Protestantism in North Korea: An Exploration

KENNETH M. WELLS

Any evaluation of life in the Democratic People's Republic of (North) Korea can be only tentative because of the great difficulty in obtaining reliable information. Almost all information coming out of North Korea is strictly official and tailored for foreign readers, including reports submitted to UN agencies such as FAO and UNESCO. The land has been described as a "*terra incognita* in the western consciousness".[1] The difficulties are especially daunting to an enquiry into the fate of religion under the cult of Kim Il-sŏng, North Korea's leader since 1946. This is somewhat surprising for Koreans historically have been (and in the South still are) extremely religious people, while up to 1945 the northern provinces had been vibrant centres of, in particular, Protestant Christianity. The silence regarding Christianity since 1953 is at least deeply disturbing and, in human terms, may enshroud a tragedy. But before attempting to peer beneath this shroud, I would like to provide a brief view of the religious and socialist/communist developments and relationships preceding Korea's partition at the 38th parallel in August 1945.

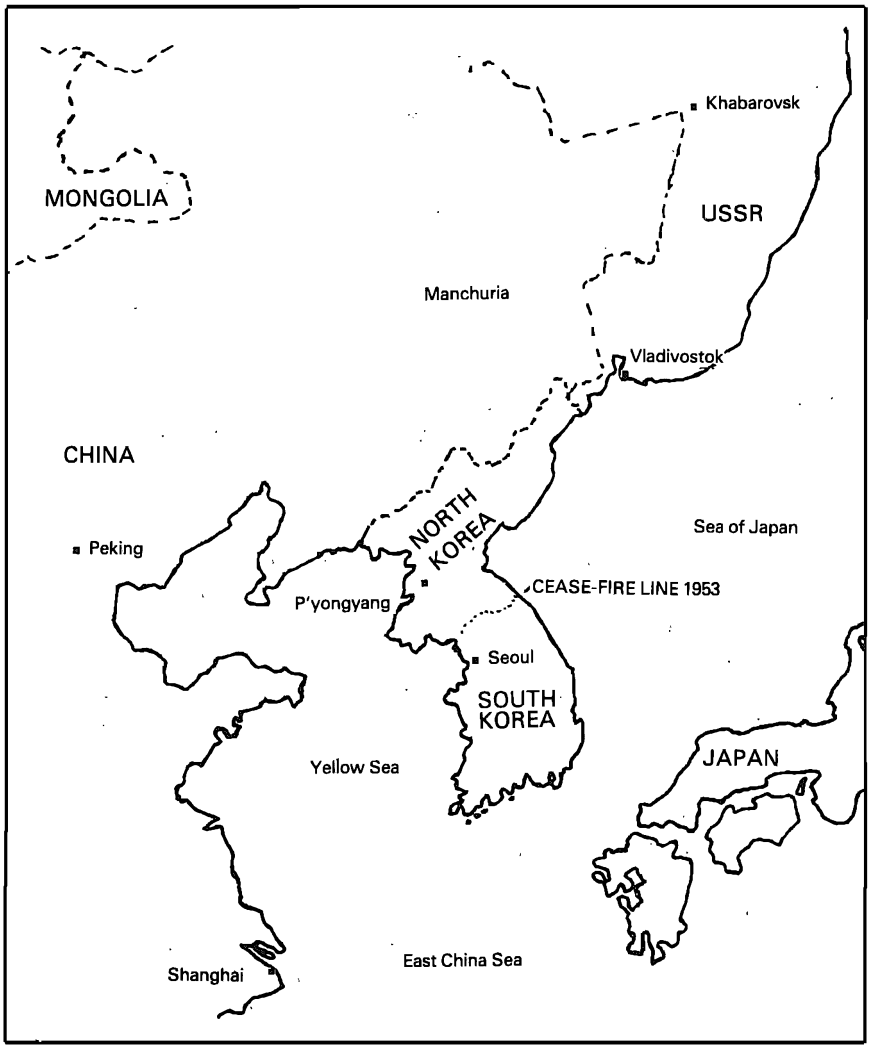
Christian developments

Roman Catholicism was brought to Korea by diplomats returning from China in the seventeenth century, but because of its association with "western learning", it was subjected to rigorous and bloody persecution by the strict neo-Confucian rulers right up to the 1880s, when Protestant missionaries were given tacit approval to evangelise. The social impact of Protestantism was immediate and powerful, as it introduced far-reaching changes in the status of women, in medicine and hygiene and in agriculture, industry and education. The political impact was no less remarkable as in 1896 outstanding young Korean Christians organised the Independence Club (Tongnip Hyŏphoe), to lobby the government on broad reform and to popularise through its newspaper — the first to be published in the vernacular phonetic script — a new course for a strong, independent Korea.[2] Between 1895 and 1905, membership of Protestant denominations increased from about 400 to over 12,000; by 1911, baptised Presbyterians alone numbered 46,934.[3]

Much of the appeal of Christianity lay in its provision of a new symbolism for national aspirations once Confucianism had been discredited after the Sino- and Russo-Japanese Wars of 1894 and 1904 respectively had demonstrated the utter weakness of the nation and its incapacity to respond to a changed world.[4] Between 1887 and 1910 Yun Ch'i-ho, possibly the most accomplished Korean Christian in Korea to the present day,[5] pioneered a nationalist theology which inspired a whole national movement throughout the harsh period of Japanese rule from 1910 to 1945. So unlike most Asian countries, where actual or threatened domination generally came from the very same countries as the Christian missionaries, Korea became extraordinarily receptive to Christianity for its potential as a focus for resistance against Imperial Japan.

In conformity with the principle of separation of Church and State which Protestant missionaries introduced, the Korean Church as an institution resisted pressures from within and without to become an organ propounding a political or nationalist ideology. However, as individuals, many Christians were involved in all phases and streams of the nationalist movement from 1896 up to and beyond 1945. Syngman Rhee, leader of the American-based democrats, President of the Shanghai Provisional Government from 1919 and later of South Korea; Yi Tong-hwi, Prime Minister of the Provisional Government 1919-21; Yun Ch'i-ho, President of the Independence Club 1897-99 and of the Self-Strengthening Club 1906-7, founder of the famous Han-Yŏng College, President of the Seoul YMCA, and advocate of moral enlightenment; An Ch'ang-ho, member of the Provisional Government and leader of the "Gradualist" Movement; ten of 11 committee members responsible for the Tokyo Students' Declaration of Independence on 8 February 1919; 16 of the signatories to the 1919 March First Independence Declaration which triggered the greatest mass-movement in the twentieth century, involving two million people;[6] Yi Sŭng-hun, pioneer of modern education; Kim Kyu-sik, Korean delegate presenting Korea's case for independence at the 1919 Paris Peace Conference; and Cho Man-sik, co-educator with Yi Sŭng-hun, founder of the Korean Products Promotion Society and Head of the North Korean Interim Government under Soviet occupation until January 1946 — all counted themselves Christians. Even An Chung-gun, assassin of Itō Hirobumi (Japanese architect of Japan's occupation of Korea), and Kim Ku, organiser of sabotage and assassin squads, claimed to be Christians. Especially after 1918 when it was infused with the zeal of Wilsonianism, Christianity "had at one stage become so pervasive that it seemed to many Koreans to be the 'wave of the future'".[7]

The main thrust of Christianity in national terms was one of ethical nationalism, or "self-reconstruction" nationalism. Nationalism was not an end in itself, and the dignity, welfare and strength of the people were primarily spiritual issues. Nation-building was presented by Yun Ch'i-ho



and An Ch'ang-ho as essentially a spiritual task.[8] They would have agreed with Dostoyevsky's claim that "the moral issue always preceded the genesis of nationality itself", and that "at the basis of social life, citizenship, nationalism lies the ideal of personal self-perfection", from which "issue all civil ideals".[9]

This ethical approach enabled early Christian leaders such as Yun and An to form a radical critique of corruptions and injustices in Korean society at least a decade before Japan annexed Korea in 1910, and this in turn saved Christianity from becoming a narrow anti-Japanese move-

ment as well as putting it in a strong position when challenged by communist ideas in the 1920s and 1930s. Christians argued that any route to independence that bypassed spiritual and moral reconstruction would not produce true national integrity. Some argued, along these lines, that the exodus from Korea by so many nationalists to work abroad was a mistake, and their argument was similar to that of Solzhenitsyn's today, that nationals who choose to live in some sort of diaspora would find their influence on affairs at home greatly reduced.[10] Above all, they argued that while a structural revolution was not undesirable, it would quickly resort to former corruption unless a spiritual revolution undergirded it.

Confrontation with Marxism

From the early 1920s, Christianity in Korea became embroiled in a debate with Marxist thought newly arrived via Japan, China and Siberia. The main Marxist criticism of the "self-reconstruction" approach was that, as a basically capitalistic approach, it must necessarily prolong imperialism. Moreover, any apparent improvements in the life of Koreans would serve only to justify Japan's colonialism. Debate was particularly sharp over the creation in 1922 of Cho Man-sik's Korean Products Promotion Society (Chosŏn Mulsan Changryŏ Hoe), which was designed to encourage Korean industry and capital formation in opposition, or at least as an alternative to Japanese enterprises. Communists argued that one could not fight capitalism with capitalism — it would simply contribute to the overall superstructure in which Japan was an imperialist force.

No direct reply by Cho himself has been discovered,[11] but charges were answered by his colleagues in a series of articles in the nationalist newspaper the *Donga Ilbo,* February and March 1923. While granting the limitations of forming, using and protecting capital under hostile domination, they asserted that adversities could be overcome in part and that Koreans able to do so were responsible for laying the foundations of a livelihood for the people.[12] Against communists and nihilistic elements in Korean nationalism, Cho and his colleagues maintained that on Christian grounds it was highly immoral to insist on Koreans remaining in poverty, ignorance and ill-health simply to load a case against foreign rulers. Naturally, the "self-reconstruction" movements were implicitly political; this form of nationalism transcended, though it also included, the expulsion of Japan. Both communism and Christianity sought to see beyond nationalism, but the latter was clearly more successful. Significantly, no nationalist movement was operating during the desperately harsh years of 1938-45 except the Christians, who were opposing obeisances at Shinto shrines: a direct political defiance, yet a purely Christian action.[13]

One suspects that Cho Man-sik was not concerned personally to refute the Marxists because he perceived the weakness of their position. For,

contrary to the Marxist argument, the Japanese certainly regarded the Korean Products Promotion Society as a real threat, and forbade its meetings, imprisoned its lecturers and intimidated sympathisers.[14] When leftists attempted to disrupt meetings the audience turned on them and threw them out, accusing them of being put up to it by the Japanese police![15] Further, several native industries commenced, and members put their capital and labour into building community centres, libraries, orphanages and other public facilities, so that communist accusations fell flat. Since the headquarters of the Society was in a YMCA building, and Cho was a well-known preacher, school headmaster and YMCA leader, Christianity was viewed with favour by the public.

The Korean Products Promotion Society was forced to dissolve under Japanese pressure in 1937, when Japan invaded North China and intensified the war economy. Whilst the communists had nothing concrete to show, Christianity, with its involvement in industry, medicine, education and society and its strong church structure, was the most influential single force in Korea at that time. Since Korea was liberated, then tragically divided, by foreign powers, the Christian-communist debate was left hanging, and questions of what otherwise might have happened must remain at best theoretical. We do however know something of the relative strengths of communism and Christianity by August 1945.

Until 1945, Korean communists had been obliged not to follow the custom of their counterparts elsewhere in denouncing religion itself although initially they had attempted to. A Japanese police report of October 1928 indicated that the "religious bodies virtually control national movements", so that the communist groups had had "a change of heart", realising that "they could not possibly hope for success in a communist revolution should they alienate religion".[16] Over the 36 years of their rule, the Japanese observed that religious groups had higher membership in politically-oriented organisations than any other group.[17] Japanese statistics indicate that whereas the Buddhist and Ch'ondogyo (Heavenly Way religion — a native cult begun in the 1890s) membership in political organisations decreased between 1911 and 1944 from 2.5% to 1.1% and 0.8% to 0.4% of the population respectively, the Christian percentage increased from 1.5% to 2.5%. (While the Korean population increased by 18% over this period, the Christians increased by 308%.)[18]

Liberation, 1945

It is one of the sad ironies of the partition of Korea that communists were more numerous in the south than the north, while Christians were far more numerous in the north than the south. Yet overall, Christian influence was certainly stronger. Of the five top contenders for political power in the south three were committed Christians — Syngman Rhee, Kim Ku and Chang Tŏk-su — one was a socialist and nominal Christian (Yŏ

Un-hyŏng) and the other was a communist, Pak Hŏn-yŏng, who soon moved to P'yŏngyang and was purged subsequently by Kim Il-sŏng.

What of the north? The popularity of Cho Man-sik was so great that when the Soviet Command reached P'yŏngyang, the "Mecca" of Korean Christianity, it felt it prudent to allow Cho to head the North Korean Interim Government. The Japanese Governor of P'yŏngan Province where P'yŏngyang is situated had already handed over the administration to Cho.[19]

1945-1950: Exodus

Four groups quickly became evident in North Korea by October-November: the domestic communists, The Yenan Faction (returnees from China), the communist group under Kim Il-sŏng that entered with the Soviet Army in August, and the non-communist nationalists under Cho Man-sik. An historian comments:

> Quite contrary to current communist assertions, the political group that had the most vitality and potentiality in North Korea was [Cho's] . . . Cho-Man-sik, a Christian teacher, derived his power from the organised strength of the Christians. . . The Christian leaders in various provinces allied with other prominent nationalist and community leaders and formally launched the Korean Democratic Party (Chosŏn Minjudang) in [November] 1945. Not being able to change his views, and realising the effect his defiance would have if he were outside the government, the Soviet command interned him in January 1946. Cho's arrest forewarned the non-communist nationalist leaders that their future in North Korea was problematic, and they immediately began to flee to the South. By April, the Party's central H.Q. had been moved to Seoul. The Communists, however, maintained the skeleton of the Party in North Korea by placing at its head Ch'oe Yŏng-gŏn, Kim Il-sŏng's protégé. . . This version of the Party was then used to help maintain the facade of "New Democracy" in North Korea.[20]

In order to suppress Cho's group, the Soviet Command and Kim Il-sŏng depended from the outset very much on force. The Koreans had been kept totally disarmed by the Japanese, so that all weaponry — that surrendered to the Soviet Army by the Japanese troops and police force and the Soviet arms — was in the hands of communists.[21] Furthermore, 30,000 Soviet-Koreans, of whom 3,000 were trained soldiers, had accompanied Soviet troops into North Korea.[22] A secret police force was mobilised to hunt out "enemies of the state . . . especially Christians".[23] A land confiscation decree in March, and an industrial decree in August

1946, cut away the economic base of organised religion.[24] At the same time the educational institutions where Christian endeavour was so prominent were absorbed into a communist education system.[25]

Attempts were made to contact Cho in February 1946 while he was still detained only in a hotel. One prominent Presbyterian elder, Kim Hyŏn-sŏk, was arrested and charged with liaising between Cho and Kim Ku in Seoul. Elder Kim was imprisoned and later disappeared. This was a shock and an awakening to many North Korean Christians, for Elder Kim was not only a native of Kim Il-sŏng's home district in South P'yŏngan Province, but his marriage had been arranged by Kim Il-sŏng's grandparents — a significant social tie in Korea. When in April Elder Kim's son, Kim Sŏn-hyŏk, was arrested with 12 other Christians for trying to form a political party, the Sam Mindang, Elder Kim's wife approached Kim Il-sŏng's grandmother. She declined to help, saying, "I cannot control my grandson".[26]

As such experiences began to proliferate, people flocked South. In Seoul, North Koreans established the Presbyterian Young-Nak Church under the ministry of a former pupil of Cho's, Rev. Han Kyŏng-jik, who is still alive. This Church now has a membership of about 40,000 and is responsible for the establishment of numerous other churches around Korea. By 1950 approximately two million Koreans had arrived in the South.[27] Considering that this comprised twenty per cent of the then North Korean population, this was no small exodus, and refugees continued pouring in during the Korean War, 1950-53. A high proportion were Christians, and probably their removal gave the communists a freer hand.

1950 Onwards: Silence

Although a large number of Christians had fled the North, a fair proportion remained. Their fate since 1950 is virtually unknown, and from 1953 we have to rely upon infrequent snippets of information. Such evidence as there is suggests that they were heavily persecuted.

Chapter 4, article 54 of the North Korean Constitution states that "Citizens have freedom of faith and freedom of anti-religious propaganda", a clause which carries a nasty sting in its tail, especially as article 2 of chapter 1 states: "The Democratic People's Republic of Korea relies on the politico-ideological unity of the entire people. . ."[28] A group of American scholars concluded in 1968 that there was "no evidence that the people could enjoy such freedom" as the Constitution guaranteed.[29] The Party regarded religion as a threat to the wholehearted support of the people and had "banned religious services of any kind".[30] When asked by a South Korean reporter at a Red Cross conference at the Punmunjŏm (border of North and South), an official of the Communist Party and

former Presbyterian minister, Mr Kang, replied that he knew of no church buildings or Christian meetings.[31] Dr Samuel Moffett, church historian and formerly Principal of a Presbyterian Seminary in P'yŏngyang, comments that the "Red Cross talks [from 1972] confirmed that there is, apparently, no organised church left in North Korea . . . [where] Communist persecution of the church has been more severe than in either China or Russia".[32]

The leading South Korean organiser of research on Christianity in the North is a Rev. Lee in Seoul. I was able to meet him in November 1981 and learn something of its fate since 1953. Rev. Lee has analysed North Korean policy towards Christianity by period, in the following way.

1. 1950-53: a period of intensive anti-Christian activity. (Many Christians were then supporting America.)
2. 1953-55: for reconstruction purposes some underground leaders were promised amnesty. In the Hwanghae and P'yŏngan Provinces in particular many Christians surfaced.
3. 1955-75: another period of suppression.
4. Somewhere about 1978 a more subtle approach was adopted whereby a dual policy was begun. Outwardly, freedom is proclaimed and a facade of specially created religious institutions have appeared. Beneath this facade, religion is suppressed as before.

It appears that the Korean War provided the regime with a fortuitous opportunity for anti-Christian propaganda. Communist destruction of worship places is conveniently and sarcastically attributed to a "Christian" nation: at Party conferences Kim Il-sŏng delights in accusing America of destroying all the churches with bombs, and declaring that therefore the people have no desire to rebuild them. I have personal confirmation of this propaganda line. At a dinner held in Seoul in November 1981 in honour of Korean-Australian academic relations I was interested to hear a Professor of Koryŏ University and delegate to the Red Cross talks on unification, Dr Kim Jun-yŏp, relate the following incident. Meeting there in the North Korean delegation a former school friend whom he knew had gone into a seminary before 1945, he enquired if he was still a Christian. "Oh, no," was the reply. "Seeing that the Americans had bombed all the churches, how could I possibly believe in God any longer?" I suspect this was the Rev. Kang Dr Moffett referred to (see above).

Rev. Lee has identified two ways in which the North Korean regime imposes thought-control and ferrets out Christian suspects. First, close observation is maintained on activities such as funerals for any differences which may suggest religious faith. Secondly, under the guise of house hygiene checks, searches are carried out for Bibles and other religious literature in the homes of suspects or those whose ancestors were Christians. If any are caught they are, apparently, subjected to intensive

brainwashing or sent to "no-return" destinations (possibly the camps recently come to light).

The present dual policy requires comment. According to Rev. Lee this also involves classifying Christianity into two types: (a) "sungmi" Christianity, which means America-worship and harks back to the Christian support for that nation in the Korean War; and (b) "sunsuhan Chosŏn Kidokkyo", meaning pure Korean Christianity, i.e. "faith" which supports and glorifies the ruling ideology. Obviously this classification would be unnecessary if previous official claims that there were no Christians in Korea had been true: in their desire to present North Korea in a favourable way to the West, its masters have had to admit the existence of Christianity.

In order to impress the large number of North Korean Christians who have settled in America and Europe, North Korea has of late begun inviting such, including Christian ministers, to North Korea to meet their families and see the show churches. Some fall for this propaganda, and Rev. Lee cites the case of the former President of Sungsil Presbyterian College in P'yŏngyang, Rev. Kim Sŏng-nak, who returned from such a visit in June 1981 with a very pro-North attitude. Given the longing to see one's kin and homeland and the strong parochialism traditional in Korea, one can appreciate the desire, and strong psychological pressure, to accept a rosy view rather easily.

The North Korean regime has also made attempts in World Council of Churches circles to persuade the human rights movement onto its side, against the South. There are two Koreans representing the North in the WCC, one No Lee-sŏn in Los Angeles and a Lee Hwa-sŏn in West Germany. Compared to the wealth and ease of information on South Korea reaching the WCC and similar organisations, the information on the North is very slight and then only official and favourable. The WCC has paid considerable attention to the negative South Korean human rights record of recent years, and many South Korean Christians frequently criticise their government for its violations. It is difficult to know how to counteract this unequal situation, except to eschew the temptation to downplay South Korean violations, for as R. L. Stevenson once wrote: "the truth that is suppressed by friends is the readiest weapon of the enemy" (*Father Damien*).

Evidence of Christians in the North Today

Are there any Christians in North Korea today? Clearly there must be, but Rev. Lee is the only person I have met who has any concrete information, as follows:

Korean churches in North China and Manchuria had been permitted to worship and had managed to send Bibles into North Korea until at least

1965. Thereafter relations between China and North Korea cooled, so that across-border contact became extremely difficult. How the current "thaw" in China's attitude to Christianity will affect matters remains to be seen.

It is suspected that up to two hundred underground churches may exist in the North, but definite contact has been made with only one such gathering, in S., through a Christian there. Another has been tentatively identified in one province, while in another area there are at least three Christians surviving where three hundred used to gather in 1945. This is the extent of our concrete knowledge.

We should bear in mind that if so many Christians fled the North between 1946 and 1953, it is not surprising that there is less activity than we learn of in China (and we only recently have learned this). Bibles are being sent into North Korea (I have one before me as I type: 75 x 60 x 10mm; black; and no title-page or title on the cover), and the Far Eastern Broadcasting Company in Seoul is relaying the Gospel to North Korea. I conclude a solemn subject with a solemn message from Lee Dong-jin, former writer for *Pravda* in P'yŏngyang, 1954-59:

> "I want to say with all the strength at my command that there is no Communist country in the world where human beings are deprived of every basic freedom and driven like animals within the confines of an organisation as tight as an iron pail — all for the power and luxury of a handful of Communist rulers — as they are in Communist North Korea."[33]

[1]Gavan McCormack, "North Korea: Kimilsungism Path to Socialism?", in *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, 13.4.1981, p. 50.

[2]See K. M. Wells, "Yun Ch'i-ho and the Quest for National Integrity" in *Korea Journal*, Seoul, January 1982; Shin Yong-ha, *Tongnip Hyŏphoe Yŏngu* (The Independence Club), Seoul, Ilchogak, 1981.

[3]R. E. Shearer, *Wildfire: Church Growth in Korea*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1966, p. 60.

[4]Y. S. Park, "Protestant Christianity and Social Change in Korea", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1975, p. 268.

[5]This at any rate is the evaluation of another prominent Korean Christian still alive, with whom I was able to converse on this subject in Seoul in 1981.

[6]F. P. Baldwin, "The March First Movement: Korean Challenge and Japanese Response", unpublished doctoral dissertation, Columbia University, 1969, p. 208.

[7]Joungwon A. Kim, *Divided Korea. The Politics of Development, 1945-1972*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976, p. 27.

[8]An Ch'ang-ho, "Kaejo" (Reconstruction), 1919, in Yo-han Chu (compiler), *Tosan An Ch'ang-ho Chŏnjip* (Complete Works of An Ch'ang-ho), Seoul, Samjung-dang, 1963. Also see Wells, *op. cit.*

[9]K. Mochulsky, *Dostoyevsky, His Life and Work*, Princeton University Press, 1967, p. 642.

[10]Kwang-su Lee, "Na ŭi Kobaek" (My Confessions), 1947, in *Lee Kwang-su Chŏnjip* (Collected Works of Lee Kwang-su), Seoul, Ŭlshin Sa, 1979, Vol. 7.

[11]I have found only one direct reference by Cho to Marxist thought, but this was not quite on the present issue: Cho Man-sik, "Kidok Ch'ŏngnyŏn ŭi Isang" (Ideals for Christian Youth), in *Samch'ŏlli*, January 1937.

[12]Yŏng-nam Yun, "Chamyŏl inga, Kuksaeng inga?" (Self-annihilation or national birth?), in *Donga Ilbo,* 26.4.1923.

[13]See Eui Whan Kim, "The Korean Church under Japanese Occupation", unpublished doctoral dissertation, Temple University, 1966.

[14]Ki-jun Cho, *Hanguk Chabonjui Sŏngnip Saron* (History of the Formation of Korean Capitalism), Koryŏ University Press, 1973, p. 524.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 525.

[16]*Archives of the Government-General of Korea,* Kei Kō Hi No. 8036, 27.10.1928, "Himitsu Kessha Chōsen Kyōsantō narabini Kōrai Kyōsan Seinenkai Jiken Kensha no Ken".

[17]Joungwon Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

[18]*Office of the Overseas Minister* (Japan), Takumu Tōkei, 1939; *Annual Report on the Administration of Chōsen,* 1944.

[19]Chong-sik Lee, "Politics in North Korea: Pre-Korean War Stage", in R. Scalapino (ed.), *North Korea Today.* New York: Praeger, 1963, p. 4.

[20]*Ibid.*

[21]Joungwon Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 86.

[23]*Ibid.*, pp. 102-3.

[24]*Area Handbook for North Korea,* Washington: U.S. Government Printing House, 1969, pp. 186-7.

[25]Yang and Chee, "North Korean Education System: 1945 to the Present", in Scalapino, *op. cit.*, pp. 125-7.

[26]I have a personal copy of the indictment of Mr Kim, who is my wife's maternal grandfather. I have this information from Mrs Kim Kwee-hyŏk, Elder Kim's daughter and my mother-in-law. Elder Kim's wife is now living in Suwŏn, south of Seoul.

[27]Joungwon Kim, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

[28]M. Y. Cho, *Wirtschaft und Politik in der DVRK.* Hamburg: Institut für Asienkunde, 1974, pp. 73, 63.

[29]*Area Handbook for North Korea,* p. 185.

[30]*Ibid.*, p. 186.

[31]S. Moffett, in *The Korean Way,* Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1977, p. 79.

[32]*Ibid.*, p. 78.

[33]Dong-jun Lee, *Hwangsang gwa Hyŏnshil: Na ŭi Kongsanjui Kwan* (Fantasy and Fact, My Observations of Communism), Seoul, Tongbang T'ongshin Sa, 1961, p. 222.