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## GEOMANCY AND SOCIAL UPHEAVALS IN KOREA

### Abstract:

Geomancy has for some time played an important role in social change and upheavals in Korean history. It has always been a fermenting agent of social instigation. Social instigators and leaders of resistance to the established socio-political class often attempted to manipulate the people's beliefs in geomancy. Some major socio-political events in contemporary history of Korea, including several presidential elections, were said to be associated with geomancy in one way or another, even in a small way such as moving a presidential candidate's family graves in expectation of good luck to a more auspicious place. In this paper I attempt to document and explain the three major social upheavals in Korean history that had significant relationships with geomantic prophecies or adopted some aspect of the geomantic belief system. The three major social upheaval-rebellions that are associated with geomantic belief in Korea are (1) the Myochong rebellion (1135-1136) and attempt to move the Koryo Dynasty's capital to present day Pyongyang; (2) Hong Kyongnae's

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rebellion (1811-1812) in the Northwestern District of the Korean Peninsula during the later part of the Chosŏn dynasty; and (3) Chon Pongjun and Tonghak Peasant War (1894). After discussing briefly the general nature of geomancy and its impact on Korean landscape and life style, I will discuss in a chronological order these three social upheavals in association with geomancy.

**Key words:** geomancy, Korea, Korean culture, Korean uprisings

### **Nature of Geomancy in Korean Culture**

Geomancy in East Asia is known as fengshui (風水) in China and p'ungsu in Korea. It is a traditional art of choosing auspicious sites for various purposes and has been a crucial factor in determining human-environment relationships and the development of cultural landscape including human settlements and graves. For instance, geomancy was a key factor to consider in the city site selection and the urban design of capital cities of East Asia such as Nanjing and Beijing in China, Kyoto and Nara in Japan, Kaesong and Seoul in Korea. The practice of geomancy in China is oldest in East Asia and has been sometimes labelled as an 'enigma' by Western Sinologist such as Jacques Lemoine who declared that 'if there is a subject which should have captivated Western Sonologists, it is geomancy" (Lemoine 1974). Two prominent Western scholars who studied Chinese geomancy labelled it as the rudiments of natural science in china (Eitel 1873) or a quasi-scientific system (de Groot, 1897, p. 935). Geomancy has been a difficult subject to comprehend by Western scholars who did not have a similar tradition in Western civilisation. This art of auspicious site selection has been a mystic and sometimes inconsistent body of knowledge to comprehend even for an East Asian scholar.

Geomancy was behind some political decisions by rulers and people's resistance to the ruling powers in Korea. This traditional art of site selection is based on the assumption that vital energy (shengqi

生氣 in Chinese and sengki in Korean) which flowed underneath the soil while supporting all forms of life and blessing people who occupying the auspicious site with wealth, health and successful career life. Thus, geomancy is defined as “a unique and comprehensive system of conceptualising the physical environment that regulates human ecology by influencing human beings to select auspicious environments and to build harmonious structures such as graves, houses, temples and cites on them” (Yoon 2006, p. 311).

When Korean geomancers choose an auspicious site, they normally consider the following 3 key geomantic principles (Yoon 1980):

- a. Surrounding landforms are the most important factors, because they are responsible for delivering and conserving the vital energy at an auspicious site. An auspicious place is normally a horse shaped basin that is sheltered by hills on three sides (back, left and right sides). A hill on the back of the propitious site is called the main mountain; the left, azure dragon; the right, white tiger. The most auspicious site lies at the foot of the main mountain.
- b. Watercourses in front of a place is a key element required in geomancy, because such waters prevent vital energy from flowing away from an auspicious site for house as well as a grave. A favourable water is a slow flowing and meandering river or stream. However, the auspicious site itself should be dry.

c. Cosmological directions are determined by a geomancer with a geomantic compass and an auspicious direction is normally a sunny direction which is south facing direction. An auspicious direction is determined by considering the surrounding landforms, cosmological identity of people who will occupy the site and the types of structure (e.g., house, temple or grave) to be built.

If a place is qualified in terms of the above three geomantic criteria, then it is declared an auspicious site by a Korean geomancer. A careful analysis of geomantic principles applied in the examination of a place suggest that the art was originally formulated and developed in the Loess Plateau, North China as an instinctive response to local environments during early man's search for comfortable places to live (Yoon 2016, pp. 21-29). The early development of geomancy is closely associated with cave dwellings (窯洞) in the loess land and thus the first form of geomancy was applied to the selection of house sites.

### **1) Myochong Rebellion**

Myochong (妙清, ?~1135) was a Buddhist monk-geomancer from Sokyong (present day Pyongyang, the Capital of North Korea) during the Koryo Dynasty (918~1392) in the Northwestern part of the Korean Peninsula. In January 1135, Myochong and his supporters in Sokyong rebelled against the central government and the rebellion

lasted almost a year. The rebellion in many ways was an important socio-political movement of the Koryo Dynasty, for it advocated more nationalistic and independent Korean ideology than any social movement during the dynasty. It was also an armed rebellion as well as a socio-political movement against the established and corrupt ruling elite of the Capital City, Kaekyong by the marginalized northwestern district people who retained more Koguryo heritage than Kaekyong (P. Yi, 1980, p. 224). This socio-political movement heavily manipulated geomantic ideas and prophecies in attracting supporters by arguing that Myochong himself was a divine geomancer and Sokyong has better geomantic conditions than Kaekyong, the capital. Thus Myochong and his supporters demanded that the central government should move capital city from Kaekyong in the central part of the Korean Peninsula to Sokyong (西京, the Western Capital) in the NorthWestern part of the peninsula. It was the most intensely nationalistic and the largest geomancy-involved socio-political movement in the history of Korea.

I will briefly summarise the historical process of Myochong's rebellion in association with geomancy as practiced during that time. Myochong seemed to be an expert on geomantic prophecy and befriended the government officers of the Capital City. In 1127, he became the court officer with the title of King's Advisor and won the confidence of King Injong. He influenced the king to visit and stay

briefly in Sokyong (present day Pyongyang), the Western Capital, away from the capital city of Kaekyong (present day Kaesong). He later strongly advised and nearly succeeded in persuading the King to move the capital to Sokyong, arguing that the geomantic energy of the existing capital had been dwindling and was weak, while the energy for Sokyong was strong and expanding further (P. Yi, 1980, p. 212-227). Although on the surface the reason for such advice was based on geomantic prophecy, in reality his real intention was to overcome the established ruling elites from Kaekyong and replace them with people from Sokyong, the Western Capital District (Pyongyang). This persuasive attempt was assisted by the literati court officers such as Chong Chisang who were from Monk Myochong's home district, Sokyong, the Western Capital Area. In fact, Chong Chisang played a key role in Myochong's ascendancy to royal advisor (P. Yi, 1980, p. 200).

Monk Myochong persuaded the King to build a new palace at Sokyong, claiming that the place had a flowery power that would cause the neighbouring countries such the Jin (金)-Manchu empire to come, surrender and pay tribute to Korea. In 1129, the New Palace in Sokyong was completed and subsequently, on several occasions, the King visited and briefly stayed there (P. Yi, 1980, p. 203). Myochong and his followers who promoted shifting the capital to Sokyong instigated the self reliant and nationalistic policy. They argued that

the then Korean king should adopt the title of Emperor as in China and designate Korea's own royal Yonho (年號) or the reign name instead of using that of the Chinese. The king could not implement this nationalistic policy because of the strong resistance from the c Kaegyong-based established class of literati-officers. Nevertheless, the King was interested in Myochong's idea of moving the capital to the newly built palace in Sokyong (present day Pyongyang). Myochong's efforts to persuade the King using geomantic arguments went very wrong when the king's trip to the newly completed palace in Sokyong in 1134 coincided with a devastating storm that caused considerable loss of personnel and horses (P. Yi, 1980, p. 224). The opponents to moving the capital to Sokyong used the event of this disastrous storm as a clear sign that Sokyong was not a suitable capital site, countering that Myongchong's geomantic argument and geomantic prophecy was false and treacherous. The opponent officers appealed to the King to stop the trip to Sokyong's new palace and to abolish the policy of moving the capital to Sokyong. The King eventually stopped the trip to Sokyong and expressed his intention not to move the capital to Sokyong. After the failure of this plan, Myochong rebelled against the central government and declared the establishment of a new Korean kingdom called "Taewi (大爲)" and his military power controlled the northwestern part of the Korean Peninsula with Sokyong (present day Pyongyang) of course as the

capital city. His rebellion lasted over a year until his capital was recaptured by government forces and Myochong was killed. Myochong's movement was one of the most nationalistic socio-political movements and an example of a Korean popular uprising and rebellion that included the direct involvement of geomantic ploys. His movement was popular among people of the northwestern part of the peninsula and had a significant impact on Korean history.

## **2) The Hong Kyongnae Rebellion**

The later Chosŏn period was marked by social unrest caused by a weakening of the king's authority and power, the rise of Royal-in-law government (Sedo chongchi), rampant factionalism and popular uprisings. The popular uprisings were often fuelled by widespread rumours and geomantic prophecies which, for example, detailed that a certain hero would come from such-and-such region to save the country. Various forms of political corruption and polarisation of society in terms of economic and social status naturally provided causes for various forms of resistances, including popular uprisings from the disadvantaged or discriminated sectors or region of the country. Sometimes these uprisings manipulated the geomantic conditions or prophecies to their advantage as a means of fuelling their movement against establishment (central or local government). Under such circumstances, geomantic ideas and prophecies sometimes played a catalytic role in the people's resistance

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movement to the ruling class, and geomancers were often the leading instigators of such movements. The role of geomancer included travelling widely to various places (including settlements) for finding and surveying auspicious places for the various clients. Once a traveller or a stranger was identified as a geomancer the locals would not be suspicious why the person was visiting strange places, for people knew about geomancers' need to travel to faraway lands from where they resided, when they are in search of auspicious places. Thus, the identity of a professional geomancer was convenient for a travelling instigators of popular resistance in avoiding suspicion from the government officers and others, and rebellion leaders often identified themselves as professional geomancers (Yu 2003, p. 270). At the same time, to be an itinerant geomancer one did not require a licence as long as one had acquired some knowledge in geomancy to evaluate landforms and possess a geomantic compass for examining auspicious directions. Geomancers sometimes practiced fortune-telling and divination as well. Therefore the ringleaders or instigators of popular resistances and uprisings were often the practicing geomancers who frequently travelled various places and gathered necessary information and sympathisers from different districts.

The Hong Kyongnae Rebellion was a large scale popular uprising manipulating geomancy as a means of attracting people from various social class including peasants, disgruntled Yangban (scholar-upper) class, merchants, laborers and even local government officers who felt

that their region was discriminated and unfairly treated by the central government and their ruling elite of Korea at that time (Yu 2003, p. 270). The two key leaders of the Rebellion were practicing geomancers: the Chief Leader, Hong Kyongnae was a professional geomancer from Yonggang County of Pyongan province who claimed that the gravesite of his father that he had chosen was a very auspicious site that would protect him. He travelled extensively to find auspicious sites for his clientele in various places, for his income was mainly dependent on his practice of geomancy. Being an itinerant geomancer was a convenient means of contacting different people, gathering information relating to local people's discontent and spreading his revolutionary ideology associated with geomantic prophecies that claim to save the people.

U Kunchik was another ring leader of the rebellion and Hong Kyongnae's key collaborator. He is also known as U Yongmun as well and was a professional and itinerant geomancer who travelled around the district. U was from Kasan, a different county from Hong Kyongnae's, but they had studied geomancy textbooks together at the Blue Dragon Temple (Chongnyongsa) at Kasan in 1800 (Kim 2007, p. 109). U was a close comrade of Hong Kyongnae and was the mastermind of the rebellion who provided ideological support along with geomantic prophecies as well as an effective recruiter of key supporters of the rebellion (Kim 2007, p. 109). He was also fairly wealthy with a high income from practicing geomancy as a well-known

geomancer, especially among merchants. He himself was involved in financial ventures as well (Kim 2007, p. 109).

The Hong Kyongnae Rebellion used geomancy as a key ideology and means to attract the people to support the popular uprising for overthrowing the central government. The rebellion started with a successful armed attack on the local government office of Kasan County on 31 January 1812. The rebels successfully took over seven cities and the surrounding rural areas northwest of the Chongchon River in Pyongan Province. However, the armed uprising failed when the government blew up Chongju city fortress with gunpowder on 29 May 1812. The Hong Kyongnae Rebellion became an important anti-dynastic movement during the latter part of the Chosŏn Dynasty and became an important event that exposed the contradictions of Korean society at that time. This armed rebellion intertwined with geomantic prophecies was one of the first popular uprisings against a corrupt and unjust central government. The ideology of geomancy was used as a means to correct social injustices and was a challenge to corrupt and weak central government. Even if the Hong Kyongnae Rebellion that was intertwined with geomantic ideology and ended unsuccessfully, it provided momentum for other popular armed uprisings in different parts of Korea seeking a more just society, many of which sprang up around the country during the later Chosŏn Period.

### **3) Chon Pongjun and the Tonghak Peasant Movement**

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The most significant armed peasant uprising against the then corrupt government was the popular and massive uprising from the Southwestern part of the Korean Peninsula that is now known as the Kapo Peasant War. This uprising was associated with the then popular and newly developed indigenous religion called 'Tonghak (東學 Eastern Learning)' and the armed rebellion was led by Chon Pongjun, who knew much about and practiced geomancy as a part time geomancer at one stage (Yu 2003). This uprising provided an important momentum for the people's challenge to the then corrupt local government systems and a call for a more just society. This peasant uprising proved to be the main cause of the Sino-Japanese War on Korean soil and accelerated the foreign influence on and intervention of the Korean government.

The ideological basis and support for this peasant movement was from Tonghak, the native religion that was created by Choe Che-u during the early 19th century. This religion preached the "In-ne-chon (人乃天) doctrine" that claims that humanity and God are the same and one. This native Korean religion was born in part as a response to the then newly introduced Catholicism from the West and preached that all human beings are equal and serving humanity is the same as serving God. The armed uprising by the peasants of the Tonghak faith was a natural outcome of the Tonghak social movement. This religion incorporates aspects of Confucianism, Buddhism, Daoism and a

number of traditional Korean folk beliefs including geomancy. The founder of the religion, Choe Che-u freely expressed his knowledge of and faith in geomancy in his book “Yongdam yusa (Bestowed Hymns on the Dragon Lake).” His descriptions and praise of the mountain ranges or local landscapes around his home Kyongju District is a geomantic reading of the local landscape using geomantic terminologies (Choe 1996, p. 126-127). In a chapter called “Mongjung Noso Mundapga (Questions and answers between elders and youngsters in a dream)”, the founder of the Tonghak Movement quoted a key geomantic proverb, “A great person is born by drawing the energy from the land” and exalted people with the statement “So let us live in the auspicious place” (Choe 1996, p. 127). In another chapter, “Yongdamga (Dragon Lake Song)” of Bestowed Hymns on the Dragon Lake, he quoted the same geomantic proverb and threw in a rhetorical question, “Since a great person is born by drawing energy from the land, a great man of virtue and talent must be born in this place” (Choe 1996, p. 127). Clearly, the Tonghak religious and social movement accepted and incorporated at least some aspects of geomancy into their religious doctrines.

The Charismatic leader of the Tonghak Peasant War (previously known as the Tonghak Rebellion), Chon Pongjun, also read geomancy textbooks and treated them as more than simple books on divination and superstition. Since boyhood his family had been poor and as he grew into an adult he became responsible for supporting his family. As

a means of earning an income he likely worked as a private tutor for children, as a geomancer or herbal medicine seller, while sometimes divining auspicious dates for villagers or ghost-writing letters for illiterate people (Minjok Munhwa Taepaekkwa Sajon 2015).

The Tonghak religion, which promoted equality among all humanity, experienced an exponential growth during 1880s with a fantastic response especially from those commoners who resented the ruling yangban class. The Tonghak movement became a formidable social force and the government started suppressing the religious movement. In 1892, several thousand Tonghak followers gathered to demand official recognition of their religion, to operate in the open and to stop the suppression of the movement. The result was not satisfactory for the Tonghak church and subsequently more and bigger gatherings were organised in different parts of Korea. In 1894, the Tonghak movement, now a formidable force, moved into a revolutionary armed uprising under the charismatic leadership of Chon Pongjun, at Kobu County against a cruel and corrupt local magistrate. The armed uprising was successful in its early stages by removing 'bad' local administrators and carrying out social reform. Serious struggles existed between the Tonghak peasant army and government forces. In order to suppress the Tonghak peasant army the threatened central government invited in Chinese armed forces. The uninvited Japanese government also sent troops to Korea under the pretext of protecting their own citizens living in Korea. China and

Japan fought a war in Korea at time of the Tonghak uprising and Japan won the Sino-Japanese war. After that the Korean government forces, along with the victorious Japanese army, defeated the Tonghak peasant army.

Even if the Tonghak armed uprising failed, its consequences were significant. The Tonghak movement installed the idea of equality among all humanity in the Korean mind, heightened commoners resistance to the Yangban ruling class, enhanced nationalism and increased awareness of Japanese power's interference with Korean affairs (Lee 1984, pp. 287-288). It was perhaps the best organised, largest scale social movement ever to exist in Korean history.

A final remark on the relationships between the Tonghak Movement and the practice of geomancy in Korea is that the Tonghak Movement's doctrines incorporated some geomantic ideas, as discussed above, and leader of the armed uprising, Chon Pongjun, had used the profession of geomancy as a means of earning income as well as actually believing in geomancy to a degree.

### **Conclusion**

The three large scale popular armed uprisings in Korean history as discussed above are the major socio-political movements and rebellions against the ruling class in the capital since the establishment of the Koryo Dynasty in AD 918. All of these three uprisings, which affected the course of Korean history significantly, were associated

with geomantic ideas. The travelling nature of professional geomancers' work was sometimes adopted as a disguise for uprising organisers' establishing and expanding networks and gathering sympathisers. Belief in an auspicious place with exceptional qualities and associated geomantic prophecies was used by uprising leaders for motivating underprivileged or disgruntled people to join uprisings with hope for a better world. It is interesting to note that these three major Korean social movements and uprisings were closely associated with the practice of geomancy in Korea.

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