Special Issue: CHURCH, STATE, AND COMMUNITY IN EAST ASIA

Introduction

Joseph Tse-Hei Lee 1

Buddhism and State-Building in Song China and Goryeo Korea

Sem Vermeersch 4

A Battle for Minds: Regulating Buddhism in Sixteenth-Century Japan

Ronald K. Frank 12

The Anti-Christian Campaign and Imperial Control in Eighteenth-Century China

Ma, Zhao 18

The Role of German Missionaries in Post-Boxer North China

Lydia Gerber 21

Mission Education as a Community Effort in Early Twentieth-Century North China

John R. Stanley 27

Bible versus Guns: Horace G. Underwood’s Evangelization of Korea

James Jin-Hong Kim 33

Church-State Relations in Post-1997 Hong Kong

Chan, Sze-Chi 38

Religion and Secular Society: A Comparison of Eastern and Western Perspectives

Thomas D. O’Sullivan 45
Bible versus Guns: Horace G. Underwood’s Evangelization of Korea

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Abstract
This article has presented a critical overview of Horace G. Underwood’s missionary career. In particular, it focuses on Underwood’s approach to evangelisation and church-state relations in late nineteenth-century Korea. While Korea was facing the Japanese imperialistic intrusion, Underwood hoped to use Protestant Christianity to reform and modernize Korea, to make the church more important to the Korean state, and to support Korea against the Japanese aggression. His contributions made him a legendary figure in the modern history of Korea. His innovative mission strategy based on a long-term vision helped transform Korea into a success story of evangelisation in the global history of Protestant missionary movements.

There has been growing interest in Horace G. Underwood’s (1859–1916) evangelization of Korea in recent years; the publication of his collected letters in 2002, for one, has enabled scholars to evaluate his role in the Christian evangelization of Korea (Choi, 1992; Kim, 2002). Horace G. Underwood represented the maturation of a Protestant missionary movement that had begun in earnest with William Carey’s pioneering work in India (1761–1834) in the late eighteenth century. By the time Underwood arrived in Korea in 1885, therefore, the Protestant missionary enterprise had been active in proselytizing among local communities in Asia and Africa for nearly a century. Underwood could look to missionaries such as Carey, Adoniram Judson (1788–1850), Robert Morrison (1782–1834) and Hudson Taylor (1832–1894) as models, even as he developed a long-term vision for the evangelization of Korea and laid the foundation for Christianity’s inculcation in Asia. Certainly, the majority of Protestant missionaries in Asia and Africa during the heyday of the Christian missionary movement from the 1860s to the 1920s relied on the political and military resources of Western powers. In contrast, Underwood not only relied on local Christians to spread the gospel message and trained large numbers of Korean church leaders; he also laid the groundwork for a Christian Korea through the nurturing of its future leaders. Indeed, Underwood’s approach was an alternative to the mission strategy that Joseph Tse-Hei Lee has termed that of “the Bible and the gun” (Lee, 2003).

Clearly, then, Underwood’s legacy is of great importance for scholars interested in the spread of Christianity in Korea as well as the history of cultural interactions between Korea and the United States. This article will discuss Underwood’s missionary career in the wider context of a global Christian movement by examining his approach to church-state relations in Korea under foreign—especially Japanese—imperialistic intrusion.

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Asia Pacific: Perspectives · December 2004

I. An Overview of the Life of Horace G. Underwood

Horace Grant Underwood was born in London in 1859, the fourth son of six children to John and Elizabeth Grant Maire Underwood. In 1869 he entered a Roman Catholic boys’ school at Boulogne-Sur-Mer in France but left three years later, at the age of thirteen, when his family migrated to the United States. After graduating from New York University (NYU) in 1881, he entered New Brunswick Theological Seminary, while continuing study for an M.A. degree in Education at NYU. Upon graduation from both institutions in 1884, he was appointed by the American Presbyterian Mission Board as its first missionary to Korea and ordained as a minister.

He arrived in Korea on Easter Day, April 5, 1885, and worked briefly with Dr. Horace N. Allen (1858–1932). In 1886, Underwood opened an orphanage, which later became the Kyongsin High School. He also baptized his first convert and played an active role in establishing Yonsei University; due to illness, however, he returned to the United States subse-

quently and died in Atlantic City, New Jersey on October 12, 1916 (H. G. Underwood, 1908a; L. H. Underwood, 1983).

II. Horace G. Underwood in the Protestant Global Mission

The subject of church-state relations is an integral part of the history of Christianity. One way of understanding this issue is to look at a particular context in which interactions between church, state, and community took place. Although
there had been a few isolated missionaries such as John Eliot in 1631 evangelizing the American Indians, the Protestant global mission had its roots in the Pietistic evangelism and ideal of the “Benevolent Empire” that existed in Euro-American churches of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century. Given this orientation, Protestant missionaries interested in China, Korea and Japan faced many challenges and much tension between church and state, between rival churches, and within the churches themselves.

One challenge that missionaries had to deal with was the fact that they operated within two states—the one from which they came and the one governing their respective mission field. The next challenge was the ongoing competition within the field, whether between Catholic and Protestant churches or among rival Protestant denominations. Another challenge was that the local church belonged to native Christians with whom missionaries had to interact and negotiate religious and secular matters. Moreover, missionaries’ association with the Western powers conveyed the idea that they were patrons of foreign imperialism to native communities. Thus, when missionaries stood up strongly for the welfare of local Christians, their evangelistic work was seen as contributing to the phenomenon of Western imperialistic intrusion of local society.

Let us explore these issues by taking a closer look at the early Jesuit and Protestant missionary pioneers in East Asia. Francis Xavier, Matteo Ricci, William Carey, Adoniram Judson, Robert Morrison and Hudson Taylor have three things in common. First, they fully engaged in an attempt to understand native languages and cultures on a “two-way-traffic” basis; second, they demonstrated a strong spirit of inter-denominational cooperation; and third, they were deeply conscious of the political, social and cultural practices beneficial to local societies (Koyama, 1975, 70–75). A central message underlying William Carey’s “Five Legacies” for mission or Adoniram Judson’s “Advice to Missionary Candidates” is the exhortation “not just [to] become familiar with but to engage in a two-way-traffic understanding.” Carey translated and distributed The Bible in 35 native dialects across India. He also urged missionaries to respect non-Christian cultures and to train native ministers as early as possible. Judson shared the same opinion. He wrote in 1832, ‘Let it be a missionary life. That is, commit for life, and not for a limited term…. Beware of prematurely judging native Christians and/or non-Christians upon arrival. Disappointment, disgust, lack of contextual understanding, and close contact with those formerly seen only from a distance can combine to dishearten or prejudice you altogether.’

Judson also dedicated much of his life to compiling an English-Burmese dictionary, thereby paving the way for future missionaries to Burma. Carey and Judson in turn may have been aware of the experiences of Francis Xavier (1506–1552) and Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), both of the Jesuit mission. Xavier believed that in order for Christianity to take root in Asia, missionaries had to reach the natives on their own terms—speaking, reading and writing in local languages, behaving like locals and even becoming part of their society. He once even attempted to use the word Dainichi (“the great sun”), a word referring to a sacred being in Japanese Buddhism, to describe the Christian God.

Succeeding Xavier in China as the chief architect of the Jesuit mission strategy, Matteo Ricci entered the Ming Empire in 1583 and spent the rest of his life acquiring a good knowledge of the Chinese language and culture in a way few Westerners have achieved (Spence ed., 253). In his most famous Chinese work, Tianzhu shih-yi (The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven), Ricci’s main concern was to engage in dialogue with the Confucian literati by identifying those elements in Chinese culture that might be compatible with Christianity. He wrote, “I make every effort to turn our way the ideas of the leader of the sect of literati, Confucius, by interpreting in our favor things which he left ambiguous in his writings. In this way our fathers gain great favor with the literati who do not adore the idols (Rule, 1986).” While Xavier reached out to people from all walks of life, Ricci took a top-down approach of evangelization and proselytized among the scholars.

Horace G. Underwood admired early Protestant and Catholic missionaries in Asia, as well as their mission methods. Following the footsteps of Carey, Judson, Morrison, Xavier and Ricci, Underwood took a keen interest in the Korean language and culture. In his scholarly work, The Religions of the East Asia, Underwood argued that there was great potential for Christianity to take root in Korea as Confucianism and Buddhism had done earlier. Moreover, he noted that because Confucian ideology in Korea strongly discouraged Buddhism and at the same time, had lost its appeal in the eyes of women and young people in particular, there was a spiritual vacuum especially in and around the capital city of Seoul. Many Koreans often reached out to popular Buddhist cults and shamanism, asking shamans to allay their sense of fear. Based on his research, Underwood stressed the need for education and urged Christians to avoid presenting God simply as another supernatural spirit with the ability to inflict or take away fear, pain and suffering. Instead, he sought to demonstrate Christian love through a concern for the ordinary people and active involvement in social change (Underwood, 1908b, 81–86, 90).

Equally important to Underwood was his belief in inter-denominationalism. In early nineteenth-century America, the idea of the “Benevolent Empire” with its focus on missionary zeal generated a strong inter-denominational spirit, and led to the creation of important missionary institutions such as the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM), the American Bible Society and the American Sunday School Union. Although this inter-denominational spirit declined considerably as a result of North-South hostilities following the American Civil War, Underwood firmly believed in it. As a Reformed Church pastor sent by the American Presbyterian Mission Board, he worked closely with Henry Appenzeller, a former Presbyterian who later joined the Methodist mission.3 Underwood was also instrumental in bringing a group of young missionaries from the Southern Presbyterian Churches to Korea in 1892. This kind of inter-denominational spirit helped Underwood gain approval from his Presbyterian Mission Board to work with
missionaries from other denominations when he encountered strong opposition from fellow Presbyterian missionaries for having founded a secular college in Seoul (Educational Committee, 1915, 11).

Underwood’s passionate concern for the interests of local communities can be discerned in his identification with the Korean people. As with late nineteenth-century China, Chosŏn Korea was in a dilemma, torn between the need to modernize in response to foreign imperialism and the desire to maintain its traditions despite entrenched hunger and poverty. Violence erupted with the Tonghak and Jeungsan movements as the Taiping and Boxer rebellions had in China. Underwood, himself only in his twenties, believed that young adults ought to be given hope through modern education. In February 1886, less than a year after his arrival in Korea, he founded an “educational” orphanage that later became the Kyung-sin High School, an important centre of learning for many Korean Christian leaders. His close association with the Korean people reminds us of Hudson Taylor’s identification with the Chinese. In 1865, Taylor wrote China, Its Spiritual Needs and Claims and founded the China Inland Mission (CIM). He went so far as to say that as much as possible, CIM missionaries should regard themselves as Chinese rather than as foreigners in China (Broomhall, 1982). Evidently, Underwood’s commitment to the Koreans was as strong as Taylor’s to the Chinese.

III. Horace G. Underwood and Inculturation of Christianity

Despite the efforts of Xavier, Ricci, Carey, Judson, Morrison, Taylor and other missionaries, Christianity remains very much a minority religion in China, India, Burma and Japan today. In China, the Rites Controversy (1610–1742) undermined the Roman Catholic mission. A century later, the Taiping and Boxer rebellions posed setbacks to the Protestant mission there. The same can be said of the history of Christian missions in India. When William Carey arrived in India, the sub-continent was already under the power of Western guns as a colony of the East India Company. It is probably not surprising that even today, most Indian Christians come from the “untouchables” rather than from the other castes. Although Burma did not become an official British colony until 1885, it had been subject to British attacks since the early nineteenth century. Today, about 5% of the Burmese population are said to be Christian, but under the current military regime, it is against the law to publish Bibles and other religious materials there. In these cases, there was a close connection between Christian missions and Western military expansion, and this connection ultimately hindered the inculturation of Christianity in these countries in the long run (Lee, 2003, 60).

In Japan, Christianity failed to take root for different reasons. Many American missionaries such as Guido Burbeck, James Ballagh, Captain L. L. Janes, and Dr. W. S. Clark contributed to the development of modern education in Japan. Yet their efforts to meet the immediate needs of Japan in modernization were challenged by Uchimura Kanzo’s Non-Church movement and Masakisa Uemura’s Independent Theological Seminary movement at the turn of the twentieth-century. In 1911, the Japanese government required all schools to practice Shinto worship. The church and missionaries did not have the power to resist. In 1912, Japan organized the so-called “Three Religions Conference” promoting dialogue among Shintoism, Buddhism and Christianity. Although the large number of Christian elite schools is responsible for educating 13% of the entire Japanese population today, less than 1% (approx. 0.6%) is Christian. Most of Japanese Christians are intellectuals of individualistic and liberal faith. However, Protestant Christianity has flourished in South Korea where Protestants dominate the overall Christian population (more than 10 of the 13 million Christians are Protestant). Horace G. Underwood and other missionaries like Henry Appenzeller, Samuel Moffett, John Ross and John McIntyre clearly sowed the seeds of church growth in contemporary Korea. What were the most significant contributions of Horace G. Underwood among the three?

Before answering this question, it is important to reconstruct the global and inter-Asian contexts in which Underwood worked. As a relative latecomer in the Protestant global missionary movement, Underwood could learn from the experiences of many earlier missionary pioneers in different parts of the world and develop his own missiological approach. Upon his arrival in Korea, he would also build on the successful—if indirect—evangelistic works done by earlier missionaries in the region. In 1873 (some claim 1874), a couple of Koreans encountered John Ross and John McIntyre of the Scottish Presbyterian mission in Manchuria and were converted to Christianity. They spread their new faith among friends and relatives when they returned to Korea. In 1879, three of them traveled to Manchuria to be baptized by Ross and McIntyre, and held Bible study meetings regularly on their own. In 1882, So Sang-yun, a former member of the Korean literati, helped Ross and McIntyre translate the Bible into Korean, and in 1885 (possibly earlier), he and his brother built the first Protestant church in Korea without the direct involvement of foreign missionaries. Around that time, another Korean had already completed the translation of The Gospel of Mark. Korea was not a blank slate but a self-initiated vital mission field when Underwood first set foot on its soil. These Korean Christians assisted Underwood with the propagating of Christianity.

Another important element affecting Underwood’s mission was the change in the East Asian political climate. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, Japan sought to take over Korea and to undermine Chinese dominance in northeast Asia. With the country’s sovereignty at peril in the face of Japanese imperialism, the ruling elite of Korea established a favorable relationship with Western powers by tolerating Christianity and showing deference to the missionaries. Political instability and foreign threats indeed afforded Christianity a unique opportunity to expand into Korea. After Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910, Christianity was tolerated because of its connection with Western powers. As a result, Christianity became a subversive challenge to the Japanese colonial authorities and this in part explains its growth and appeal in Korea. Under the cover of the Church,
Koreans struggled against Japanese colonialism throughout the early twentieth century. In this hostile environment, Underwood presented the Bible as an alternative power to the gun, thereby allowing many Koreans to understand patriotism and Christianity in mutual terms (Kim, 2001, 278).

Yet, it was his long-term vision of inculturating the Christian gospel in Korea that distinguished Underwood from other missionaries in the field. Instead of focusing on winning converts as quickly as possible, Underwood sought to lay the foundation for a Christian Korea that, in the long run, would be capable of participating in the global community with an independent, mature understanding of the gospel message. Peter Schineller defines “inculturation” as “the incarnation of [a given religious or philosophical message and its life application] in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about ‘a new creation’ (Schineller, 1990, 6).” Enabling the gospel to shape the native culture from the inside out—without itself getting lost in syncretism—poses a huge challenge. Considering that Nestorian Christianity had merged with Buddhist teaching and practices in Tang China, the nature of “Asian Christianity” is difficult to define even today. Underwood may have had an intuitive understanding of the task stemming from his own cross-cultural upbringing as an immigrant in America. What was important was his emphasis on training a large body of highly educated Christians, who would become future leaders in every sector of society and initiate the process of cultural transformation from within. To this end, Underwood established the YMCA and Yonsei University with funds from his brother.4

As the founder of the Korean YMCA, Underwood included two Japanese senior officials in the Board of Trustees, even though he whole-heartedly supported the Korean Independence Movement.5 He was criticized in some circles for their inclusion but stood firm in seeing beyond national as well as denominational lines. In the long run, the YMCA trained many key figures of the Korean Independence Movement including his own foster son, Kim Kyu-sik, who later served as the President of Korea and in other official capacities for the Korean interim government.

In founding Yonsei University, Underwood envisioned the inclusion of a business school even though commerce was considered to be the lowest profession in Confucian Korea. He foresaw that when Korea became independent, it would face the challenges of urbanization and industrialization posed by the Western world. He sought to prepare young Koreans for these challenges to become capable and ethical leaders in the business world. Underwood died six months before the University opened on April 7, 1917, but his foresight made Yonsei the alma mater to many Korean leaders, and a major centre of social consciousness and political activism. Because Underwood saw education as a partner in the Christian renaissance of Korea, he believed in maintaining the highest standards of academic and moral excellence for Christian educators, pastors and workers, as well as for education in general. He also pushed for the admission of non-Christians into mission schools and colleges while upholding Christian values at the same time. He even promoted native folk culture and supported its artistic expression. He published the first Korean hymnal in 1894 and included seven hymns written by Korean composers and writers. After all, his vision was to establish a Christian Korea in the true sense of inculturation rather than to establish churches in Korea. He did not limit himself to the creation of isolated Korean Christian enclaves. Instead, he sought to transform Korean culture as a whole on Christian terms.

IV. Conclusion

This article has presented an overview of Horace G. Underwood’s approach to missions. His innovative mission strategy based on a long-term vision helped transform Korea into a success story of evangelization in the history of Protestant global missions. Nonetheless, the Korean Church today faces a number of problems. In 1993, Horace G. Underwood III, a grandson of Underwood and former president of Yonsei University, commented on the contemporary Korean church at a seminar for Christian leaders. In his opinion, the Korean church was strong in its zeal to pray, to spread the gospel and to study the Bible, as well as in its obedience to tithe and its ability to establish large churches (27 of the world’s 40 largest churches are in Korea). Yet, the church tended to separate life and faith in everyday life (i.e. most Korean Christians were Sunday Christians), lacked interest in social justice, and engaged in interdenominational rivalries and intra-/inter-church conflicts. Many Christians also emphasized material blessings, and unwittingly admitted a syncretism of faith and folk shamanism into the Christian life. As the common saying went, church pastors are “shamans in Western clothes”. Underwood III concluded that unless Korean Christians reached out to society and kept an eye on political, social, economic and cultural affairs, Korea would never possess a Christian culture despite its large church memberships.6 Clearly, these are problems Horace G. Underwood had warned against and worked to prevent, but not all missionaries had shared his concerns. In an effort to encourage local pastors, many missionaries had lowered academic standards and ordained pastors with little proper training in Biblical knowledge, theology, church leadership and even general humanistic learning. Indeed, of the more than 300 theological seminaries in South Korea today, less than 20% are institutions accredited by the Ministry of Education.

If these problems hinder the progress of the most successful case of Protestant global missions in the twenty-first century, one can imagine the difficulties in other parts of Asia. Therefore, it is important to evaluate the missiological approach of Horace G. Underwood towards Korea and Christian missions in general. Underwood promoted inter-denominational and inter-national cooperation, respected Korean cultural heritage, and showed a strong sense of social consciousness. Most importantly, he never lost sight of his long-term vision for Korea’s ultimate transformation into a Christian nation. As Underwood lay on his deathbed on October 12, 1916, his last words were, “I think, I think, I could...

ENDNOTES


3. Underwood and Appenzeller first met at the Inter-Seminary Alliance Conference at Hartford, Connecticut and within two years went to Korea together. See A Modern Pioneer in Korea, Griffis, p.71.


5. Underwood had stood in guard of the Emperor Kojong through the night the Japanese assassinated Empress Min in 1895. Since then, Underwood often took great risk to his own life and mission to support the Korean Independence Movement against Japanese colonial authority.


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