

A Mission of Education and Creation: The Work of Christian Missionaries in Korea from 1882 Through 1910

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When Kim Dae-jung completed his term as the Republic of Korea's President, the government constructed a presidential library in his honor. The library was built at Yonsei University, a private college with a history leading back to the dawn of western-styled education within Korea. Interestingly, Kim Dae-jung never studied at Yonsei. So why build the library at this private, well renowned university? Perhaps because they represented "firsts" for their nation: Kim Dae-jung as the nation's first Roman Catholic President and Yonsei University as the first hospital to provide Western medical education in Korea. By the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Western missionaries founded schools in Korea to spread Christianity. These schools and hospitals provided new, modern access to education for the people of Korea. Christian missionaries played a significant role in developing Korea's education system and medical infrastructure from 1882 to 1910. Without the works of these individuals, a "modern" educational system would not have evolved on the peninsula until the occupation of Korea by Japan in 1910.

Before examining the work of Christian missionaries and their efforts to establish schools and hospitals on the Korean peninsula, we must explore the context in which Christianity arrived and became available to the Korean people. Takemichi Hara notes that one of the first significant ways that Western influence reached Korea was through the annual tributary missions to China by emissaries of the Korean Kingdom during the eighteenth-century.²⁸⁷ Even though the emissaries were theoretically forbidden to enter Peking, little stopped them from intruding into the city to search for entertainment, shopping, or conversation. Korean emissaries regularly visited the *Nan-t'ang*, or South Church, where resident Jesuit priests of the Manchu court provided the visiting Koreans with scientific works or Christian writings translated into Chinese.²⁸⁸ When these writings returned to Korea they found a receptive audience in the *Sirhak*²⁸⁹ crowd, leading to academic interest and conversion among many of the

²⁸⁷ Takemichi Hara, "Korea, China, and Western Barbarians: Diplomacy in Early Nineteenth-Century Korea," *Modern Asian Studies* 32, no. 2 (May 1998): 393.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ Translated as "practical learning."

intellectual elite. This new religion was so attractive to Korean emissaries that the first recorded baptism occurred at Peking in 1784.²⁹⁰

Individuals who returned from Peking and converts among the *Sirhak* movement continued to spread Christianity in Korea without any official missionaries until 1794, when Chou Wen-mo became the first Catholic Priest in Korea. When Chou Wen-mo, a young Chinese man entered the country he found at least four thousand converts.²⁹¹ Wen-mo became the first Catholic priest in Korea. So pervasive was this new teaching, that it attracted followers from the late King Chǒngjo's political faction. In 1801, Queen Reagent issued the *Shinyu* proclamation, authorizing a large scale persecution of Christianity as an "evil teaching" in Confucian tradition. Despite this government sponsored persecution of Christianity, its religious base continued to grow. These trends continued to influence the peninsula as the isolationist policies of Korea began to crumble when Korea opened to Western powers by signing the United States–Korea treaty. Christian persecution calmed in 1886 after Korea signed a treaty with France containing a remarkably vague clause that allowed missionaries to spread Christianity in Korea. The ending of official persecution of Christians allowed for the entrance of many Protestant missionaries into Korea who not only spread the word of God, but also created schools and hospitals.

The brief observance of Christianity's history in Korea is important for two reasons. First, it exemplifies how the religion arrived on the peninsula as a byproduct of the tributary missions between Korea and China. It spread among the academic population, partially through the *Sirhak* movement, before being persecuted by royal mandate in 1801 by the *Shinyu* proclamation. Second, the end of official persecution in 1882 opened the door for the missionaries to come to Korea, bringing their Western knowledge that changed the face of Korean education and medicine forever. These two reasons prove critical to understand and contextualize the history of Christian missionaries in Korea.

With the treaty signed in 1882, the United States began their missionary work in Korea by building hospitals and schools. Although a pre-established form or practice of individual education existed within Korea, especially through male dominated Confucian traditions, it remained inaccessible to many individuals. Missionaries brought accessibility to Korean education by creating an educational system for everyone at every level. Prior to the establishment of missionary schools, Korean education centered upon private primary and secondary education. State controlled

²⁹⁰ "Yi Sŭng-hun, who had accompanied his father in a diplomatic entourage, returned from Peking after being baptized by a Western Catholic priest." Carter J. Eckert, ed., *Korea Old and New: A History*, (Seoul: Ilchokak Publishers, 1990), 170.

²⁹¹ Hara, 394.

public schooling focused on college education. Sungho Lee summarizes these ideas:

The state run institutions were mostly those of higher learning, which opened their doors only to the selected youths of the privileged upper class. The primary purpose of higher learning was to acquaint the students with Confucian philosophy and ethics through a course of study composed of Chinese classics, which were thought to be a guide for the bureaucracy. [...] the private institutions of education were for primary and middle levels of education. The formal general education for people was generally a private matter, while higher education for the ruling class was a public one.²⁹²

In Korea, before the introduction of missionary schools, schooling for all levels of education did not exist, either private or public. Complicating this problem, the state provided the only one form of higher education. American missionaries created a system of public and higher education outside of the Korean government's public style. They founded schools with the intention of upgrading them to junior colleges and to "extend every effort to eventually create Western four-year colleges."²⁹³

In less than two years after the signing of the first United States-Korea treaty, countless missionaries had arrived on Korea's shores. Among them, Dr. Horace G. Underwood, published the first Korean-English and English-Korean dictionaries. The Reverend Underwood would later create the Chosŏn Christian College in 1915. In addition to schools, many missionaries came to Korea to establish hospitals that not only provided Western medicine, but taught willing students different forms of medicine. Dr. Horace Allen and Dr. O.R. Avison opened the first hospital to provide and teach Western medicine in Seoul in 1885. This hospital, Gwanhyewon, was the forerunner to Yonsei University. With the assistance of Ohio industrialist L.H. Severance, the college eventually opened a medical school: the Union Medical College and Hospital and the School of Nursing. This, too, eventually consolidated into Yonsei University.²⁹⁴ Such a prestigious university has roots in the missionary schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Missionary schools revolutionized the quality of Korean education and medicine.

Missionaries founded schools and institutions founded with two primary differences from the Korean private and public schools systems.

²⁹² Sungho Lee, "The Emergence of the Modern University in Korea," *Higher Education* 18, no. 1 (1989): 88.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 91.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

These schools taught Korean Hangul and provided an educational system for women. Sungho Lee reveals the greatest strength of these mission schools:

[T]he Western missionaries introduced Western higher learning in the Korean language, “Hangul.” They did away with Chinese classics. They were first class Korean speakers and scholars in Korean studies. They wrote the history of Korea and studied Korea’s traditional religions.²⁹⁵

Rather than teach Confucian traditions by using Chinese Confucian texts, the missionaries broke these constraints upon higher learning in Korea by using Hangul, making them pioneers of education within Korea. The idea that Koreans could receive a higher education in their own language without the use of Confucian texts was new. Its popularity trickled downward into the primary and middle levels of education provided by the missionaries. By establishing this new education in Korean, and not in Chinese, the doors of opportunity were opened to all Koreans who wanted to pursue an education.

The attention devoted to women made mission schools indispensable to the Korean educational system. Traditionally, the education system in Korea was exclusive to men, and those women of the upper *yangban* class who did receive some education did so in the *onmun* vernacular script.²⁹⁶ This practice would change soon after 1882 when Mrs. Mary F. Scranton arrived in Korea. She began a women’s school, Ewha Haktang, in 1886 with just one student. She created the school with the full blessing of Queen Min²⁹⁷, a renowned and infamous monarch with a very anti-Western background. Ewha Haktang struggled at first. Initially, the people of Korea believed that the missionaries intended to abduct their daughters for service as slaves in foreign countries. Ewha Haktang, however, began accepting orphaned girls from backgrounds of extreme poverty some of whom, when given a chance, excelled.²⁹⁸ Ewha Haktang developed quickly and Sungho Lee notes that it was a “pioneer” of progress:

[T]he girls of Ewha Haktang in 1898 asked that the teaching of Chinese characters be included in the curriculum. This was a reflection of the new spirit that education for girls should not in any way be inferior to that of boys’, knowledge of Chinese characters and

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 93.

²⁹⁶ Jihang Park, “Trailblazers in a Traditional World: Korea’s First Women College Graduates, 1910-1945,” *Social Science History* 14, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 535.

²⁹⁷ Lee, 89.

²⁹⁸ Park, 540.

classics being the traditional hallmark of a good education given only to boys.²⁹⁹

Ewha Haktang would continue to pioneer in the area of women's education when it offered its first college courses in three departments—literature, music, and home economics—in 1910 for fifteen female students. The pioneering work of schools like Ewha Haktang brought greater educational equality and inspired generations of women, regardless of economic background to pursue an education.

In addition to creating an educational structure for higher education for both genders, missionaries also worked to develop a medical infrastructure. Missionaries founded numerous hospitals and schools for nursing. Another hospital of note was the East Gate Women's Hospital founded in Seoul by Dr. Mary Cutler in 1886. In 1905, Dr. Cutler and Margaret J. Edmunds, a nursing graduate of University Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, began the first training school for nurses. Frances Lee Whang, former director of the Severance Hospital School, notes in an article from *The American Journal of Nursing* that:

The School admitted only Christian applicants, on their parents' written consent, and their pastors' or teacher' recommendation... the school provided books, shoes, uniforms, citizen's clothes, bedding, food, room, light, fuel, summer vacations and at graduation a handsome diploma and gold school pin.³⁰⁰

Korean female nurses often came from poor backgrounds, much like the girls of Ewha Haktang, and relied heavily upon the scholarship and charity of the nursing school. The missionaries that came after the signing of the first United States-Korea treaty strengthened the educational background of these girls and, by extension, the nursing infrastructure of Korea. These missionaries were the first group to establish a complete curriculum for Korea, from kindergarten to college, which brought a modern approach to education by including the study of science and medicine.³⁰¹ Establishing schools, of all levels, and hospitals became the focus of many missionaries in Korea.³⁰²

By 1910, when the Japanese annexed Korea as a colony, Missionaries operated about one-third of all schools.³⁰³ The large

²⁹⁹ Lee, 91.

³⁰⁰ Frances Lee Whang, "The Advance of Nursing in Korea," *The American Journal of Nursing* 54, no. 7 (July 1954): 818.

³⁰¹ Andrew Eungi Kim, "Characteristics of Religious Life in South Korea: a Sociological Survey," *Review of Religious Research* 43, no. 4 (June 2002): 301.

³⁰² Keith Pratt, *Everlasting Flower*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 202.

³⁰³ Lee, 90.

proportion of mission schools in Korea shows the demand for, and quality of, the education that these schools provided. The establishment of nursing schools, hospitals, and expansion of medical instruction by missionaries vastly strengthened the medical infrastructure of the country.

By establishing these schools and hospitals, the missionaries set a precedent for future generations of Koreans that can be seen in the educational attainment of Christians in Korea today. In the article "Characteristics of Religious Life in South Korea: a Sociological Survey," a Gallup Korea survey revealed that about one-fourth of Korean Protestants and one-fourth of Korean Catholics surveyed had university degrees, compared to only seven percent of the Buddhists surveyed. Thirty percent of Korean Buddhists had only an elementary education or less, compared to the three and eleven percent of Catholics and Protestants who had the same educational achievement.³⁰⁴ This shows the impact that these missionaries had on their converts; they took the need for an education which they found in Korea, created a modern system of education, and established an educational system that served generations of Koreans, even during the Japanese occupation.³⁰⁵ Lillie Ora Lathrop, in a letter to the editor of *The American Journal of Nursing*, provides a candid assessment of the situation and desire for education in Korea in 1922. While discussing the celebration of Korean Thanksgiving, the anniversary of Christianity's arrival in Korea, she talks about women attending night school in order to learn to write and read so that they may educate their children "who all, now, seem to want an education."³⁰⁶ These missionaries had changed Korean society by combining their evangelism with a desire to provide and create a passion for education and training. When the Japanese closed these missionary schools, claiming they wished to purge Western influence from their new colony, they did not expect an outcry over the loss of educational opportunities provided by the missionaries. Christian missionaries provided the means, education, and training, to be successful in post 1882 Korea, and many Koreans embraced these opportunities regardless of the political climate.

The relationship between Christian missionaries and the dynamic changes that occurred in Korea during the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century, affected the policies of Meiji Japan in Korea. The influence of Christianity continued to affect the peninsula during the twentieth-century, even after World War II, as one-fourth of Koreans today identify themselves as Christian. During the decades prior to the occupation of Korea by Japan in 1910, Christianity and the mission work of missionaries played a significant role in developing the Republic of Korea's

³⁰⁴ Kim, 298.

³⁰⁵ Lee, 96. The mission schools which closed or lost college status under the Education Ordinance of 1911 were reinstated as colleges by the Government General of Korea in 1925.

³⁰⁶ Lillie Ora Lathrop, "From Korea," *The American Journal of Nursing* 22, no. 6 (March 1922): 465.

education system and medical infrastructure. The history of Christianity in Korea highlights how early converts and missionaries were the victims of persecution until the first United States-Korea treaty in 1882 and the Korea-France treaty in 1886. In the late nineteenth-century missionaries founded multiple institutions to provide a beneficial education system to Korea through the establishment of a curriculum that spanned from kindergarten to college. This curriculum employed Hangul as the language of instruction and provided an expansion of educational opportunities for women, and established nursing and medical schools to provide Western medical instruction and training to Koreans. One-third of the formal schools within Korea adopted this educational system which illustrates the impact of religion on educational attainment in Korea today. After the missionary schools closed in 1911, Koreans voiced their need for this education which was not fulfilled until the reopening of Korea in 1925. Connecting the efforts of missionaries with Korea's future leaders reveals the true impact of the mission work of Christian missionaries in Korea. Without their work creating a complete educational system, schools, and hospitals, the face of Korea today might look very different.

