Americans and the Development of Civil Society in Modern Korea

By Donald N. Clark

Vibrant civil societies, communities of citizens linked by common interests and collective identities, are critical for the perpetuation of free societies.[1] South Korea today is widely regarded as a successful democracy that rests on the solid foundation of a civil society. The building blocks of this foundation include a strong and thriving middle class; a constitution that guarantees basic freedoms, such as a free press and the freedom to associate; a political system that is supported by free and mostly honest elections; and a thriving capitalist economy that provides a livelihood for almost all citizens. With a history that has been overshadowed since its inception by the division of Korea into North and South and a consequent need to make national defense a top priority, the South Korean state has done remarkably well in creating a functioning democracy in adverse circumstances. The road has not always been smooth. Periods of war and dictatorship raised doubts that South Korea could ever be a truly free society. And though there remain emergency laws and defense priorities that dictate limits on certain kinds of political activity, most Koreans celebrate the fact that their country has weathered the worst of times and emerged as a world trading power, a member of the G-21, and a society that is known and respected for its energy and culture.[2]

Essential to this is the fact that Koreans are free to join with others in many kinds of association, almost always without government supervision or interference. There are clubs of every kind, associations for every imaginable purpose, churches and religious bodies of all sorts, and political parties that come and go in a kaleidoscope of changing interests. Free association, however, while essential to healthy democracy, is not a tradition in Korea. Under the monarchy before 1910, Koreans had status assignments. Under the Japanese colonial regime between 1910 and 1945, Koreans were actively discouraged from doing anything collective.

In the few decades prior to Japan's takeover of Korea in 1910, there was a generation of reformers who were influenced by changes they saw in Japan, experience studying in America and Europe, and the negative example of China in the era of the Opium Wars. Their proposals for modernization in Korea were met by resistance from the ruling *yangban* class that controlled wealth and power under the Korean monarchy. Though the reformers themselves were sons of the yangban class, there was a ferocious conservative backlash when they began to argue that Korea's best defense against foreign imperialism was to restructure its own internal social and political system. Proposals to end slavery and abolish social classes, to end the long-standing practice of keeping their country closed and under Chinese protection, and to open relations with Japan and the West created bloody conflicts in the 1880s and arrests of the reformers in the 1890s. A popular rebellion of peasants demanding justice likewise was crushed in 1894-95. An "Independence Club" of Western-educated, yangban-class reformers was put out of business in 1898. The upshot was Korea's continuing unpreparedness to defend itself when Japan turned its full force on the peninsula and took it over in the first decade of the twentieth century.

Koreans have often noted that the United States seemed to be the one foreign power that was capable of defending Korea against these pressures. The US-Korea Treaty of 1882 contained a clause whereby the two nations would use their "good offices" to protect each other from harm. Any notion that this meant that the United States would defend Korea against Japan, however, ended with the Russo-Japanese War, when Theodore Roosevelt's administration stood aside and approved Japan's taking control of Korea as a "protectorate." In Roosevelt's words, Americans had little interest in Korea and were inclined to "let nature take its course." That indifference to Japanese designs on Korea continued as the official stance of the United States until World War II. Even so, from the late nineteenth century until Pearl Harbor, Americans as individuals did play a significant role in Korea, contributing much to Korean modernization as entrepreneurs and, most of all, as missionaries working in their three fields of work, called the "missionary triad": evangelism, education, and medicine. More than a thousand Western missionaries served in Korea between 1885 and 1941. While obeying Japanese law, they also stood for dignifying the Koreans as something better than colonial serfs and thus served as witnesses to, and in some cases opponents of, Japanese rule in Korea. This association with Korean nationalism is an important aspect of their role in modern Korean life.

Although Korea lost its independence, the troubled last decades of the Chosŏn kingdom saw many things that were revolutionary in their effect. The royal government had tried until 1876 to maintain itself as a "Hermit Kingdom," resisting relations with any nation but China. Foreigners were strongly discouraged from coming to Korea, and foreign ideas such as Catholicism were suppressed. Indeed, much of the nineteenth century in Korea was marked by recurrent purges and massacres of Catholics, both missionaries and Korean converts.

A grudging toleration of Christianity followed Japan's forcible "opening" of Korea in 1876. The opening also brought permission for foreign diplomats and merchants to do business in Korea. Foreign goods began to appear in Korean markets, and foreign people began arriving to explore trade possibilities or to invest in enterprises like power plants and gold mines or as advisers to the royal court, diplomats, or Christian missionaries. Western entrepreneurs played their part in starting modern enterprises like electric power plants, the Seoul streetcar system, steam engines, weaving machines, kerosene lamps and matches to light them, and printing presses. Western advisers helped modernize the Korean army, legal system, mining industry, and foreign policy. They were hired to start the first government schools to teach modern subjects, including English.[3]

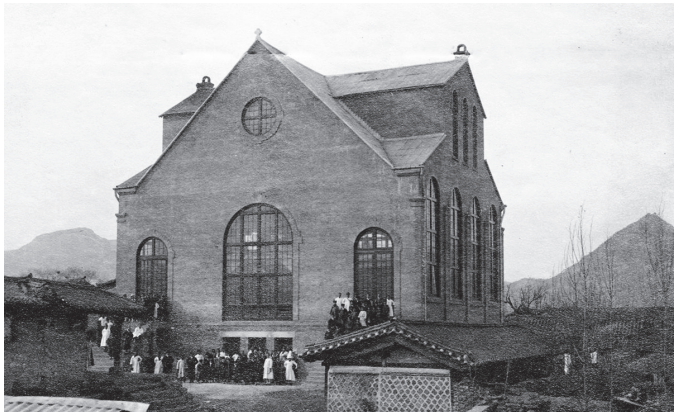
Although Great Britain was the leading Western power at the time, Americans quickly outnumbered all others in late nineteenth-century Korea. The majority of Americans who came to Korea were Christian missionaries. This was because of a powerful impetus sweeping American Protestant churches to plant missions all around the world. Idealistic young Christians, driven by

a commitment to "preach the gospel to every creature," arrived in large numbers between 1890 and 1910, intending to settle in and devote their lives to promoting Christianity in Korea. They began typically with several years of intensive language study. This enabled them to take their message beyond the cities of Korea into the countryside, where their influence turned out to be revolutionary. Along with the Gospel, they brought American democratic values and ideas about how to organize and educate people. The Presbyterians—North Americans and Australians—brought with them a form of church government that required a hierarchy of councils, circles of leaders and directors, rules of parliamentary procedure, majority rule through voting, and a set of church laws. These governance structures required many local leaders to manage the affairs of each individual congregation. Where country people had enjoyed few opportunities to hold or improve their social positions, the little village churches offered them the chance to lead through service. Missionaries founded the churches but immediately turned them over to local leaders. The Korean pastor of a congregation suddenly was a leader with a ready-made constituency. He rose or fell with his ability to keep his supporters, who also had positions as deacons, elders, and church officers. The conduct of church business was by rules and regulations, in meetings run by rules of procedure. These tiny examples of civil society, planted across the Korean countryside—200 of them in the environs of P'yŏngyang alone by the 1930s—amounted to a training ground for democratic practice all across the Korean peninsula.[4]

The triad of missionary work included evangelism, education, and medicine. Evangelism—i.e., persuading Koreans to convert to Christianity and organizing Christian communities into church congregations with their own leaders—was historically significant as a building block of modern civil society in several ways. Admission to the church community was class-blind. Notwithstanding Korea's rigid social hierarchy, the doors were meant to be open to all. Second, propagation of the Gospel required the dissemination of Christian propaganda in the form of Bibles, study materials, leaflets, hymnals, and texts of all kinds. It was imperative that Korean Christians be able to read, so Christian missions pushed the Korean phonetic *Han'gŭl* alphabet and taught classes that put literacy within reach of even the humblest church member. For peasants and laborers who had never been educated—and who even believed that they *couldn't* be educated—the program to teach adults to read was empowering, attractive, and essential to the formation of church congregations as independent and free civil society groups.

Through literacy and the importance of teaching new Christians to read, evangelism and education overlapped as two sides of the missionary triad. The Americans who labored on the education side of the triad founded schools not only for boys, but also for girls. At first, missionary schools were suspect. After all, who would want to commend their children to the ministrations of Western barbarians? However, by 1900, Christian schools were proliferating. They often began with weekday classes meeting in the original mud-walled country churches, staffed by volunteers. Some Christian schools were started by tradesmen or even the occasional Christian nobleman who wanted to operate modern schools as philanthropies. These schools taught religion, since that was their original purpose, but they also taught modern subjects like math, science, world geography, English, and the like. Parents enthusiastically enrolled their children in these schools and gave sacrificially to help them grow. The few secondary schools that developed began turning out teachers for the lower grades. By the 1920s, there were

Samuel Forman Moore (1860-1906) with his wife and children. Source: *The Marmot's Hole: Korea* . . . in blog format at http://tiny.cc/5nabcx.



Seoul Seung-dong (Central) Presbyterian Church—the "butchers' church" in 1913. Courtesy of the author.

American-founded colleges in Seoul and P'yŏngyang, preparing graduates for modern professions. The result was that the missionary educational effort created an alternative to Japanese colonial education that was reasonably independent of government control. This made a great difference to Koreans, not least because the language of instruction was Korean rather than Japanese. Japanese was not forced upon all Koreans as their "national language" until the 1930s. This made for a subtle appeal: independent church-related schools where Koreans could be Koreans, contributing to the link between Christianity and Korean nationalism during the Japanese colonial period.

The democratic ideals that came with American Protestant missionaries worked themselves out in some interesting ways. For example, in 1895, the missionary Samuel F. Moore founded what is now the Seung-dong Presbyterian Church in central Seoul on the edge of the city's residential district for noblemen, who were called yangban. It was a year of change, when reformers were calling for the abolition of social classes, which suited Moore's American values. Moore himself was an outsider, reasonably aware of social realities in Korea but convinced that they could be changed in practice. So one Sunday, he announced to his assembled yangban congregants that he was going to invite commoners to attend church along with them as a demonstration of the Christian theory of equality before the throne of God. The church would welcome riff-raff from the local market, including peddlers from a class called *paekchong* and even outcasts of which the lowest were persons who dealt with meat

and leather—dead things—and so were nicknamed "butchers." He would encourage the new members to put their hair up in topknots and wear hats, like decent people, and everyone should call each other "brother." The yangban members immediately went for the exits, and for the next decade before his death, Moore mourned the failure of his experiment. Evidently, Korea was not ready for this degree of social mingling at the time. However, the rising tide of education among Christians in commoner churches contributed to a degree of social integration in the years that followed. Moore's church today has expanded into ever-larger buildings, and today, the congregation of the Seung-dong Church proudly remembers the story of the "Butchers Church" as an early chapter in the history of Korean democracy.[5]

The third leg of the missionary triad was medicine, which served as Korea's introduction to Western science and scientific learning. Most mission stations, consisting of evangelical missionaries and their churches and educators and their schools, also include a medical facility, whether a clinic and nurse in the smaller locations or a hospital with doctors and labs and a staff in the larger cities. In Seoul, the crown jewel of medical missions was Severance Union Medical College (SUMC), now part of Yonsei University. Named for Ohio philanthropist Louis Severance, whose founding gift launched the institution, SUMC was graduating full-fledged doctors by the late 1920s. Smaller medical schools graduated nurses and general practitioners. Large hospitals in Pusan, Taegu, and Chŏnju anchored the missionary medical effort in all corners of the country and employed the graduates. In this way, American missionary work contributed much to Korea's early education in the sciences.

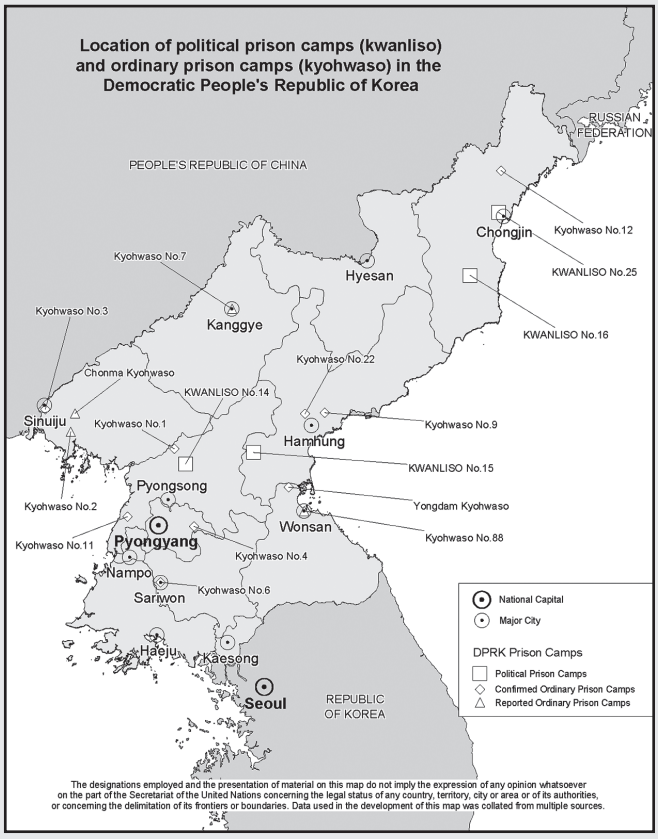
All three sides of the missionary triad created revolutionary opportunities for Korean women. Where women had normally lived as "inside persons," confined to the domestic sphere, Christianity brought them out into constructive roles in the public sphere. In church, they were welcomed to services—albeit segregated from men in the beginning. They could be elected to positions as deacons and members of decision-making committees or even appointed as Sunday School teachers. They were given training at women's adult classes, aimed at teaching them to be Christian mothers to their children of both sexes. Voluntary church work sometimes gave them titles like "teacher" or "honorable deacon," earning respect from the community on their own merits. Women benefited from the Christian school network by taking part as students and teachers. They could earn degrees and, like the graduates of the nursing

UN 2014 Report on North Korea

On February 17, 2014, the United Nations' Human Rights Council released a 372-page document, *Report of the Detailed Findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).* The major thesis of the UN report about the North Korean regime is succinctly described in the following sentence.

"The gravity, scale, and nature of these [human rights] violations reveal a State that does not have any parallel in the contemporary world."

The findings encompass the following categories: violations of freedoms of thought, expression, and religion; discrimination on the basis of state-assigned social class, gender, and disability; violations of the freedom of movement and residence; violations of the right to food and related aspects of the right to life; arbitrary detention, torture, executions, enforced disappearances, and political prison camps; and enforced disappearance of persons from other countries, including through abductions. Below are just a few excerpts from this extensively documented report.



Violations of Freedoms of Thought

All DVDs must have a stamp to show they are government-approved. Individuals who are caught watching unstamped movies face a range of punishments, including torture, sleep deprivation, ten to fifteen year prison terms and execution.

State-Assigned Social Class

The DPRK employs the *songbun*, a state-assigned social class system. Citizens are placed into one of three broad classes based on their perceived political allegiance to the DPRK: Core, Wavering, and Hostile. The category of songbun designation profoundly affects an individual's life. Those with Hostile songbun designations were given little or no food during the 1990s famine.

Prison Camps

The DPRK has an extensive prison camp system. Four large prison camps are known to exist, with tens of thousands of prisoners per camp. Estimates of the prison camp population have declined from 150,000-200,000 in the early 2000s to 80,000-130,000 today. Although some of the drop is attributed to prisoner release after camp consolidation, DPRK prison camps have high rates of death due to starvation, neglect, disease, and executions.

The report is available at http://tinyurl.com/nu3v9eu.

1911 Severance Union Medical College graduates are shown with members of the faculty: Dr. Kim, Dr. Hirst, Dr. Avison, Dr. Weir, Dr. Pak, Dr. Hong. The college was founded by American philanthropist, Louis Henry Severance (1838-1913).
Source: *Mochi Thinking Blog, Korea: Caught In Time* by Terry Bennett at http://tiny.cc/h8dbcx.

schools, pursue careers in the professions. Some became writers, professors, or noted musicians. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) inspired Korean women to affiliate and seek legal improvements in areas like marriage and owning property. The opening of wider horizons for Korean women was an important part of the foundation for civil society, over the long run creating conditions for women to serve as prime ministers and, in 2013, as president of the ROK.

When Japan was defeated in 1945 and Korea emerged from colonial status, fewer than one in five Korean children had ever been to school. The Christian schools had mostly been shut down during the war, but their legacy was strong, and they quickly reopened. When the communist regime in North Korea drove Christians to migrate to the South, they brought their alumni associations with them and started new campuses in South Korea by themselves with whatever meager resources they brought with them. Since then, South Korea has always had a large number of Christian-run schools at all levels, long after the departure of the missionaries. Many of them are top-tier institutions, like Yonsei and Ewha universities. Many of the trustees, administrators, and faculty members had educations not only in the Christian schools of Korea but degrees from the graduate institutions of the United States. Their experience and orientation has always amounted to an important link between the United States and Korea.

When history turned in 1945 and Japan was stripped of its empire, the US Army took over occupation responsibility in the southern zone, sharing Korea with the Soviet Red Army in the North. The US Army Government in Korea (USAMGIK) from the start began the audacious project of planting democracy in what had just been a Japanese colony and before that an ancient Confucian kingdom. This effort was its own contradiction, being a military dictatorship in effect. USAMGIK, under the command of General Douglas MacArthur in Tokyo, searched frantically for pro-American elements and found them in businessmen, landlords, and other established conservatives. While being pro-American, these kinds of Koreans were not inclined to encourage mass democracy but to resist anything that would threaten their own privileges in traditional Korean society. They were definitely not inclined to share political power with ordinary people. In ways that are reminiscent of Samuel Moore and his "Butchers Church," the US Army occupiers were outsiders preaching a gospel of equality that was unnatural for the place and time.

USAMGIK, therefore, started out opposing its own democratic program by deploying armed force against Korea's progressive left wing, which, including communists, was campaigning for land reform and other kinds of redistribution of wealth and power. The Americans tried with one hand to promote democracy for some while excluding others. Like the elites, they feared social revolution. They suppressed peasant associations and labor unions, stopped short of breaking up the largest landholdings of the richest South Koreans, and did their best to prevent radical change. At the beginning of the occupation, they were actually so ignorant of the realities of Korea that they went first to consult the defeated Japanese about how to govern the place. They used Koreans who had been employed by the Japanese Imperial forces as their first officers in a newly created South Korean constabulary, the precursor of today's Republic of Korea army, whose first job in the 1940s was to help the Americans crush leftist activity in the countryside. Thus, the American military government had a dual program: the promotion of institutional democracy in the constitutional sense and the protection of privileged elites in the social and economic sense.

The American missionaries who returned to work in Korea after the war were part of this picture. USAMGIK employed many prewar missionaries as advisers. American civilians at first were kept out of Korea but in 1946 were invited back to be, as General MacArthur saw it, a supporting cast in the drama of creating democratic capitalism in South Korea. Without meaning to, or even realizing that it was happening, Christian missionaries thus became part of the infrastructure of the occupation and then of the South Korean republic that emerged from it. Their support for the American program was influenced by a passionate, anti-communist zeal, the result of the suffering of Christians in North Korea under the Soviet occupation of that zone. North Korea, which once had been the area of greatest Christian concentration, had seen Christians defined as enemies of the system, their lands and businesses nationalized, their households forced in many cases to flee to the South. Support for the South Korean state was also natural because the new president was the returned exile Syngman Rhee, an American-educated Christian who had received his early education in Seoul in a Methodist boys' school.

The first decade of Korean independence was plagued by violence, most dramatically the North Korean invasion of the South in June 1950 and the ensuing three-year war. The violence ramped up before 1950, in constant left-versus-right conflict within South Korea and also along the border with the North. Security concerns also meant quasi-wartime conditions after the 1953 armistice, such as

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the militarization of national life, the institution of draconian curbs on civil liberties through an elaborate National Security Law, and constant reminders of danger like the midnight curfews that continued throughout South Korea until the 1980s. The war devastated both halves of Korea and reduced the republic in the South to a state of wretched dependence on international aid. Conditions for building a healthy society were completely lacking in South Korea until the 1960s. Instead, corruption sapped the Koreans' confidence, and the processes of democracy that were provided for in the constitution were marred by corrupt elections, bribery, political infighting, and cruel injustices. An ethic of self-promotion drove individuals to clamber over each other to find advantage in what scholar-diplomat Gregory Henderson called the "politics of the vortex,"[6] defeating any possibility of a healthy democracy based on common causes, freedom, responsibility, and a respect for law.

During this bleak period, until about 1965, American support for free institutions in Korea consisted of charity in the form of foreign aid, voluntary assistance from church and other humanitarian organizations, and a massive military commitment to create a deterrent to any renewed outbreak of war on the peninsula. The Korean War era further solidified American support for privileged Koreans, not least because they were often American-educated and English-speaking, and they professed values that were intelligible to American backers of the South Korean state. The United States also contributed a massive aid program to improve Korea's economic infrastructure in energy, transportation, construction materials, and much else. Americans helped rebuild the education system, even sending the Peace Corps to teach English, science, and public health.

With communist North Korea as a kind of a doppelganger embodying the opposite of everything that Americans wanted to see develop in the South, the demands of national security were allowed to excuse rule by right-wing political and military cliques. This continued after and through the ROK Army military coup under General Park Chung-hee in 1961. General Park introduced unprecedented discipline into the public sphere after the coup, but it rested on military rule and intimidation via domestic police and intelligence agencies that made it risky to associate with others for political purposes. The press was censored; regulations and arbitrary preferences controlled the marketplace; and the nation remained

General Park Chung-hee, Chairman, Supreme Council of Korea, pays farewell call to President Kennedy, November 15, 1961. Source: *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum* at http://tiny.cc/9gfbcx.

under laws that equated dissent with treason and "aiding the enemy," namely North Korea. Under the circumstances, civil society organizations operated cautiously under heavy blankets of self-censorship. The government punished people who dissented, for example, labor leaders who protested the low wages that the Park regime enforced in order to keep Korean products cheap overseas and the masses of citizens who protested Park's program of rapprochement with Japan or his volunteering divisions of the ROK Army to support the Americans in Việt Nam.

In many ways, it was Catholic and Protestant Christians, no longer led by foreign missionaries, who kept alive the spark of civil society in Korea. As had been the case under Japanese rule, churches continued with nominal government permission to operate as independent centers for assembly and discussion of the Gospel in society. Churches represented a spectrum, but virtually all recalled the horrors of the Korean War and the fate of Christians in North Korea as reasons to stand strongly against communism or anything resembling it in South Korea. As such, the churches of South Korea, though more or less independent of government control, marched with the state in its determination to oppose communism. On the right of the spectrum, Christians supported the government's arbitrary arrests of suspected communists and other leftists, including labor leaders. On the left, a current developed of human rights activism that opposed the Park dictatorship's crushing of freedom in the name of national security. As a result, the churches of South Korea were the locus of a lively debate among people of many kinds of views, being in effect a huge forum for discussion and development of free expression—although "free expression" did not become a reality until the 1990s in South Korea, when the experience of Korea's churches turned out to be an important schooling in debate and majority rule.

The year 1982 marked the centennial of US-Korean relations. The speeches made much of the bonds forged during the Korean War. Other ceremonies honored individuals on both sides who had contributed in many other ways, including the founders of the Korean immigrant community in the United States. Missionaries got their due, honored by alumni of the churches, schools, and hospitals they founded as part of the missionary triad. In fact, while the United States and its citizens have played many roles in modern Korea, Koreans have always been the agents of their own history.

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This is true for the Korean noblemen who sold their country out to the Japanese in 1910; the Korean independence fighters during the occupation; and the Korean leftists and rightists, whose interests helped create and maintain the national division between North and South. As individuals with their own agendas, Americans played a supporting role during the Japanese occupation, and they determined fateful events after World War II when it came to dividing Korea or deciding to intervene in the North-South civil war. Americans promoted and supported democracy in South Korea and also armed the military that stood in democracy's way for decades in the late twentieth century. Americans are still important in both halves of Korea today, as archenemies in the North and trading partners and military allies in the South. There is much to be proud of in the relationship and much to regret. Americans have left large footprints in Korea, and the two peoples have learned much about each other. We can hope that what we have learned will be the basis for respect and constructive effort in the future. ■

NOTES

1. "Definition: Civil Society," *Oxford Dictionaries*, accessed February 24, 2014, http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/civil-society .
2. For a collection of studies on civil society in modern Korea, including student movements, reform efforts, religious organizations, and the evolution of the rule of law, see Charles K. Armstrong, ed., *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy and the State,* 2nd edition (London: Routledge, 2007).
3. For a detailed recent study of the way Westerners experienced Korea before 1900, see Robert Neff, *Letters from Joseon: Nineteenth Century Korea through the Eyes of an American Ambassador's Wife* (Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2012).
4. As a child, North Korean founder/leader Kim Il-sung occasionally attended one of the churches with his mother, Kang Pan-sŏk, who was a Presbyterian deaconess. See Ch'oe Yong-ho, "Christian Background in the Early Life of Kim Il-song," *Asian Survey* 26, no. 10 (1986): 1082-1091.
5. Donald N. Clark, *Living Dangerously in Korea: The Western Experience 1900-1950* (Norwalk: Eastbridge, 2003), 17-18.
6. Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of the Vortex* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968).

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