



# Korean Sovereignty, Liberal Democratic Society, and the Underwoods, 1916–1951

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## Abstract

*Protestant missionaries present in Korea during the period of the US military government and the formation of the Republic of Korea (1945–1948) were observers of and, to some extent, participants in the development of an anti-communist state increasingly aligned with Korean Protestantism. Through the cases of Horace and Ethel Underwood, this paper illustrates that the missionary role in the US military government, Korean society, and Korean state formation must be understood from within the complexities of missionary experience under colonialism, approaches to missions and society, and the personal histories of missionaries with Korea. Beginning with conflicts within the Presbyterian missions in Korea and rooted in Horace Underwood's pre-colonial Korean childhood, both Underwoods became committed to Korean autonomy and sovereignty, a stance which guided their interactions with their mission and with the American military government. In those interactions they displayed confidence in the promise of a liberal democratic society in Korea as they urged their colleagues to seek and to defer to Korean opinion. Wary of both communism and the authoritarianism displayed in the early Syngman Rhee administration, their words and actions demonstrated a strong faith in the potential of Koreans to forge and participate actively in a vibrant, open, liberal society.*

**Keywords:** Protestant missionaries, Korean Protestants, higher education, women's organizations, USAMGIK

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## Introduction

In July of 1946, Ethel Underwood (1888–1949), just returned to Korea following her family’s forced departure in 1942, expressed frustration over the circumstances she found under the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK). Having with her husband stood up against her colleagues in the Korea Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the USA (PCUSA) a decade earlier in defense of the autonomy of Korean Christians and the Presbyterian churches in Korea, she resented that Korean autonomy now, even in *liberation*, was held at bay by the American military government. She wrote her daughter, Grace: “Everything seems helpless—‘taken out from under.’ Every earnest attempt by Koreans to help themselves is snatched from their hands—[and labeled] ‘incompetent.’”<sup>1</sup> Her husband, Horace Horton Underwood (1890–1951), who had returned to Korea nine months earlier in an advisory role with the USAMGIK, found his dual roles with the church and the military government complicating his position in Korea. Born in Seoul to early PCUSA missionaries Horace Grant and Lillias Underwood, he had long felt a familial duty to work respectfully with the broader Korean Protestant community—a task made difficult by church and mission tensions in the 1930s and by his affiliation with the Americans now in charge in the south.

In this new, post-colonial but not-yet-autonomous, transition period of Korean history, the role of foreign missionaries in the Korean church and society was anything but certain. Indeed, the role of Protestant Christianity was likewise uncertain. As Korea moved toward formal division and a new state was formed in the southern half of the peninsula, Korean Protestantism emerged as a key political force, particularly in response to the prospect of a Communist state in the north (Lee and Suh 2017). The creation of the eventual anti-communist consolidation of church and state in South Korea, however, was more complex than is often portrayed (Jung 2012; Park 2003). Central to that complexity is the diversity (political, ideological, and religious) in the Korean Christian community both before and following

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1. Ethel Underwood to Grace Underwood, July 9, 1946, Richard F. Underwood Papers (RFU).

liberation in 1945, as argued by Kun-woo Kim in this issue.

The role of American missionaries in this era likewise warrants more rigorous examination and positioning in the historical context and divisions within the mission community (An 2010; Haga 2012). Missionaries' part in this growing alignment of church and state in Korea is often simplistically told: the USAMGIK relied upon the advice of American missionaries, such as Horace Underwood, in making appointments and political decisions in the south. These American missionaries introduced their Korean Christian students, acquaintances, and friends, who thereby took on a disproportionate role in both the military government period and in the establishment of the Republic of Korea. Jong-Chol An's (2010) examination of Horace H. Underwood, which draws on Underwood's actions in mission conflicts within the PCUSA and with the USAMGIK, argues that for Underwood, these two roles went hand in hand. Underwood, he claims, made "no distinction between sacred and secular" (An 2010, 225). He concludes that Underwood's primary motivation in his association with the USAMGIK was his desire for a "spiritual victory" over communism, and suggests that Underwood's views were highly influential on the decision-making of the military government, the Koreans working with them, and the broader Korean church. In drawing these conclusions, An overstates the influence of Underwood, both before and following liberation, and ignores the influence Koreans had on the attitudes and responses of the missionaries with whom they interacted. Moreover, his characterization of Underwood as centered on the idea of "spiritual victory" is not true to Underwood's focus on the social applications of his faith. In my research, in which I consider both Horace and Ethel Underwood's lives and actions in Korea, I find distinctly different motivations. Like An, I trace the story of the Underwoods to the conflicts in the Presbyterian missions under Japanese colonialism. In those conflicts, however, I find that for the Underwoods, the value of Korean sovereignty and the practice of soliciting the opinion and will of the Koreans with whom they work to be of ultimate importance. Moreover, I find that Horace, in his work with Chosen Christian College (later Yonsei University), and Ethel, in her work with women's organizations, shared a strong primary commitment to social improvement and believed

in the promise of an open and vibrant liberal society in Korea. Those ideals and values, shaped and solidified in the context of mission conflicts up to their forced departure from Korea in 1942, played a crucial role in their activities both in preparation for returning to Korea, and in their work following liberation. The cases of Horace and Ethel Underwood show that the missionary role in Korean society and military government must be viewed within the context of missionary experience under colonialism, their approaches to missions and society, and in their personal relationships and history with Korea. Moreover, they illustrate and provide insight into the complexities of the relationship between Protestantism and state formation in South Korea.

Horace and Ethel Underwood's choices and actions in post-liberation Korea were deeply rooted in Horace Underwood's pre-colonial childhood in Korea. Son of Horace Grant and Lillias Underwood, widely known and respected early Protestant missionaries, in his childhood he was exposed to a wide cross section of Korean society, including political leaders and members of the royal family (Elizabeth Underwood 2003). Following Korea's annexation and colonization by Japan, the Underwoods, while for the most part cooperating with Japanese authorities as required by their PCUSA mission board, were overtly sympathetic with Korean nationalists. Kim Kyu-sik, with whom Underwood had lived as a child, had made his mark on the Korean nationalist movement by representing the Korean Provisional Government at the Paris peace talks in 1919. Other early nationalist leaders were frequent visitors to the Underwood homes and were among the heroes of Underwood's youth, and he was keenly sympathetic with Korea's fight for liberation. Ethel Underwood knew only a Korea under the rule of Japan, having arrived in Korea in 1912, but she quickly adopted the Underwood's desire for a fully independent Korea. Married in 1916, the couple lived with Lillias Underwood for the first five years of their marriage. Their home, as it had been when Horace's father was alive, was a busy center of social interaction, and Ethel's connections with Korean communities expanded exponentially. She taught English and psychology at Chosen Christian College, managed an extensive Sunday school, studied Korean, and raised five children. Over time, she came to be deeply attached to social

movement organizations with which she worked, including the Korean WCTU (Woman's Christian Temperance Union) and the YWCA.

### **A Mission Divided: The Underwoods in Pre-war Korea**

Horace Underwood's missionary career in Korea began during his father's conflict with other PCUSA missionaries over the purpose of mission education and the formation of a college in Seoul. That college, which became Chosen Christian College (CCC), was the site of Horace and Ethel's primary work in their missionary career. Its beginning also drew a line between more theologically conservative Presbyterian missionaries in Pyongyang and those in Seoul. The Korea Mission of the PCUSA in which Underwood was raised, and with which they both worked, had a long history of factional division. In part this was due to differences in personalities and theologies between members, but, as I have discussed elsewhere, it also reflected differences in the Korean communities with whom they worked (Elizabeth Underwood 2003). In Seoul, the Underwood family was keenly aware of the local demand for liberal education that would aid in national modernization and eventual independence. Comparatively, those missionaries in Pyongyang and the broader northwestern region found their congregations, though equally patriotic and desirous of liberty, to be more conservative, favoring a more religiously centered education and leery of the modernist trends in Seoul (Min 1983). Together with Methodist missionaries, the elder Underwood proposed the development of a Christian influenced, but not strictly religious, institution of higher education in Seoul to meet the needs of future political and civil leaders of Korea. In response, the Pyongyang-dominated PCUSA mission worked to block Presbyterian participation, arguing that the mostly secular curriculum of the new school would damage the cause of the mission in Korea (Clark 2003, 131). Although the elder Underwood fell ill and died in 1916, his wife and son, among other Seoul missionaries, successfully lobbied the Board of Foreign Missions of the PCUSA to build and develop the new college. Nonetheless, the tensions over the purpose of mission education continued within the

mission throughout the pre-World War II years in Seoul, and reflected not only theological but also geographic divisions within Protestant Christianity in Korea. Unlike the more religiously focused mission college in Pyongyang, CCC fostered and promoted open debate and displayed commitment to participatory liberal society in Korea. During Horace Horton Underwood's career as professor, vice president (1928) and president (1934–1941) of CCC, the college employed intellectuals from across the political spectrum, including Paek Nam-un, a Marxist historian who taught at the college from 1924 until 1938 (Em 2013). In public debates over progress, science, and religion in Seoul in the 1920s, CCC students were vocal participants on all sides and Underwood even sponsored the establishment of a socialist literary society (Park 2003, 143). During Underwood's tenure as vice president and then president the college sought to become a center for the study of Korean history and civilization (CCC 1930) and urged student involvement in clubs, service work, and debate societies. Within the limits of both the Japanese administration and the evangelical goals of others in the mission, the Underwoods worked to create in the college a space for, and display of, a vibrant open society.

The conflict between the Pyongyang faction of the PCUSA missionaries and those in Seoul, especially the Underwoods and others associated with the college, grew even more heated beginning in 1932 in response to the expanding requirements by the Japanese Government-General in Korea (Joseon chongdokbu 朝鮮總督府) that schools—and later churches—participate in Shinto ceremonies (Kim 1997; An 2010). Across the Japanese Empire local Christian and missionary groups struggled to untangle the religious and civil meaning of Shinto rituals. While at first virtually all Christian groups opposed participation, and rejected it for both religious and political reasons, most eventually reluctantly chose to take the Japanese assurances that this was just a civil act at face value in order to continue to operate their educational institutions (Lee 2010). Presbyterians in Korea were the most vocal opponents and holdouts against participation and eventually both American missions (PCUSA and PCUS) voted to close their schools. Within the Korean Presbyterian communities and the foreign missions, however, not all were in agreement. In both Pyongyang and Daegu, students'

families protested and tried (unsuccessfully) to purchase the schools themselves. Resentment of the missionaries' paternalistic response to their demands led some to call for missionaries to leave Korea (Clark 2003, 216). In Seoul, the Underwoods adamantly opposed their mission's decision and appealed to their own and other US agencies for permission to keep schools open and allow Koreans to decide for themselves. In an article penned at the request of *The Presbyterian Tribune*, Horace Underwood argued that the decision to attend the Shinto ceremonies or not should be an individual one. Given the large numbers of Christians who had chosen to attend, he asserted: "A man might conceivable say 'I cannot attend' but we can hardly say 'no Christian can attend'" (Horace H. Underwood 1938).

In presenting his case in *The Presbyterian Tribune*, Underwood insisted that the "attitude of the Korean Church" on this question be addressed. Noting the impossibility of providing good survey evidence due to Japanese restrictions on open debate and the influence of political opinion, he drew instead on the facts available. He presented data on locally run Presbyterian elementary schools, the vast majority of which remained open; he noted that a majority of teachers and students wanted educational work to continue; he discussed Korean pastors and leaders who sent their children to government run schools where attendance at the ceremonies was required; and he presented the stated observation by other missionaries that "the feeling in the Korean church, though divided, is one of reluctance rather than conscientious objection" and that they "would probably favor continuance of the schools." Moreover, he noted that many Koreans had come forward with plans to carry on the schools on their own. While acknowledging and respecting the opinions of those Christians (Korean and foreign) who felt their conscience dictated a refusal to attend the shrines, he ardently argued against missionaries forcing their decisions upon the local churches and schools and dictating the actions of their fellow missionaries.

Underwood's insistence on listening to Korean opinion, and in this case specifically Korean Christian opinion, did not emerge in a vacuum, but rather was shaped by his position as his father's son and by calls for a change in missionary-church relationships in the Protestant world more broadly. Underwood himself referenced his own inherited position in his

presentation in *The Presbyterian Tribune*:

Through the good fortune of name, position, birth in the country, and twenty-five years of missionary service, I have a wide and happy acquaintance among the Korean ministry, yet in the three years since this question became acute not one pastor, elder, parent of any student, or other lay Christian has come to me to remonstrate against my known stand. (Horace H. Underwood 1938)

Since his father's death in 1916, Underwood's position had been a unique one. Given respect, initially, due to his father's reputation, he also felt a deep responsibility to return that respect, especially to Korean Christian leaders, many of whom had known him as a child. Moreover, as his father's son, his home was the near-constant recipient of visits from Korean Christians who came for consultation, advice, and occasionally to remonstrate (Underwood 2003). The broader missionary community in Korea occasionally solicited Korean critique and advice beginning in 1919 on the pages of their shared journal, *The Korea Mission Field*, and in missionary conferences, but the tendency among missionaries to *make decisions for Koreans* remained. G. W. Avison, who was Underwood's contemporary and whose father had been a close friend and colleague of Underwood's father, admonished his fellow missionaries in 1926 to "work with and not for the people," and insisted on the need to solicit their advice and opinion before simply acting *on their behalf* (Avison 1926). Both Avison and Underwood, having been raised in Korea and working in Seoul in positions that were not directly evangelistic (Avison with the YMCA), expressed frustration with attitudes of superiority among their colleagues, and urged attention to public opinion in and beyond the church. Though clearly Underwood acknowledged the restrictions on an open public sphere under the Japanese administration, he also appeared to believe firmly in a Korean public sphere and its capacity for social determination and believed the mission was obligated to respect it.

The tensions between the Presbyterian Mission and the Presbyterian Church of Korea led to a near complete fissure in 1938 when the General Assembly held in in Pyongyang (under considerable pressure from

the Japanese administration) declared that the required ceremonies were “purely nationalistic and patriotic” and thereby urged attendance (Horace H. Underwood 1939). The majority of the PCUSA missionaries responded by leaving the assembly and refusing to continue to work with local presbyteries, a response which Ethel and Horace Underwood saw as a betrayal of their Korean coworkers (Clark 2003, 218). Reporting that in a counter response, “a number of [Korean] presbyteries have passed resolutions against making pastoral assignments to missionaries” (Horace H. Underwood 1939), Underwood was distressed by what he noted as increasingly entrenched resentments on all sides.

These mission conflicts, which shaped the experiences of both Horace and Ethel Underwood in their missionary years up until their forced departure in 1942, created a shared sense of duty to stand up for Korean autonomy in their dealings with their American colleagues. Moreover, these experiences deepened their commitment to surveying and attending to Korean opinion and advice, and solidified for the couple their determination, regardless of the political situation, to stand by and with their Korean friends. Increasingly sure that their role was to be that of coworkers with, not leaders of, their Korean colleagues, they looked forward to resuming their participation in building civil society in an independent Korea.

### **Preparing for a Liberated and Independent Korea**

In 1945 and 1946, as first Horace and then Ethel Underwood returned to Korea, they did so in the hope of working to resume their life and work in an undivided and liberated nation. Even as they left Korea in 1942, the last 18 remaining regular members of the Korea Mission of the PCUSA discussed their plans for return. Over the course of the next three years the mission board in the United States organized multiple conferences, conducted surveys, and debated the next steps for their work in Korea following the end of the war. One key item under discussion was the proposed relationship between the mission and the Korean Church. In

broader foreign mission circles, calls for the autonomy of local churches led to questions about the nature of missions going forward. For most in the Korea Mission of the PCUSA, this was seen as an irrelevant issue. They argued that Korean churches had been independent of mission control since 1907 when the first Korean Presbytery was organized. This view, however, overstated the independent nature of Korean church institutions. The mission had maintained some control over various institutions—schools and hospitals, for instance. Moreover, they determined the use of PCUSA funds in Korea, and at times used the control of those funds and properties to influence the Korean Church, as revealed in the conflicts of the 1930s. At a 1943 conference, a member of the Japan Mission suggested that the Koreans might not see a place for a mission outside of the Korean Church. Most of those gathered objected, and asserted that the mission should continue as a separate entity. Many added as a qualification that they should serve as *helpers*, and that the Koreans themselves maintain the control over the institutions they had assumed when the missionaries withdrew. Underwood, reflecting his deference to his Korean friends, reiterated his stance that consultation with the Korean Church was key. “If, when we go back, the existence of a mission brings resentment and the plan is not satisfactory, then we should be ready to follow whatever plan seems best under actual circumstance” (CMC 1943).

For Horace Underwood, a bigger issue to be addressed before reentry was Korean response to the missions’ lack of public support for independence. While he, and most missionaries, believed that the *popular attitude* in Korea towards Christianity and missions was very favorable, he noted the “danger that this attitude may be unfavorably conditioned by the lukewarm position of missions toward Korean independence” (CMC 1943). In his written report for the 1943 conference, which focused on the political, economic, and social considerations for a planned return, he argued that it was time to go on public record in support of Korea’s independence.

While the Board and the missionaries were conducting work in Korea by the favor of the Japanese government, they had no right to agitate against the government or to encourage such agitation. This situation has now

been completely changed and we in our freedom of the United States have a perfect right to express our opinions and to take a definite stand. (CMC 1943)

Noting the broader call for the Church to take rising nationalism in Asia into account, he further argued that “failure to recognize this nationalism [in Korea] and to show ourselves as on their side” would hurt the cause of missions upon their return, and once again asked the mission to respect and support Korean autonomy.

Underwood was not alone in wanting the mission to take a public stand. Harry Rhodes, in his paper for the same 1943 conference, drew on Korea’s population, history, and civilization in stating that Koreans were “entitled to their independence not only because of the aims of freedom for which this war is being waged but for what they are in themselves” (CMC 1943). Retired PCUSA missionary O. R. Avison, who served as President of CCC from 1916-1934, made public calls for Korea’s liberation in his role with The Christian Friends of Korea, Syngman Rhee’s American-based political lobbying organization (Avison 1943). The PCUSA mission board, however, remained adamant that “missionaries never should engage in political activities” and that the mission would be out of order to make such statements, individually, or as a mission (CMC 1943). Though unsuccessful, Horace Underwood’s attempt to bring about a formal statement from the mission illustrates his commitment to Korean autonomy in ecclesiastical as well as political matters.<sup>2</sup>

Ethel Underwood was mostly eager to expand the mission’s support of the development of progressive social services in Korea. Following a presentation by fellow missionary William Blair, in which he urged a central focus on church purity and evangelization for the mission, she attempted to draw the mission’s attention toward cooperation with social welfare organizations: “I think the church should hold up the hands of

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2. Later in 1943, the United States, together with Great Britain and China, made the declaration the PCUSA denied the missionaries. The Cairo Declaration signed in November of 1943 declared independence for Korea “in due course” (S. Choi 2002).

organizations for social betterment in Korea” (CMC 1943). Ethel’s primary issue of concern was sexual exploitation of girls and women. In her final years in Korea before liberation, she had become keenly aware of Japan’s forced sexual slavery of Korean adolescent girls through her work with the Korean WCTU. In 1942 she delivered a typed two-page report she titled “The Darkest Blot” to Harold Quarton, the US Consul General in Seoul and fellow repatriate. In it, she detailed the process by which girls were recruited, “trained,” and sold into prostitution. Citing formerly imprisoned Korean leaders and friends, Ethel wrote also of police abuse of women and girls, concluding, “brutal by day and bestial by night the policeman is both hated and despised” (Ethel Underwood 1942).

In her comments at the 1943 conference, Ethel Underwood further expressed concern that the Korean Church, focusing primarily on issues of theological purity, was unwilling or unable to address these social issues, and that it was outside organizations who were taking the lead. “The women in the [Korean] churches largely feel the need for keeping the church pure and this has to a large extent shut off the church from the need of giving safeguard to the girls in industry...etc.” (Ethel Underwood 1942). This internal focus, Ethel argued, was also a product of women’s responsibility for forming Christian homes, a responsibility Protestant missionaries had long advocated and taught (H. Choi 2014). Although the conflicts in the history of the PCUSA mission in Korea had never erupted along evangelical vs. social gospel battle lines, those were clearly suggested in some of the tensions over the establishment of CCC. For the most part, the Korea Mission of the PCUSA believed evangelism to be the higher call with other *social* services of the mission and church serving as expressions of Christian faith (Horace G. Underwood 2001). The Underwoods’ focus on education, social services, and other elements of a broader civil society marked them as comparatively liberal in the eyes of the mission. For Ethel, the focus on church purity among many in the mission and in the Korean Church was unnecessarily preventing awareness and execution of social *expressions of Christian faith*.

The 1943 conference decided little with regard to the relative approaches of social versus evangelical missions in these discussions on the return of missionaries to Korea. Rather, the recommendations made to

the mission board centered on logistical issues. The consensus was to begin by reestablishing the mission stations in Pyongyang, Seoul, and Daegu, where, before their withdrawal, sixty percent of their missionaries had been assigned. Other stations would reopen as more missionaries arrived. They recommended that all experienced missionaries would be needed, including retired missionaries if possible, with an A-list drawn up of members to return first. Heading their subsequent report to the board in terms of importance was, as Underwood had initially proposed in 1942, the need to proceed in full consultation and coordination with the Korean Church (“Survey of the Stations” 1944).

In addition to their work with the PCUSA’s conferences, Horace and Ethel Underwood’s preparation and planning to return to Korea included attempts to influence American public and church opinion on Korea through public speaking about Korea (emphasizing history and civilization), the Korean mission, and the college. Horace published reviews of Korea-related publications in which he challenged research which drew too heavily on Japanese scholarship (Horace H. Underwood 1945). He also actively cooperated with US agencies in the war against Japan. From the time of their arrival back in the United States in 1942, missionaries were approached by officials of the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) for information on Korea and the Japanese presence there. Underwood, with his language skills, long experience, and knowledge of Korean geography, including coastal lines and ports, soon became known as a “Korea expert” (Correspondence OSS). In 1944 and 1945 the OSS made plans to send him as an area advisor to China, where he would supervise agents in a planned “special and highly secret project aimed at penetrating that country [Korea]” (PDS OSS). While those plans never came to fruition, Underwood’s willingness and eagerness to participate in the fight for Korean independence while in his fifties suggests the commitment he had to Korean political freedom. It also suggests a belief that the goals of the United States aligned with his vision for Korea’s future, although clearly he also felt he could influence those goals and their implantation better from within than without. As World War II came to an end, he was eager to return to Korea and rebuild his work in the development of Korean civil society in a now liberated and

autonomous country. In August, however, he received notice that his service was still needed by the United States government. He wrote his son, “I don’t understand why they should function at all now that the war is over and I don’t know what they want me to do but they say that they want me and that they will send me to Korea.”<sup>3</sup> A month later he found himself at the start of long journey to Japan, where he received orders to proceed to Seoul. Once in Korea he learned he would be serving as an advisor to General Archibald Arnold, the new military governor in the USAMGIK.

### **Military Government in Korea**

Horace Underwood spent much of his first few months back in Korea assessing Korean opinion and circumstances, both unofficially for the PCUSA mission and officially in his role with the USAMGIK. In November, together with Colonel Prescott in the civil administration, he toured the southern provinces to survey political opinions. In his formal report he notes meeting with local officials, advisory councils, and other local citizens. Reporting near unanimity in the content of the issues shared with him, he detailed “points of emphasis” under the categories of price controls, supply distribution, currency control, lawlessness, and Korean-American relations (Horace H. Underwood 1945a). His assessment of the political situation in the southern provinces was that of being in a “most confused political condition.” The most popular and active organizations were those associated with the People’s Party of Korea (Joseon inmindang), which he characterized as primarily, but not uniformly, “communistic.” In contrast, he noted that the “so-called Democratic party [Korea Democratic Party, or Hanguk minjudang] is poorly organized or unorganized in most places and the real democratic forces of the country are divided at least in form and have apparently waited too long to set up active organizations in most centers.” He concluded his summary by stating that the “military government cannot and should not discriminate against either Communists or People’s Republic

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3. Horace H. Underwood to Richard Underwood, August 25, 1945, RFU.

[Joseon inmin gonghwaguk] as political parties.” Instead, they should enforce existing laws and policies to help create the circumstances under which political parties can get underway “and be ready for the time when the people of Korea will decide for themselves the form of government which they will choose” (Horace H. Underwood 1945a).<sup>4</sup>

The first of the former missionaries back to Korea, Underwood also took stock of the state of the churches, mission properties, and institutions, meeting and consulting with numerous church leaders and relaying information both to his and to other mission agencies. As with the political scene, he found the churches to be in a state of disarray, still reeling from the impositions over the last years of colonial rule. Having been forced by the Japanese to form one “United Church,” Underwood reported that there were mixed desires among Protestants to separate again. He reported on the severe criticism of leaders both within and beyond the church who had acquiesced to, and in some cases imposed, Japan’s directives. Unable to get access to the north, he reported only what he was told: that Russia was “stripping the country.” In terms of recommendations to his PCUSA mission board in New York he wrote that “no real plans” could be made for mission activities until the county was unified and order was restored. Nonetheless he believed and reported that “all Koreans, Christians and many others want missionaries back.”<sup>5</sup>

For the USAMGIK, Underwood’s renown in many Korean circles made him a useful translator and face of their administration to Korea. In late December 1945, for instance, as protests against the announcement of a planned trusteeship of Korea raged in Seoul, he was tasked with interpreting for Governor Arnold in a press conference in large part because he was “a man known and trusted by all educated Koreans” (HUSAMGIK). He was then asked to take over arrangements for the first anniversary of “liberation day,” August 15, 1946, a task he did not relish according to Ethel, who wrote

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4. This report, “Summary of Conversations with Korean officials, advisory council members etc.,” was written by Underwood on November 28, 1945. A copy of the report was included in a letter of the same date which he sent to his wife, Ethel.

5. Horace H. Underwood to Hooper, November 19, 1949, Moffett Korea Collection, Princeton Theological Seminary (Moffett).

about the discomfort he had with a celebratory “Liberation day’ for a land far from liberated!”<sup>6</sup> Also, in August 1946, he was asked by Major General Lerch, now military governor, to “set up and head a special Board of Review designed to give Koreans a place—a sort of High Court of Appeals to which they could bring injustices...with the assurance that they would receive a speedy and fair hearing” (Horace H. Underwood 1948). Throughout his time with the USAMGIK Underwood also served as a trusted Korea expert, providing information on Korean history and society at official meetings and conferences and in lectures to military personnel and administrators.

It was in this latter task, that of trying to interpret and communicate Korea to those now *in charge*, that Underwood, in retrospect, felt he had been able to most contribute to his goal of securing Korean autonomy. Frequently noting not only the overall lack of knowledge of Korea among the Americans, but also the “race prejudice” they displayed, Underwood hoped to “color their whole outlook on Korea and Koreans.”<sup>7</sup> He spoke and wrote frequently to his USAMGIK colleagues about the need to remember that Korea was not a conquered and occupied but a liberated country.

As he had in his talks across the United States, Underwood presented Korea as a country whose history and culture stood as proof of its capacity for autonomy. Again displaying his faith in the emergence of an open liberal society in Korea, in his view the role of the United States in Korea was to assist the Koreans, whose society and economy had been systematically undermined by Japan, in setting up a government of their choosing and reestablishing a sound economy.

In March 1947, Major General Lerch asked Underwood to serve as advisor to the Korean director of the Department of Education. Eager to leave his military affiliation and work directly with his college and the mission, Underwood was reluctant to accept and did so only after consultation with his Korean colleagues. In his deliberations he expressed both his concern that the Americans in the Department would resent having a missionary in this position and his continued frustration with

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6. Ethel Underwood to Grace Underwood, July 31, 1946, RFU.

7. Horace H. Underwood to Hooper, January 26, 1948, Moffett.

American views and treatment of Koreans. Moreover, he confessed in a letter to his son, he did not feel he possessed much in terms of “statesman-like qualities.”<sup>8</sup> He was, however, pleased at the idea of working with his former CCC colleague and close friend, Yu Eok-gyeom, who was the first Korean director of the Department. He also was of the firm belief that education had a crucial role to play in the development of democracy in Korea.

It is in this advisory role that Underwood gave his most clear and public rebuke of the US military government’s approach to Koreans and his most clear defense of Korean autonomy. Ironically, that defense came at the cost of choosing between competing Korean voices. Prior to his appointment to the Department the overall structure of the military government had shifted the directorship of civil departments from Americans to Koreans. In May 1947 a series of school protests tested the limits of American commitment to Korean control of government departments. The policy of the Korean-led Department of Education had been to prohibit school students from being absent from school for the purpose of participation in political meetings and rallies. Anticipating rallies on May Day, 1947, the Korean leaders of the Department issued a specific order against excusing students for this occasion. When students did participate, many were arrested by the police, and some schools expelled students for disobeying the stated policy. Mr. Martin, an American advisor in the Seoul City Department, responded by sending a memo ordering that the students be reinstated in their schools. Underwood, as advisor to the Department of Education, received complaints from the Korean school officials who, he reported, “are at a loss to know by what right the American advisor issued ‘orders’ to the principals of private schools in regard to the discipline of their students.” Underwood reprimanded Martin, writing, “allow me to remind you that the Americans in the various departments of government are now ADVISORS and NOT Directors.”<sup>9</sup> The same day (May 15, 1947) he also prepared a press release in an attempt to clarify the goals of the USAMGIK policy:

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8. Horace H. Underwood to Richard Underwood, March 9, 1947, RFU.

9. Horace H. Underwood to Martin, May 15, 1947, RG 554, Box 35, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

USAMGIK for the sake of hastening the realization of real democracy in Korea has so far as possible encouraged the decentralization of authority. The national Department of Education controls the overall policies in education and within that sphere considers its duties to be to work through the local organs of government and to direct policy through these organs. Similarly, the local educational organs have given to the school principals the authority to conduct the schools and all control over the internal discipline in these schools under the general educational policy and principles laid down for such schools. Therefore, in the recent May Day incidents the measures taken by the school principals for discipline within the schools must be recognized as authoritative, and as carried out under the general direction of the governmental organs. (Horace H. Underwood 1947a)

That while supporting the authority of the Korean leaders in the Department of Education from the overreach of individuals in the USAMGIK he also contributed to the limiting of the voices of student protestors was not lost on Underwood as he considered his role with the military government.

Howard Kahm (2017) has used the issue of school protest to illustrate an inherent contradiction in the educational policies in occupied Korea. On one hand, the American-instituted policies ostensibly promoted the discourse of democratic freedom, but on the other, they resulted in a suppression of the free expression of protest. In Kahm's assessment, this contradiction arose primarily because of differences in American and Korean interpretations of democracy. For Americans, Kahm argued, "the greater threat posed by communism in Korea" outweighed the concerns of the protestors (Kahm 2017, 546). While this assessment neglects the fact that there were both Koreans and Americans on each side of this particular issue, the contradictions in the educational goals were certainly evident. Underwood himself commented on this in his May 15 memo, expressing concern over the alleged police severity, but a "hope for the time when greater freedom may be possible" (Horace H. Underwood 1947a). For Underwood the desire to support the autonomy of his Korean friends in the Department of Education against what he saw as American overreach was

the deciding factor.

Underwood's tenure with the Department of Education was short (just seven months), and in his private letters to his son it is clear that he was not pleased with the results of his efforts.<sup>10</sup> In addition to his general frustration with the political world and with the lack of financial support for the Department of Education, he was also discouraged by a lack of American commitment to what he felt were the two primary goals of the Department: to undo the damage of the authoritarian Japanese system, and help foster democracy in society at large. Underwood had been adamant about instituting a different type of educational model for Korea than the authoritarian model that had been set up by the Japanese, and which, he wrote, "was administered for the benefit of Japan and the Japanese" (Underwood 1947b). Additionally, for Underwood, education had a key ideological role to play in forming a new Korean nation, one that might provide the longed-for "greater freedom" that would allow all Koreans to assert their voices, and perhaps lead to a decrease in the authoritarianism exhibited by his Korean friends in the Department of Education, whose actions, in the name of Korean autonomy, he himself had defended. His reports to the USAMGIK included strong calls for commitment to providing education in democracy at all levels, even beyond the classroom.

[T]he problem [of education in democracy] should not be faced piecemeal but as a whole...The program which would thus be worked out should be prepared in close cooperation with the Department of Public Information, which has a similar task of presentation of these ideals through different channels. The assumption that democratic ideas and methods will be absorbed by contact with Americans or in some other convenient and easy way is obviously false. (Horace H. Underwood 1947b)

In October 1947, discouraged by the lack of progress he felt he had been able to make, Horace Underwood resigned from his work with the

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10. Horace H. Underwood to Richard Underwood, October 30, 1947, RFU.

USAMGIK and returned to the mission and college. Ethel, in addition to her college teaching, worked increasingly with both international and local humanitarian agencies. Her primary focus, however, was in supporting the work of the Korean-run YMCA and WCTU in addressing concerns regarding girls in Korean society. In a plea for financial assistance for the WCTU home for girls, she reported on the history and continued needs of the many “little girls from ten years to sixteen” among the many displaced persons now found in Seoul. While what she described as the “greatest system of evil procurement of pre-adolescent girls for soldiers and the lust of men, that the world has ever seen” in the last years of the Japanese regime in Korea was ended upon liberation, the abuse of girls continued, especially for those girls working as servants in homes and separated from family.<sup>11</sup> In this plea, she reported on a 1946 gathering of “some hundred earnest women in the city of Seoul, representing ten women’s organizations, [who] met to consider this problem of our helpless girls.” The Korean WCTU accepted the gathering’s request that they form a home for girls, and two years later were only \$2400.00 short of the funds needed to begin.

During Underwood’s two years of affiliation with military government, both he and Ethel maintained much of the approach to their work in Korea they had developed in the 1930s. They both believed that Koreans should be making the decisions for Korea, that Americans should respect and cooperate in that effort, and that they themselves should cooperate with their Korean colleagues in providing educational and organizational opportunities in furthering democratic decision-making in Korea. Ethel, who upon her return to Korea in 1946 had expressed frustration at the lack of autonomy given Koreans, wanted to support the efforts of Korean women in their organizations for the protections of women and girls. Horace Underwood tried to put his belief in democratic education into concrete action, not only in his role with the Department of Education, but also in providing lectures for the new Korean Police Force on the role of the police in a democratic nation. Although he had asserted in late 1945 that the American military government should not privilege one political party

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11. Ethel Underwood to J. Calvitt Clarke, China’s Children Fund, September 10, 1948, RFU.

over any other, he grew privately wary of the communist influence in Korea and increasingly concerned by the divisions within and violence associated with political parties in the south.<sup>12</sup> By 1947, he presented education in democracy as a necessary condition to keep Korea from choosing either to follow a Japanese-styled pattern of authoritarian rule or a Soviet-styled communism (Horace H. Underwood 1947b). The following year, however, this democratic ideal was thwarted, as an authoritarian and repressive anti-communist state was formed in the south and a Soviet-aligned communist state established in the north. Moreover, the Protestant community in South Korea, now increasingly dominated by northern Koreans who had fled communism, bolstered the new regime and cooperated in the further repression of democracy. It would be nearly four decades before democracy was decidedly established in the Republic of Korea. As Chang (2015) has argued, however, much of the groundwork for the 1980s democracy movement was laid in the 1960s and 1970s. Student groups and the progressive wing of the Christian community were crucial in that period.

### **The New Republic**

Although the Underwoods initially expressed their happiness with Korean participation in the elections and establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, they mourned the division of the country and were deeply concerned about what the future would hold on the peninsula. Ethel's concern was primarily tied to her desire for an improved status of women in Korea. While pleased that women were given the right to vote, she was discouraged by the absence of elected women.<sup>13</sup> Horace, though having been long acquainted with Syngman Rhee, the newly-elected president, through his father was not politically a supporter. In a June 1948 letter to his cousin he described him as "a very old, very obstinate, very dictatorial man impatient of all

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12. Horace H. Underwood to Conard, June 26, 1948, Horace Grant Underwood Papers, Yonsei University Library (Yonsei).

13. Ethel Underwood to Richard Underwood, May 15, 1948, RFU.

controls.”<sup>14</sup> To his son he expressed a growing concern about conditions for his educational work under the Rhee administration, writing, “it is quite possible that life under a Korean government will be worse for us than life under the Japanese up to about 1940.” He further worried that the Rhee administration was, in part, recreating the oppression previously applied by the Japanese colonial power.<sup>15</sup> Having longed for Korean autonomy, he was pleased by what he believed to be democratic participation in the UN-sponsored elections, but frustrated that in the exercise of autonomy the new Republic of Korea itself was recreating some of the authoritarian methods and measures practiced earlier by the Japanese.

Underwood was also worried about what the election represented to the future of the peninsula and the increased probability of war. He expressed his dread of the “purging” and “massacres” by both sides which he believed would likely accompany an upcoming conflict.<sup>16</sup> He lamented the threat to democracy emerging from South Korean fears of an attack from the north and the ROK’s use of “terroristic methods” in response.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, he worried that missionaries might get drawn into the fray. When in March 1949, Ethel Underwood was shot in her home, Horace believed his fears had come true.

Ethel Underwood died while trying to protect her guests at a Faculty Women’s Club meeting in her home from armed intruders. The captured intruders, members of the left-wing Democratic Patriotic Students League, insisted the speaker at the meeting, Mo Yun-suk, was the intended target.<sup>18</sup> Horace, however, remained convinced that Ethel herself was targeted, and that murder was intended to sow even more division in Korea and to turn

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14. Horace H. Underwood to Conard, June 26, 1948, Yonsei.

15. Horace H. Underwood to Conard, July 27, 1948, Yonsei.

16. Horace H. Underwood to Conard, June 26, 1948, Yonsei.

17. Horace H. Underwood to Conard, January 15, 1949, Yonsei.

18. Poet Mo Yun-suk and her political connections with the Syngman Rhee administration and with Helen Kim are discussed by Haeseong Park in this issue. Although Underwood hosted the Faculty Women’s Club in her home, she did not invite or have influence over speakers and programs. Underwood’s letters leading up to her death include mention of the upcoming meeting but do not mention Mo or the topic of the meeting.

Americans away from supporting the new Republic of Korea (Horace H. Underwood 1949). Ethel died doing what she had long felt was her role in Korea. The Faculty Women's Club at the college was her own creation, and was intended primarily to provide the wives of the mostly male faculty at the college opportunities for intellectual and social engagement. Although Ethel hosted these meetings, she did not run them. The club had its own program committee and determined its own agendas. Likewise, the home for girls was a project of the Korean WCTU. That said, it was a project Ethel had hoped for and worked actively towards. The night before her murder she wrote to her son, "Friday—may God be with me—I go to get approval for our 'W.C.T.U. House for Girls Charter of incorporation' from the Dept. of Education, then the National Welfare Bureau, then to the court for negotiation."<sup>19</sup>

Horace Underwood returned to the United States in early 1950 to raise money for CCC, to visit his children, and due to health issues. When war broke out in Korea he actively lobbied his former military government connections for US return to Korea. He himself arrived in Korea, again in an ambiguous advisory position, in October 1950, against the advice of his medical doctors. In Seoul he again tried to survey conditions in the Korean churches and in the college. Following their retreat to Busan from Seoul he died of a heart attack on February 14, 1951.

## Conclusion

Between 1949 and his death in early 1951 Horace H. Underwood undertook two writing projects. The first was a novel about the sixteenth-century Korean military naval hero, Yi Sun-sin, which Underwood began in March.<sup>20</sup> Underwood's fascination with Yi Sun-sin was longstanding, and he had previously studied the famed *turtle ship*, research that resulted in the publication of *Korean Boats and Ships* (1934). That he turned to writing

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19. Ethel Underwood to Richard Underwood, March 16, 1949, RFU.

20. Horace H. Underwood to Richard Underwood, March 1, 1949, RFU.

about a Korean historical figure who had defeated the Japanese during the early days of the Republic of Korea is perhaps indicative of his support for Korean autonomy, although he wrote little of his motivation in his letters to family. In this unfinished fictional account, for which he drew on the archival material he could access with the help of his colleagues at CCC, he may have also been presenting a picture of his hopes for Korea's future. Yi Sun-sin, as presented by Underwood, is a man whose loyalty was to all of Korea, and not to political factions. Moreover, he is an egalitarian, challenging structures of class and gender, and "fond of the songs which the common people of Korea sing" (Underwood 1951a).

His second text, published posthumously as *Tragedy and Faith in Korea* (1951b), was written at the request of a Christian publisher in the early months of the Korean War. Underwood wrote the draft on his way to Tokyo in October 1950, and following his death Marion Hartness (a fellow PCUSA missionary) revised the text and authored a final chapter. In this pamphlet, as in lectures prepared by Horace Underwood before he left for Korea in 1950, he presents Korean geography, history, society, and the work of the churches and missions. He also describes the political situation on the peninsula, and in doing so, clearly presents his assessment of "Soviet communism" as being an imposed and detrimental threat to the Korean people. It is in large part from this text that An (2010) draws his conclusion that Horace Underwood was motivated primarily by anti-communism and the desire for "spiritual victory." Regrettably, An, does not note that the text was both edited and completed following Underwood's death, and he misattributes to Underwood words from the final chapter added by Hartness. That said, there is no doubt that Underwood negatively viewed the Soviet implementation of communism in northern Korea as early as 1945. By 1950, as he assessed a Korea now at war, his hopes stood firmly with the South. The idea that his anti-Soviet view was primarily a spiritual issue for Underwood, however, does not square with his other writings. Rather, for Underwood, the appeal of communism in Korea highlighted the failures of an inwardly focused church to meet the needs of society and to assist in real social change and betterment. In *Tragedy and Faith in Korea* he asks, is Christianity, "to be found shut up inside the walls of the buildings called

churches?” Or do Christians “care for the sick and suffering,” truly help the girl taken in prostitution, lighten the load of the workers? (Underwood 1951b, 43). Moreover, he admonishes those Americans who might join mission work in Korea to be willing to work “with, for and *under*” the Koreans (Underwood 1951b, 44; emphasis in original), and spoke of the “seven hundred thousand Protestant Christians who will help their young colleagues from the West” (Underwood 1951b, 49). Here, Underwood’s motivations appear much as they had throughout his career, based on and fully confident in an autonomous Korean church and society. Moreover, in this 1950 text, he has fully incorporated Ethel’s goal of a church working with Korean humanitarian organizations for social betterment and social justice into his view of mission work in Korea.

In conclusion, Horace and Ethel Underwood shared a commitment to the idea of an autonomous Korean church and society. That commitment was based, in part, on Horace’s childhood association with the history and cause of Korean independence, and on Ethel’s assumption of that view through her marriage and through her close association with Lillias Underwood, with whom she lived for the first five years of her marriage. It was solidified in their conflicts with others in mission work in Korea and also in the impositions put upon their work under the Japanese. They also shared a confidence in the promise of a Korean liberal democracy. For Ethel, this confidence played out in her work with Korean women’s organizations, organizations that she believed would lead to the improvements in the lives of girls and women of Korea. For the two together it contributed to their views of the importance of Chosen Christian College and their belief that it had a crucial role to play in building a new and independent nation. Ethel and Horace’s deaths, in 1949 and 1951 respectively, preclude analysis of their response to the subsequent denial of democracy and the growth of externally controlled humanitarianism, including what SooJin Pate (2014) has called “militarized humanitarianism,” initiated during the Korean War (Hong 2015; Oh 2015). Likewise, how much of Underwood’s own voice remained in the edited and posthumously published *Tragedy and Faith in Korea* is unclear. His lecture, recorded in 1950 as he returned to Korea for the final time, however, concludes with his hopes for Chosen Christian

College's contribution to a vibrant civil society and liberal democracy in a sovereign nation.

It is our hope, that many more young men and women will go through these doors, to bring to this ancient land of Korea, with its four thousand years of history, with its forty years of oppression under the Japanese, and with the tragedy that it is passing through at the present time, the knowhow, the knowledge, the hope, the ideals which will help them to build a free, independent, and united Korea. (Horace H. Underwood 1950)

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