Vibrant civil societies, communities of citizens linked by common interests and collective identities, are critical for the perpetuation of free societies. 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.

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. Until the middle of the twentieth century, Korea was a society that is known and respected for its energy and culture.

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.
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 typically 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

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 paekch'ong and even outcasts of which the lowest were persons who dealt with meat.
Focus on Korea: Korean Democratization

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 Ch'ungju 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


“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.

The report is available at http://tinyurl.com/nu3v9eu.
Dr. Pak, Dr. Hong. The college was founded by American philanthropist, Louis Henry Severance (1838-1913).

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 striped 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

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.
The war devastated both halves of Korea and reduced the republic in the South to a state of wretched dependence on international aid.

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
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 Vietnam.

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.

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

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).

DONALD N. CLARK is the Murchison Professor of History and Co-Director of East Asian Studies at Trinity University. He also serves as Director of Trinity’s International Studies Program. He teaches courses on China, Japan, and Korea, and the history of American foreign relations with a research focus on Korea, where he spent much of his life as the son of missionaries. In addition to writing books and journal articles on a variety of East Asian topics, Professor Clark has also published two works that focus upon Western missionaries in Korea—Living Dangerously in Korea: The Western Experience 1900-1950 (2003) and Missionary Photography in Korea: Encountering the West through Christianity (2009). Professor Clark is also the author of the Key Issues in Asian Studies booklet Korea in World History.