

# The Role of Children in Daesoon Jinrihoe, a Korean New Religion

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**Original Articles**

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## Abstract

This study attempts to investigate the role of children in the Korean new religious movement, Daeseon Jinrihoe. The research method combined archival studies with qualitative research; interviews with two members involved in educating youth through the establishment of Youth Camps and *Donggeurami*, the order's youth magazine. Our four research questions were:

1. Do children play a central role in the millennial vision of this NRM?
2. Are children separated from the world?
3. Have Daeseon childrearing methods been challenged by secular authorities or anticult groups?
4. Are there procedures to educate children in the religious beliefs and values of their parents and the community?

Our results found that Daeseon Jinrihoe appears to be a religion designed for adults. Children do not usually participate in religious activities. On the other hand, since 2005 there has been a strategic effort to educate the children in the faith of their parents, through the establishment of Youth Camps and the youth magazine, *Donggeurami*.

**Keywords:** Daeseon Jinrihoe; religious youth programming; childrearing; *Donggeurami*; Spiritual Childhoods

## Introduction

In this study our purpose is to attempt to understand the role of children in the Korean new religious movement (NRM), Daesoon Jinrihoe. Typically, researchers who have undertaken to investigate childrearing in NRMs in the past have encountered an array of daunting challenges (Palmer and Hardman 1999; Van Eck Van Twist 2015; Frisk 2018; Nilsson 2019). This study is no exception, except that the obstacles to research are of a different nature (these will be outlined below).

This study is part of a broader (2017-2021) research project called “Children in sectarian religions and state control” at McGill University in Montreal, Canada ([www.spiritualchildhoods.ca](http://www.spiritualchildhoods.ca)).<sup>1</sup> The research project has two objectives:

- 1) To explore the ways different minority religions raise their children.
- 2) To study conflicts in different countries between minority religions and local secular authorities over alternative childrearing methods.

Within the framework of these objectives, the research questions we bring to this study of Daesoon Jinrihoe are the following:

- 1) Do children play a central role in the millennial vision of this NRM?
- 2) Are children separated from the world? Are they insulated/protected from secular society?
- 3) Have there been criticisms of this new religion’s childrearing methods from secular authorities or anticult groups? Have there been any state interventions on behalf of the children?
- 4) Are there procedures to educate children in the religious beliefs and values of their parents and the community?

According to our results, the answer to questions 1, 2 and 3 are “No”. The answer to question 4 is “Yes” (or more accurately, “to some degree”). The implications of these answers will be explored in terms of what they tell us about Daesoon Jinrihoe’s status as a new religion, and the broader issues raised concerning the role of children in NRMs.

## Methodology and Obstacles to Research

It is important to note at the outset that, in fact, very little is known about children in NRMs. This was the main rationale in applying for funding from the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for the “Children in sectarian religions” project. There are sound reasons for this lack of knowledge, and the

researcher encounters three sources of obstacles.

One set of obstacles was posed by the university administration. Canadian and U.S. research ethics boards have banned researchers' access to children as "vulnerable human subjects". Ironically, one condition for administering this grant to study children was that no children would be interviewed.

A second set of obstacles was posed by the religious communities themselves typically involve secrecy and lack of documentation. Many groups that experienced conflict with the larger society tend to be secretive towards journalists, social workers and researchers. Moreover, their utopian childrearing methods tended to be experimental, rapidly changing and part of an oral tradition, hence undocumented.

The research confronts a third set of obstacles at the level of the state and its various state agents or authorities; data collected by the police, social services or school boards are often inaccessible to researchers, sealed, and/or privileged to the court.

In the case of Daeseon Jinrihoe, this researcher encountered quite a different set of obstacles. First, there was the Korean language and Asian culture. Aside from the writings of a handful of scholars (Baker 2016; Introvigne 2017; Kim 2015) Daeseon Jinrihoe is still quite unknown to the West. For this reason, this researcher (Palmer) chose Jason Greenberger as translator, consultant and co-author on this project.

Second, the unforeseen obstacle of the coronavirus pandemic curtailed our plans for field work in South Korea this Spring, which would have enriched the research base for this article. Third, statistics regarding children, membership, conversion and attrition rates were unavailable to this researcher. Requests to the Daeseon administration were met with the response, "We do not keep this kind of information."

## The Research Findings

Although Daeseon Jinrihoe has been described as a millenarian religion by Introvigne (2017); Baker (2016) and Kim (2015), our interviews with our two informants indicate that children have no special role in this process.<sup>2</sup> It appears that in Daeseon Jinrihoe, the vast, long-term expectation of the earthly paradise, for which there is no specific date, somehow makes children's participation irrelevant.

Daeseon Jinrihoe's millennial vision is contained in the fourth principle, "The perfected unification with Dao" (*Dotong-jingyeong*, 道通真境). According to Baker (2016, 10-11) this refers to the realization of earthly immortality in an earthly paradise through the renewal of human beings and the recreation of the world. Introvigne notes, "In fact, the world will become one clan or family, and all humanity will be governed without force and punishment, according to divine laws and principles. Officials will be moderate and wise... humans will be free from worldly desires... three disasters coming from water, fire, and wind will disappear from the world. Humans will

be given freedom (i.e., eternal youth and immortality).

“And the whole world will be an earthly paradise filled with bliss and joy.” (Kim 2015, 187-94)

Palmer and her research assistants involved in the “Children in Sectarian Movements” project found in our study of NRMs that qualify as “millennial movements” (e.g. Unification Church, The Children of God, David Koresh’s Branch Davidians of Waco, Ogyen Chogyen Kunzang, The Nation of Yahweh, the Solar Temple, the Ant Hill Kids) that the Millennial Kingdom was anticipated to arrive *within the lifetimes* of the current devotees and their children. In these NRMs, children were raised to participate in the groups’ millennial goals. They were trained, variously, to become an elite cadre in the society of the future; or trained to fight as warriors in the impending cosmic battle; or they were educated to become “the 24 Elders” (*in Revelations*) or kings’ councilors, destined to advise the new rulers in the Millennial Kingdom.

In 2017, Jason Greenberger conducted a survey of 119 members of Daesoon Jinrihoe in which he asked, “What is your timeframe regarding the arrival of the Later World?”. 70% of his informants responded that it was ‘underway,’ 15% said it was ‘imminent,’ and 15% said it was ‘eventual.’<sup>13</sup> He notes that, in his best estimate, it is just the social hierarchy of leaders and followers that is described in the Later World does not appear to inspire or frighten members to prepare to be future leaders. Scripture states that there will only be 12,000 leaders (far fewer than the current number of devotees) and says nothing about the role of children. Some of Greenberger’s informants indicated they felt “comfortable” with the notion that they would be part of the noble populace rather than a Dao-empowered sage. Thus, it appears that “being ordinary” is seen as neither a problem nor a punishment.

Other apocalyptic NRMs have demanded a higher level of commitment from its members when the End Time is perceived to be imminent. A good example of this pattern would be Aum Shinrikyo, the Japanese new religion, whose prophet Shoko Asahara demanded that his followers move into the group’s compound in Mount Fuji and devote themselves full time to religious rituals and physical austerities in preparation for “Harumageddon” (Mullins 1998).

Thus, it would appear the nature of Daesoon’s vision of the earthly paradise is quite consistent with the absence of pressure on children to play an active role in the process of ushering it in. Once adults, they can hasten the coming of the Later World through holy works (gongbu, an intensive communal incantation practice held at the headquarters) if they choose to do so.

The answer to our second research question (whether children in Daesoon Jinrihoe are separated/insulated/protected from secular society) was again “No”.

There are no restrictions concerning children in Daeseon Jinrihoe playing with other children who do not share their religion. If anything, their playmates are probably unlikely to know that their family is in Daeseon Jinrihoe. Children in minority religions in Korea are, in general, unlikely to draw attention to it; doing so could alienate them from their neighbours.

We were told that Daeseon Jinrihoe does have its own schools. Daeseon Jinrihoe operates four High Schools (Daejin High School, Daejin Girls High School, Daejin Electronic Communications High School, and Daejin Design High School). There is a level of higher education at the Daejin University (located in Pocheon, South Korea with two campuses in China, in Suzhou and Harbin). But we were told that the majority of members' children attend regular secular schools that are unaffiliated with Daeseon Jinrihoe.

These research findings are quite consistent with the observations of scholars who have studied Daeseon Jinrihoe. David Kim notes that Daeseon Jinrihoe “has grown large and respectable enough to become a major component of Korea’s religious landscape” (Kim 2020, Preface). Massimo Introvigne notes. “In 1998, Bundang Jesaeng Hospital was opened, followed in 2007 by the Daeseon Jinrihoe Welfare Foundation. The educational and charitable activities of Daeseon Jinrihoe greatly benefited the public image of the movement, which is increasingly regarded in Korea as a legitimate part of the country’s religious pluralism.” (Introvigne 2017)

The two scholars concur that Daeseon Jinrihoe has become well-integrated into South Korea’s democratic society. This would be consistent with the parents’ wishes for their children to be well-adapted to function in the larger society.

The responses to our third question (concerning whether there are any criticisms of Daeseon Jinrihoe’s childrearing methods by secular authorities or anticult groups, or any state interventions regarding the safety of the children) was also negative.

David Kim (2020) and Massimo Introvigne (2017) each refer to the kind of criticisms of Daeseon Jinrihoe that have emanated from anticult groups or detractors who are members of other Korean religions. These critics tend to regard Daeseon Jinrihoe as a “heresy” or as a “cult”. In his “Preface”, David William Kim states, “Daeseon Jinrihoe is a new religion and so it has had to endure the criticism that new religions receive.... True to its teaching [regarding *Cheok* or grievances] Daeseon Jinrihoe has not engaged in arguments with its detractors. Instead it has let its history prove its detractors wrong.” (Kim 2020).

However, none of Daeseon Jinrihoe’s Korean detractors have criticized, or indeed even mentioned its child-rearing methods.

In contrast, North American and European news stories on the child victims of “cult-related” violence (OTS mass suicides 1994, Jonestown 1978, Waco 1993) have been proliferating in the mass media ever since the 1978 tragedy at Jonestown. Currently, the

newspapers have featured many reports on police investigations after children died of medical neglect or refusal of blood transfusions; as well as recent trials of Hasidic rabbis, Pentecostal pastors, Catholic priests or Hindu/Buddhist gurus as alleged “pedophiles”.

A new genre of memoirs; autobiographies by angry apostates who were raised in alternative spiritual communities has become popular. Websites of “cult awareness”/ anticult groups (UNADFI, FECRIS, ICSA) are tending to portray NRMs as places where children are trapped, indoctrinated, deprived of education, exploited and abused. But whereas in the West, “Children in Cults” has become a popular theme in the mass media, it appears to be a non-issue, a non-topic in the East; in Asian societies.

## The Founding and Development of Youth Camps

According to our informants, whom we will call “Subject A” and “Subject B”, there is no equivalent to a puberty ritual in this NRM. Nor is there a ceremony equivalent to a baptism or christening. Until 2005 there was no “youth programming” in Daesoon Jinrihoe; neither the concept of educating children in the faith of their parents, nor the materials needed to instruct children in the history, values and doctrines of the faith.

Subject B, in his role as “Head Edifier” (which involves religious instruction for members) felt a concern about the children, having two pre-school children of his own at the time. He therefore convinced Daesoon Jinrihoe’s administrators to support him in setting up the first Youth Camp in July 2005.

This Youth Camp lasted for three days and two nights. There were 16 Camp Counsellors (many of them parents) and 800 students, boys and girls between the ages of 11 to 18. The Camp was split up and organized into seven separate mini-sessions to accommodate the numbers and the age groups.

The Youth Camp received enthusiastic responses from the children and parents and has continued as an annual event until 2019.<sup>4</sup> A daily schedule has evolved that includes sports and field trips. There was little formal religious education and no supervised prayers or chanting at the Youth Camps, but there was some instruction about the history of Daesoon Jinrihoe and the lives of its three founders. The most overtly “religious” activity took place in the evenings when the Counsellors would put on performances for the children in which they would dress up and act out stories that dramatized some of the core precepts of Daesoon Jinrihoe. On the third day, the children would spend time with their assigned counsellors in informal discussions. The youth at the camps were on excellent terms with the counsellors, and many of them, after becoming university students, would volunteer to work as camp counsellors.

The Daesoon Jinrihoe summer camps produce a youth magazine, *Donggeurami*, that features articles on the campers’ experience. On the basis of translated excerpts from the article, “Impressions from the Winter Camp: Our Stories” (Issue 2, 2008) two

patterns are apparent: 1) that the youthful campers enjoy a rich social life and form strong friendships at the camp, and 2) that the theme of each year's camp is based on a precept or point of doctrine. For example, the precept "promote the betterment of others" was emphasized in 2008's Winter Camp.

Ryu Seunghui (Primary School, Fourth Grader, Group 1) writes:

What I remember most was the saying "Promote the Betterment of Others"... "If I think of others before myself, I think I will become closer with my friends... I learned so much during the winter camp, and it was a really happy experience for me. Now as I leave to head back to Seoul, I am sure I will miss all of my fellow campers and our camp counselors. Campers and counselors, I love you! :-)♥

Kim Yeji (Middle School, Freshman, Group 1) writes:

Ever since I was a fifth grader in primary school, I have never missed a camp. Even on my first day, the counselors did such a great job that I easily became familiar with everything and had a great time. During the talent show, everything was well done, all the dances, songs, plays... everything was really interesting. That was the reason I kept coming back year after year.

This camp, the coolest programs were Everland, the talent show, and edification; all of which were very memorable. On the first day, we made rice cakes, and I thought mine were gonna turn out well, but later, I noticed that the colors had all kind of blended together, and it didn't look that great. That will end up a lasting memory for me nevertheless. On the second day, we went to Everland Amusement Park, and I cheerfully played around, rode rides, and felt my stress melt away while having a ton of fun. On the third day during edification, suddenly a scary thought popped into my mind, and I knew I should live my life with greater kindness. This year's camp was really a blast!

Kim Seulgi (High School, Year Three, Group 1) writes:

I kept attending camp, and in the blink of an eye, it was my sixth time to go. I am basically an adult now, and this marks my last camp... This camp's theme was 'Promote the Betterment of Others.' Although it is something that is always in the back of my mind, and I know I should live a life of promoting the betterment of others and feeling grateful to them, the truth is that this is no easy matter. However, based on what I have learned from this camp, I know that I can start off by just being incrementally kinder and



better to others. That is something I will work hard at achieving.

For high school juniors like me, this is our last camp, but I don't think of this as an end. Instead, I will regard it as the new beginning of my new life going forward. I am profoundly thankful to all of the counselors and fellow campers with whom I made such fond memories. I wish you all the best of health, and I will sincerely devote myself to living in accordance with the precept, "Promote the Betterment of Others."

## The Youth Magazine, *Donggeurami*

As a young but rapidly expanding new religion, Daesoon Jinrihoe, as part of its new initiative to place emphasis on religious education for its youth, established the youth magazine, *Donggeurami* (동그라미) which has its winter, spring, summer, and fall issues. This magazine is not dissimilar to the adult magazine, *Daesoon Hoebo* (大巡會報), but its contents are clearly simplified; written for younger readers, it is presented in such a way as to appeal to children and young teenagers.

In the earliest issues of *Donggeurami* (2007-2009), the format was clearly in an experimental phase, but by the sixth issue, released in 2012 (after a two-year hiatus) the magazine emerged with a well-developed format that has been consistently maintained over the last six years (Greenberger 2018).

*Donggeurami* has become a successful vehicle for the religious education of youth through its articles on culture, history and the Order, and through its entertaining children's comics that offer a narrative about Daesoon's founders.

Since 2012, *Donggeurami* had featured at least one article per issue on culture, and this usually involves introducing Korean tourist attractions or historical landmarks that possess historical and cultural significance (e.g. 수원 화성 (Suwon Castle)<sup>5</sup>, 인의예지를 품은 서울 4대문 (The Four Gates of Seoul that Carry Humanity, Benevolence, and Wisdom),<sup>6</sup> 죽 이야기 (A Story about Porridge),<sup>7</sup> and 겨울의 절기 (The Solar Terms of Winter).<sup>8</sup> 'A Story about Porridge' is a Chinese folktale that instructs readers in some of the popular varieties of porridge. 'The Solar Terms of Winter' introduces the nine solar terms that occur during the season of winter. None of these articles relate directly to Daesoon Jinrihoe, but indirect connections might be made.

For example, 'The Solar Terms of Winter' covers all nine of the solar terms of winter, but two of these, The Initial Day of Winter (立冬) and The Winter Solstice (冬至) might be interpreted as referring to the Chiseongs (致誠, Devotional Offerings) in Daesoon Jinrihoe. By reading articles such as these, the youth of Daesoon Jinrihoe are reminded that the magazine that they are reading is not exclusively focused on Daesoon Jinrihoe, but that it demonstrates the broader connections between their parents' faith and traditional Korean culture (Greenberger 2108).

Articles on Korean history are often featured in *Donggeurami*. Some articles focusing heavily on the tragedies and injustices brought by foreign invaders (임진왜란, The Japanese Disturbance of 1592),<sup>9</sup> 청주 고인쇄박물관 (The Cheongju Museum of Ancient Printing),<sup>10</sup> and 청나라 침략에 조선의 왕이 없드려 항복하다 (The King of Joseon on the Verge of Chinese Invasion).<sup>11</sup> But here again, the articles do not necessarily apply or refer to Daeseon Jinrihoe. For example, the article about ancient printing is echoed in a mere footnote in *The Canonical Scripture (Jeon-Gyeong)*, rather than being a substantial topic. However, both the Imjin War and the Qing Invasion are major historical events that are discussed in *The Canonical Scripture*.

Articles that focus specifically on Daeseon Jinrihoe in the youth magazine are less common than one might expect. Articles of this nature include: 상생이란 무엇인가요 (What is Sangsaeng)?,<sup>12</sup> 『전경』은 어떤 책이에요 (What Kind of Book is *The Canonical Scripture*)?,<sup>13</sup> <6> 부산에도 본부를 설치하시다 (Part 6: He Also Established a Headquarters Temple Complex in Busan),<sup>14</sup> 지영이의 입도치성 (Jiyeong's Initiation Offering Ceremony),<sup>15</sup> and 입도치성이 뭐예요 (What is an Ipdo Chiseong)?<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that this category includes many articles on what might be called 'Proto-Daeseon Jinrihoe' period (before the founding of Daeseon Jinrihoe in 1969). This kind of article describes what can be referred to as 'the community of disciples who served Kang Seong Sangje' or 'the earlier religious orders of Doju Jo Jeongsan.' Examples of such articles would be 'He Also Established a Headquarters Temple Complex in Busan'; and another article about Doju creating a headquarters for his religious order, 'Mugeuk-Do' in Busan. There are also articles written to accompany and explain a comic story, such as the comic 'Jiyeong's Initiation Offering Ceremony' which leads directly into the explanatory article 'What is an Ipdo Chiseong?' (Greenberger 2018).

Comics are also a popular staple in *Donggeurami*. Example of the comics' titles include 진묵대사와 김봉곡 (Master Jinmuk and Kim Bonggok),<sup>17</sup> 손빈과 방연 (Sonbin and Bangeon),<sup>18</sup> 끝까지 신념을 지킨 충신 (Observing One's Faith to the Very End),<sup>19</sup> and 북창 정렴 (Master Jeongnyeom of Bukchang).<sup>20</sup> All the comics, according to Greenberger's informal survey, conclude with a verse from *The Canonical Scripture*. The only exception to this pattern is found in the Sixth Issue of *Donggeurami*, where the comic tale, 'Master Jinmuk and Kim Bonggok,' does not conclude with a verse from *The Canonical Scripture* at the end. If the corresponding verses had been included for that story about Master Jinmuk and Kim Bonggok, they would have been Reordering Works Chapter 3 verses 14 and 15. The reason for this exception might be that this was the first comic in this series, and the content creators were still determining their format. These comics help young readers visualize stories from *The Canonical Scripture* and also show them how those stories might be directly related to the lives of young devotees (Greenberger 2018).

The magazine, *Donggeurami*, presents the young devotees of Daesoon Jinrihoe with quality reading material that makes theology, history, practice, and culture more accessible than it would be through articles written for adults. The magazine is attractive, features enjoyable comics in the style secular Korea children often read, and the writing opts for spoken Korean over literary Korean. *Donggeurami* encourages its readers to interact by sending in drawings and writings which are published in the magazine. This publication, which began in its first five issues as basically an advertisement or an annual report of Daesoon Jinrihoe's youth camps, has evolved into a substantial and respected religious publication for youth. Moreover, Daesoon Jinrihoe's charitable institution, DIVA, is considering using some of the articles generated by *Donggeurami* in their Korean classes for foreigners.<sup>21</sup> The language used in *Donggeurami* is more approachable and less intimidating than the articles in the adult magazine, Daesoon Hoebo, and thus might be quite useful in a foreign language classroom.

## Family Values in Daesoon Jinrihoe

Could these findings be explained within the framework of Buddhism's traditionally atomistic, individualistic, "anti-family" approach to enlightenment/Nirvana? Unlike Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, however, Daesoon Jinrihoe fosters marriage and family life, as well as gender equality for its clergy and laity alike. These family values are emphasized in *The Dao Constitution* (The Regulations of Daesoon Jinrihoe) and *The Guiding Compass of Daesoon* (Daesoon Jichim).

*The Dao Constitution* outlines "The Three Bonds and Five Relationships" which are the founders' vision of the moral foundations that enable harmonious relationships and sustain order in society. These include: "Maintain filial piety toward your parents" and "Create a peaceful family by achieving harmony in your marriage."

*The Guiding Compass of Daesoon* (Daesoon Jichim) is a collection of writings from the period when Dojeon (Park Wudang) first presented the teachings. The following quotes from this text clearly indicate Daesoon Jinrihoe's priorities regarding religion and family life:

Accomplish harmony in your family and devote yourself to educating your children (I.4.1.).

Each Dao cohort should dedicate themselves to harmonizing their family on a basis of concordance and unity. (The 3<sup>rd</sup> day of the 1<sup>st</sup> month, 1980)

Dao cohorts whose family do not live in harmony should prioritize familial harmony (The 17<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month, 1980).

Merit can be achieved in harmonious households. Therefore, edify people about familial unity and harmony (The 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the 9<sup>th</sup> month, 1980).

All female executive members including seongam (Head Propagator) and gyogam (Head Edifier), if also housewives, should devote themselves to the simultaneous fulfilment of their duties and the keeping of their household responsibilities (The 26<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month, 1982).

*The Canonical Scripture* says, “As there is no filial piety, no loyalty, and no fidelity in this world, the whole world is ailing.” Therefore, keep that firmly in mind (The 26<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month, 1982).

Executive members should strive to support the achievement of harmonious families for the devotees who belong to their branch by taking good care of their family circumstances (The 26<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> month, 1982).

## Divine Heroes and Sacred Role-Models for Children

Children in Daeseon Jinrihoe are sometimes taught episodes from the life of Kang Jeungsan (spoken of as Sangje, the Supreme God), the human incarnation of the object of worship in Daeseon Jinrihoe, Gucheon Sangje (the Supreme God of the Ninth Heaven). These stories focus on Kang’s childhood and relationships with his parents and with other children. Feminist Christian (and “post-Christian”) theologians, Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983) and Mary Daly have made the point that in the same way that Catholic women throughout history could never truly aspire to emulate the Virgin Mary who was free of sin and performed the miracle of by giving birth to God’s only begotten son while remaining a virgin, the children of Daeseon Jinrihoe cannot be expected to perform miracles like Kang. Nevertheless, these divine figures, with their attributes of physical and moral strength, provide inspiration and role models of kindness, love and compassion.

*The Canonical Scripture* (Acts 1: 5-1: 18)<sup>22</sup>

The following verses recount the miraculous nature of Sangje’s birth:

5. Sangje, the Supreme God of the Universe, was incarnated on Earth at Guest-awating (Gaekmang) Village, near the auspicious mountain, Mount Steamer-on-Cauldron (Siru-san, Jeungsan 甑山). Sangje was born into the Kang family lineage, six generations after the time of Jin-Chang, who was the eldest son of the Kang family of Primordial Hill (Gobu). At the time of His incarnation, Sangje’s family name was Kang and His personal name was Il-Sun (一淳)... The birthday of the incarnated Supreme God is recorded in history as the 19day of the ninth month of the Shinmi Year,

the eighth year of the reign of King Gojong of the Joseon Dynasty, or the Year 4204 of the Dan Era. The birthday of the incarnated Sangje fell on the Western calendar date of November 1, 1871 CE.

8. The first name of Sangje's father was Mun-Hoe, with the courtesy name, Heung-Ju. With a tiger-like countenance and a booming voice, his knowledge of his great demeanor stretched from his neighbors to even the Eastern Learning (Donghak 東學) peasant militia.
9. The surname of Sangje's mother was Kwon, her personal name was Yang-Deok. One night when she visited her parents who had lived in Book Mountain (Seosan) Village of Pear Plains (Yipyong) Township, she dreamed that the sky had been torn in half. From the fissure in the sky, north and south before her, a massive ball of flame emerged and covered her body. After that, she showed signs of pregnancy and after 13 months, Sangje was born.
10. On the day Sangje was born, the delivery room was filled with light; two celestial maidens descended to Earth from Heaven. They entered the delivery room, which was aglow with their presence, and the maidens attended the newborn Sangje. An effervescent, mysterious fragrance filled the entire delivery room. An auspicious vapor enveloped the entire house in which Sangje was born, and its light, extending up into the sky.

These following verses speak of Sangje's prowess as a student, his prodigious physical strength, his moral qualities, and his compassion for all living things:

11. From His youth onward, Sangje exhibited a good-natured and generous personality and a remarkably brilliant mind. Even as a little boy, Sangje possessed the great virtue of respecting all life; for instance, He enjoyed planting trees but never broke off even a single branch or harmed any insects no matter how small. Sangje was loved and revered by all who knew Him.
12. Sangje visited a village school at the age of seven. He was asked to compose a verse in Chinese. After being given the prompt '驚 (gyeong, frighten)' by the teacher, He wrote: "Taking a great stride, I hope that I do not demolish the Earth. Shouting with a big roar, I worry I may frighten Heaven [遠步恐地坼 大呼恐天驚]."

13. When Sangje was a student at the village school, He immediately understood what He had been taught by the master and, as such, always ranked first. There is an amusing anecdote about Him: one day, the teacher intended to promote the second-ranked pupil to first place, feeling sorry for that pupil's parents. To do this, he gave his class a test; however, Sangje received the highest score once again. Sangje had discovered the teacher's plot ahead of time and altered His style of writing and lettering so His teacher would be unable to distinguish between Himself and the second-ranked pupil.
  
14. One day, at the age of 13, Sangje went to the open market held in Wellspring-Town (Jeongeup) County with His older neighbor, Yu Deok-Ahn. The brothers had gone to town to sell some rolls of ramie fabric which had been woven by Sangje's mother. Deok-Ahn had some business of his own to attend to, so he left Sangje and the rolls of fabric behind. Though Sangje was standing right next to the fabric, when He looked away for just a moment, the fabric was no longer there. Deok-Ahn soon returned, and the brothers diligently scoured the market looking for the missing rolls of fabric. They searched all afternoon. As night approached, they still had not located the fabric. Sangje declined Deok-Ahn's offer to accompany Him back home and instead sent Deok-Ahn back alone. Sangje did not want to give up on the lost rolls of fabric. He knew another open market would be held in the distant county of Stand High (Gochang) the next day. Sangje walked through the night to arrive at the market. There, while looking through various fabric stores, He finally came across a man selling the rolls of ramie fabric which He had lost in Wellspring-Town. Sangje came back home after fulfilling His task of retrieving the rolls of fabric and selling them.
  
15. In His youth, Sangje was an active, playful boy. Two of Sangje's relatives, Kang Yeon-Hoe and Kang Gi-Hoe, were solidly built, powerful men. They enjoyed devising contests and measuring their strength against Sangje's. For His part, Sangje enjoyed taking opportunities to display His strength. On one occasion, Sangje bit down on the metal joint-connector at the bottom of a millstone with His teeth and lifted the heavy stone off the ground. His remarkable feat startled nearby onlookers, who were spellbound. On another occasion, Sangje jump-kicked the edge of the eaves of the high roof from a standing position in the yard without even taking a running start. And yet another time, He threw from the ground

heavy thatched roofing materials onto a house's rooftop with one hand. Sometimes He would get down on all fours while a dozen or so strong men would attempt to hold Him down. The grown men completely exhausted themselves, but Sangje's body did not move down, not even an inch. Kim Gwang-Mun passed on a story telling of a time he witnessed Sangje playfully amusing a group of children by putting a stone mortar on His head and spinning it so effortlessly that it looked like a streamer twirled from a hat (*sangmo*) when dancing.

16. Sangje's brilliance became known to many people, and He was often invited to village schools, near and far, one after another. When He was asked to compose epigrams, He always left one or two empty spaces at the end of the final verse.
  
17. Sangje learned that His father had been agonizing over the debt of several hundred nyang which he had borrowed from a rich man, Park of Wellspring-Town (Jeongeup) County. Sangje wanted to relieve His father of his worry, so He asked His father for 50 nyang. With that, He visited Park, and paid back part of the debt. While He was there, Sangje made friends with the pupils studying at Park's private school. While He was staying at the schoolhouse, the teacher had all the pupils write poems. Sangje also asked the teacher for a one-word prompt so He could compose a rhyme. His poem was so refined and exquisite; the teacher and the pupils greatly admired it. Park also felt very curious about Sangje and asked Him to stay for a while to study with his own children and nephews. Sangje reluctantly decided to stay there for a few days. After telling Park about His father's difficulties, Park was deeply touched by His filial piety and canceled the debt by burning up the promissory note.
  
18. One day in the Jeonghae Year (1887), while Sangje was headed to visit His maternal grandparents at their home, Sangje encountered a drunken man who hurled abuse at Him for no reason. Wisely, Sangje did not react to the man. Suddenly and out of nowhere, a big stone mortar flew overhead and covered the drunken man's head. Stuck in the mortar, he could not get away. Sangje turned from him and headed on his way.

The following excerpts from *The Life and Philosophical Thought of Jeungsan* depict Kange Jeungsan as hero possessing precious wit and amazing strength.<sup>23</sup>

- Remarkable Physicality and Generous Nature

Jeungsan had a countenance that would have garnered honor from everyone, due to His bold features and round facial structure. He had a burly frame, but was gentle in character. There is a story from the period after Jeungsan had reached adulthood. The concubine of Baek Namshin's younger brother had been a courtesan. One time, Jeungsan had opted to stay at Baek Namshin's younger brother's home as a guest, and she was taken aback by His elegant wit and she came to His room in the middle of the night and made a pass at him. In addition, the adults in the village were said to have poured their hearts into Jeungsan even more than they had their own children. His nature was such that He exhibited goodwill to all creatures, did not cut so much as a blade of grass, and did not hurt even the smallest of insects. Throughout the course of His life, He never cursed at anyone even a single time and perpetually maintained an amicable and magnanimous character. One year in autumn, a young Jeungsan saw farmers pitilessly engaging in the act of busily chasing birds away from the grain they had harvested. With a warm heart He questioned, "How could you possibly feed human beings if even the occasional bird's pecking at a single grain brings you so much displeasure?"

One day, He saw His father chasing some birds and chickens, and He attempted to dissuade His father from continuing. His father disregarded this and persisted in chasing the birds and chickens. Suddenly, lightning struck and heavy rain began to pour even in the brightness of mid-day. The previously dried grain floated away in the fallen rain. As father and Son, they looked upon one another face to face and speechless. Jeungsan, who possessed the traits of being as remarkably strong outwardly as He was remarkably generous inwardly, was venerated to such a high degree that He was called a divine child in regards to His wisdom.

- The Great Learning, Wisdom, and Knowledge of a Prodigy

At age seven, Jeungsan began formally learning the ways of the world. His father invited a village tutor to come to their house and teach Jeungsan the Thousand Character Classic. Tutor pointed to the character 'cheon' meaning Heaven, had Him read it, and then read the character 'ji' meaning Earth and had Him memorize it. The tutor continued to the character 'hyeon' meaning black, but Jeungsan did not read along. The tutor asked Him why He did not read, but He did not answer. Instead He told His father, "I have found the profundity of Heaven within Heaven, and I have penetratingly gazed into the mysterious truth of Earth. There is nothing more to learn; so send the



tutor back.” His father found himself at a loss with nothing to do but dismiss the tutor. He built a master's quarters in the backyard for his Son to live by Himself. There was no one who was not awestruck by the wisdom of young Jeungsan.

Although He was endowed with wisdom and exercised control over winds, rains, lightning, and thunder, He was still a child of only seven years. On the way to His maternal grandparents' home one day, a drunkard began hurling abuse at Him in a threatening manner. But Jeungsan did not say so much as a word. Suddenly, a stone mortar was flung into the air and then landed over the head of the drunkard trapping him. Jeungsan thereby continued on His way with no further impediments.

During His youth, Jeungsan liked to play around. One day He bit down the metal joint-connector at the bottom of the millstone with His teeth and lifted it off the ground. His strength was simply magnificent and His manner of speaking and fortitude of character likewise left villagers spellbound wherever He went.

Sometimes He, without even needing a running start, would launch Himself into the air to jump kick the edge of eaves from a standing position in the yard.

Other times, He would throw heavy thatched upper roofing onto a house's rooftop with a single hand. Other times still, He would position Himself on all fours and keep His body up while strong men tested their might by attempting to hold Him down. They never succeeded in forcing Him down to the ground. There was also a story of Him putting a stone mortar on His head and spinning it so effortlessly that it looked like a ribbon twirled from a hat during a folk dance.

These sacred stories concerning the boyhood of Sangje convey some idea to outsiders of the values of this new religion and how they shape the lives of children growing up in Daesoon Jinrihoe.

## **The Significance of this Study**

What is the significance of this study for the microsociology of children in new religious movements? In 2017, the Chinese government introduced new regulations that banned children from attending religious events. In Shangrao, an area of Jiangxi, more than forty churches have signs over their entrances that read, “Non-locals are prohibited from preaching; no underage people allowed in church.”<sup>24</sup> According to the international non-profit Christian human rights organization, China Aid, regulations

introduced in 2017 by the Chinese government place new bans on unregistered church worship and on teaching Christianity to children.<sup>25</sup>

In Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province on the eastern coast, children were specifically prohibited from attending church services, with local officials ordering churches to cancel all activities involving teenagers. Elementary and middle school staff members told parents not to allow their children to attend Sunday worship services or other church events. These restrictions also apply to Muslims. In Linxia, a predominantly Muslim county in the province of Gansu, the Chinese Communist Party increased the control of religious education and the district's education bureau announced in a notice online that all school students in the area were prohibited from entering religious buildings over their holiday break.<sup>26</sup>

South Korea, in contrast to China, is a democratic country. The Republic of Korea 2018 International Religious Freedom Report states, "all citizens have freedom of religion, and that there shall be no discrimination in political, economic, social, or cultural life because of religion. Freedoms in the constitution may be restricted by law only when necessary for national security, law and order, or public welfare, and restrictions may not violate the "essential aspect" of the freedom." The constitution also states that religion and state shall be separate.<sup>27</sup> While there have been some legal cases and public debate over the issues of conscientious exemption from military service<sup>28</sup> and the practice of deprogramming,<sup>29</sup> but generally speaking, South Korea provides a "favorable ecology" for new religious movements (Stark 1996).<sup>30</sup>

Researchers in the field of new religions in Europe and North America have thus far tended to choose the more sectarian and controversial groups (NRMs) that exhibit radical, experimental patterns of sexuality, family and childrearing (Palmer and Hardman 1999; Van Eck Duymaer Van Twist 2015; Frisk 2018; Nilsson 2019). The mass media, in reporting on religion, especially alternative religions, tends to focus on conflict, as James Beckford has noted (Beckford 2004). But in the case of Daesoon Jinrihoe, we find an example (and no doubt there are many others) of a new religion that is clearly not "sectarian"; whose children cannot be described as "indoctrinated" – in fact they appear to lead "normal" lives, in terms of their orientation to the larger society.

## Conclusion

Daesoon Jinrihoe appears to be a religion that is designed for adults. Our research found that children do not usually participate in religious activities. Chanting and prayer are understood as "adults-only" activities. Our informants explained this situation as follows: "The prayers and series of incantations are a 'hard sell' on children." There is a surprising absence of rites of passage, of coming of age rites, such as the equivalent of baptisms, christenings, and puberty initiations which appear to be an almost universal feature of religion, from ancient to indigenous to early modern.

But the new religion of Daesoon Jinrihoe is currently Korea's largest indigenous religious organization, and since 2005, through the establishment of the Youth Camps and the youth magazine, *Donggeurami*, there has been a strategic effort to educate the children in the faith of their parents. At the same time, children are awarded the power of choice. There appears to be no such thing as "forced indoctrination" or "shunning" in Daesoon Jinrihoe (practices that other religious minorities, notably the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Amish and the Bruderhof, have been accused of).<sup>31</sup> One of our informants who is a parent spoke of his openness to the prospect of their children not choosing to follow in the Daesoon Jinrihoe faith. The Daesoon father noted, "the children are taught the history of Daesoon Jinrihoe, and some of them, like my son, develop a research interest in its history, even if they choose not to become active members as adults."

### **Conflict of Interest**

Susan Palmer has been on the Editorial Board of *JDTREA* since July 2021, and Jason Greenberger has been Managing Editor during that same time period. However, neither had a role in the decision to publish this article. No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> It is funded by the Social Sciences and the Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- <sup>2</sup> Our two informants are members of Daesoon Jinrihoe. One of them was the chief editor and co-founder of the youth magazine, *Donggeurami*, and the other is a Head Edifier and founder of the Youth Camps.
- <sup>3</sup> Jason Greenberger presented his findings via a presentation titled, “Are We There Yet? Differing Views from Daesoon Jinrihoe Devotees as to Whether the Later World is Underway, Imminent, or Eventual”, at 79th Annual Meeting of Association for the Sociology of Religion in 2017. The theme for that year’s meeting was Religion and Division: Causes, Consequences, and Counters.
- <sup>4</sup> The July 2020 Youth Camp is not held, due to the vagaries of Covid-19.
- <sup>5</sup> *Donggeurami* 2012. Winter. Issue 6, p. 38-43 『동그라미』 2012. 겨울. 제6호, p.38-43
- <sup>6</sup> *Donggeurami* 2014. Spring. Issue 13 『동그라미』 2014. 봄. 제13호
- <sup>7</sup> *Donggeurami* 2016. Autumn. Issue 23 『동그라미』 2016. 가을. 제23호
- <sup>8</sup> *Donggeurami* 2018. Winter. Issue 28 『동그라미』 2018. 겨울. 제28호 『
- <sup>9</sup> *Donggeurami* 2012. Winter. Issue 6, p. 18-21. 『동그라미』 2012. 겨울. 제6호, p.18-21
- <sup>10</sup> *Donggeurami* 2016. Autumn. Issue 23, p. 4-9 『동그라미』 2016. 가을. 제23호, p. 4-9
- <sup>11</sup> *Donggeurami* 2018. Winter. Issue 28, p. 56-63 『동그라미』 2018. 겨울. 제28호, p. 56-63
- <sup>12</sup> *Donggeurami* 2012. Winter. Issue 6, p. 102-105 『동그라미』 2012. 겨울. 제6호, p. 102-105
- <sup>13</sup> *Donggeurami* 2014. Spring. Issue 13, p. 51 『동그라미』 2014. 봄. 제13호, p. 51
- <sup>14</sup> *Donggeurami* 2016. Autumn. Issue 23, p.20-23 『동그라미』 2016. 가을. 제23호, p. 20-23
- <sup>15</sup> *Donggeurami* 2018. Winter. Issue 28, p. 30-35 『동그라미』 2018. 겨울. 제28호, p. 30-35
- <sup>16</sup> *Donggeurami* 2018. Winter. Issue 28, p. 36-37 『동그라미』 2018. 겨울. 제28호, p. 36-37
- <sup>17</sup> *Donggeurami* 2012. Winter. Issue 6, p.6-17 『동그라미』 2012. 겨울. 제6호, p. 6-17
- <sup>18</sup> *Donggeurami* 2014. Spring. Issue 13, p.20-33 『동그라미』 2014. 봄. 제13호, p. 20-33
- <sup>19</sup> *Donggeurami* 2016. Autumn. Issue 23, p.24-37 『동그라미』 2016. 가을. 제23호, p. 24-37
- <sup>20</sup> *Donggeurami* 2018. Winter. Issue 28, p.42-55 『동그라미』 2018. 겨울. 제28호, p. 42-55
- <sup>21</sup> DIVA (Daejin International Volunteers Association) is an affiliated body of Daesoon Jinrihoe which is the biggest Korean ethnic religious organization and has its three major works: Charity Aid, Social Welfare and Education.
- <sup>22</sup> Translation by members of Daesoon Institute of Religion and Culture (including Jason Greenberger).
- <sup>23</sup> Greenberg notes the translations of these texts are still an ongoing process.
- <sup>24</sup> <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/china-forbids-children-from-churches-as-religious-rights-diminish>
- <sup>25</sup> <https://anglicanplanet.net/china-bans-children-from-church-services/>
- <sup>26</sup> <https://www.newsweek.com/atheist-china-bans-children-religion-muslim-province-783798>
- <sup>27</sup> <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/KOREA-REP-2018-INTERNATIONAL-RELIGIOUS-FREEDOM-REPORT.pdf>
- <sup>28</sup> <https://www.osce.org/odihr/94564?download=true>
- <sup>29</sup> <https://www.iirf.eu/news/other-news/conference-on-forced-change-of-religion-in-seoul/>
- <sup>30</sup> Rodney Stark, “Why Religious Movements Succeed or Fail: A Revised General Model” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Volume 11, Issue 2 May 1996, pages 133 - 146
- <sup>31</sup> <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/religious-shunning-jehovahs-witness-1.3767074>

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