

# **New Millennium South Korea**

Neoliberal capitalism and transnational  
movements

**Edited by Jesook Song**

# New Millennium South Korea

Despite the commonly held belief that Asian nations have displayed anti-market tendencies of under-consumption and export-oriented trade since the Asian financial crisis, in the ten years since the crisis, South Korea has bucked this trend, accruing a higher debt rate than the US. This groundbreaking collection of essays addresses questions such as how did the open market policies and restructuring processes implemented during the Asian financial crisis magnify the consumption and debt level in South Korea to such an extent? What is the impact of these financial changes on the daily lives of people in different cultural and socio-economic groups? In examining these questions the authors provide valuable insight into the rise of financial capitalism, transnational mobility, and the implications of neoliberal governing tactics following the Asian financial crisis.

Examining South Korea's transformation during the early years of the twenty-first century, *New Millennium South Korea* will be of interest to anthropologists, economists, and sociologists, as well as students and scholars of Korean Studies.

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## 9 “If you don’t work, you don’t eat”

### Evangelizing development in Africa

*Ju Hui Judy Han*

“... we gave you this rule: ‘If a man will not work, he shall not eat.’”

(2 Thessalonians 3:10)<sup>1</sup>

“We are told we must work and use our talents to create wealth. ‘If a man will not work he shall not eat’ wrote St Paul to the Thessalonians ...”

(Margaret Thatcher, “Sermon on the Mound,” 1988)

“Repeat after me: You don’t work, you don’t eat! No work, no eat!”

(South Korean missionary in Tanzania, 2006)

Work or else starve – these unkind words were uttered partly out of frustration. Two South Korean Christian missionaries from Global Mission Frontier (GMF) were presenting a week-long economic development seminar to approximately 30 local government officials and municipal employees crowded inside a modest hotel room in Mwanza, Tanzania.<sup>2</sup> The seminar leader, Deacon Shin, had begun by introducing himself as hailing from the prosperous land of Samsung and the LG Group (two of the world’s biggest conglomerates) but he failed to impress – the participants had never heard of the corporate brands. “How about Hyundai?” Deacon Shin asked in disbelief. “You must have seen all the Hyundai advertising during the World Cup games?”<sup>3</sup> Apparently not. Deacon Shin shook his head in dismay, and explained that these are large, powerful companies from Korea, and that their very success stands as proof of the miracle of Korean economic development.

Deacon Shin’s frustration was compounded by the lackluster performance of the English–Swahili interpreter – a local pastor volunteering for a small stipend – as well as the intermittent power outages that kept disabling the Sony video projector the missionaries brought from Korea.<sup>4</sup> By lunchtime on the first day, the Tanzanian participants appeared bored and uninspired, and the Korean missionaries were becoming flustered. It was then that Deacon Shin suddenly instructed everyone to stand up and stretch – and shout after him, “You don’t work, you don’t eat!” When some chuckled, he said firmly, “This is in the Bible!” and pointed to the Bible in his hand. Indeed, there it was in Second Thessalonians of the New Testament: “If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” He explained that this verse captured the key to Korea’s economic miracle, and rallied the class in fist-pumping chants for several minutes: “No work, no eat! No work, no eat!”

## **Understanding Korean/American short-term missions**

Programs like this – short-term volunteer missions proselytizing through “secular” efforts like economic development and education – are among the untold backstories of neoliberal globalization and transnational religious movements today. The contention that religious missions have played a complex and contradictory role within the workings of colonial domination and capitalist development is by now well known (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; Cooper 2005; Keane 2007). At the present moment, even the diehard evangelicals begrudgingly admit that the “romance of missions” has all but faded away amidst pleas for pluralism and tolerance, and vow to make changes for missions to be less paternalistic and more equitable. One popular pledge among contemporary mission theologians is that in addition to the tried-and-true cross-cultural missions, proselytizing missions must be led by “cultural neighbors” who are more ideally suited for evangelizing the “unreached.” Such is the landscape of what has been dubbed “postcolonial missions,” with an emphasis on South-to-South flows and a focus on humanitarian aid and cultural exchange as the preferred mode of mission encounter. It is an important part of a new evangelical ethics of alterity, coordinated through purpose-driven encounters with modernity’s strangers in need of rescue and love (Ahmed 2000).

It is in this context that I consider the work of Korean evangelical Protestant short-term missions. By definition deliberative and purpose-driven, missions exemplify what Gramsci would call a philosophy of praxis – believing by doing, ideas embedded in “practical activity,” synthesizing a unity of theory and practice on the mission field.<sup>5</sup> Proselytizing missions – and especially short-term overseas missions as I argue elsewhere (Han 2010) – are in the soul-changing business, inciting personal transformations and fomenting social change by spreading the Gospel, as mandated by the Christian theological doctrine of the Great Commission. By focusing on Korean-led missions, my aim is to decenter white North Americans and Europeans, long privileged as the primary agents in the study of mission encounters, and complexify the ways in which Christianity is assumed to function as a fundamental sign of capitalist modernity. This is the first aim of this chapter – using this perspectival shift to draw attention to the historical trajectories and geographical imaginaries that together constitute the particular meanings and practices of religious missions.

The second aim of the chapter is to assess short-term missions in the transnational context of travel and mobility. Loosely defined, short-term missions last anywhere from a week to several months. They are derided by critics as “amateurization of missions” or “drive-by missions,” but they have become commonplace and enormously popular – especially among those who are unwilling or unable to leave their jobs or suspend their lives for an extended period of time to become full-time career missionaries. Every year, over a million Americans join short-term mission trips to locations foreign and distant, and tens of thousands of Koreans and Korean Americans participate in collaborative mission programs. It is common to find retired South Korean dentists on medical missions caring for ethnic Koreans in China for six months at a time, or Korean American college students from Illinois building a church in Uganda or teaching Taekwondo in Tanzania during

their summer vacation. Space-time compression has increased and accelerated our encounters with diverse and formerly distant ways of seeing the world – encounters with strangers, strangeness, and what Ahmed (2000) has called “strangeness” – and short-term missions are very much part of this phenomenon.

Missionary encounters are often discussed in the context of domination and subordination. The assertive, “bellicose ethos” of American neoconservatives and the Christian Right has likewise been the subject of much critical analysis (Brouwer, Gifford, and Rose 1996; Brown 2006; Buss and Herman 2003; Connolly 2008; Diamond 1999; Runions 2007). Of particular interest is what William Connolly has described as the “evangelical-capitalist resonance machine,” an assemblage with a shared spiritual disposition toward the world in their “readiness to defend neoliberal ideology in the face of significant counter-evidence” (Connolly 2005, 2008: 42). His argument is that the connection between evangelical Christianity and neoliberal capitalism cannot be simplified in terms of causality or a shared allegiance to a singular, universal creed. Instead, Connolly proposes the concept of “resonance” as a useful way of discussing the complex and historical dynamics between economic, religious, and geopolitical forces that together produce this particularly bellicose and ravenous convergence.

But then how do we understand the Christian call for service and sacrifice? After all, evangelical missionaries at least claim to “save” the world from poverty, Islam, and eternal damnation. For those heeding the call for missionary service, the intent is to strive beyond personal salvation, and to save the world. As a famous evangelist once put it: “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Save all you can.’”<sup>6</sup> Even if one disagreed with the logic and the method of this “lifeboat,” and even if, as the saying goes, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” I would still caution against hastily dismissing intent and affect as simply duplicitous or perfunctory. After all, emotional labor on the mission field – the tears, the frequent declarations of love and compassion, and the voluntary embracing of hardship and suffering – is a significant part of the missionary service. With this in mind, I look at how evangelical enterprises might promulgate the “emotional content of economics” (Moreton 2007: 119). One might say that missionaries put into practice what Margaret Thatcher once said: “economics are the method, but the object is to change the soul.”<sup>7</sup> Drawing from critical scholarship on faith-based humanitarian aid development NGOs (Bornstein 2003; Clarke 2007), the third aim of this chapter is to discuss the Korean evangelical efforts to “change the soul,” taking seriously the complex interplay between their historical experiences, motivations, and practices.

## **Research methodology**

This chapter draws primarily on ethnographic research of an East Africa mission trip in 2006, which involved approximately 150 South Koreans and Korean Americans in a month-long program devoted to “bringing together Korea and Africa under the wings of God.” Global Mission Frontier (GMF), a Korean/American missionary organization with offices in Seoul and northern and southern California, was founded in 1994 by a modestly successful immigrant Korean

entrepreneur in the Silicon Valley. GMF has organized an annual summer program since 2000, arranging visits to orphanages and refugee camps, and producing large-scale outdoor prayer rallies, traditional Korean dance performances and sporting events, as well as economic development seminars and "Christian motherhood" workshops.

GMF's short-term mission programs are designed to complement its long-term projects, which include establishing missionary centers, primary schools, medical clinics, small factories, and seminaries throughout East Africa.<sup>8</sup> The summer mission itinerary has typically included Rwanda and Burundi for the first two weeks, and Tanzania and Uganda for the second two weeks, concluding with an optional safari tour of Serengeti National Park in Tanzania. In total, the missionaries spend an estimated \$1.5 million in travel and program expenses for the month-long series of programs. With permission, I joined the mission team as a participant-observer and a volunteer Korean–English interpreter for seminars and public events as well as for private meetings between South Korean Christian politicians and a number of high-level government officials in Uganda and Tanzania – including mayors, members of the Cabinet and the Supreme Court, officials at the National Electoral Commission, and dozens of legislators attending a weekly "breakfast prayer meeting" at the Parliament of Uganda.

### **The development generation**

The 150 or so South Korean and Korean Americans on GMF's short-term mission in East Africa ranged in age from 15 to 70, with more than two-thirds being women. Many of the participants, especially those in their fifties and older, told stories with a consistently similar narrative arc. For the most part, they described their intention in broad strokes, typically involving tales of survival, feelings of gratitude and indebtedness, and pursuit of charity and volunteer service. GMF's own promotional video began with images of white American missionaries arriving in Korea to save the nation from Communism, war, and poverty, and concluded with the triumphant world-bound departure of Korean missionaries. One elderly South Korean woman on the mission field in Uganda said during a group conversation, "If the Americans hadn't brought the Gospel to Korea and saved us from Communism and poverty, I wonder if we would still be living like this." By "this," she was referring to life in Uganda. Her sentiment was echoed by Woo, an immigrant Korean pastor from California who also participated in the Uganda mission. He later reflected in a GMF publication:

The African countries were slightly different from each other, but in the case of Uganda, it looked just like Korea in the late 1950s to early 1960s. There's no doubt that our task is to go to Africa with the Bible and feed the Gospel to the hungry people. But I also felt that our most important mission was to instill in that land our [Korean] people's desire to plow the land and plant the seeds for a prosperous nation, the way we did through our national modernization movement.

(anonymous interview, September 2006)

Woo's reflection is strikingly reminiscent of a statement by Pastor Ha Yong-jo, a well-known conservative pastor of Onnuri Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Seoul, who said in a 2007 radio broadcast of *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*:

When I was young, Korea's GDP at the time was the same as Congo, and I could never imagine Korea as an industrialized country. It is just a miracle ... When we were hopeless, the Western missionaries came and they introduced us to the hope in Jesus Christ. So we have a very holy obligation to share this hope in Jesus Christ with those people who are still in their misery.

(Ha 2007)

Some felt this "holy" obligation in a deeply personal way. Tae, an energetic volunteer from South Korea, grew up in an orphanage in Korea, having lost both her parents in an auto accident at the age of four. When asked about the impact of Western Christianity on Korea, Tae said that she had only fond memories of American missionaries who visited the orphanage children with gifts and affection. When she was approached by a church pastor about the possibility of going to Africa as a missionary, she said she was enthralled most of all by the idea of visiting an orphanage, so she could finally return the favor and help the orphans there – as she had been helped by Americans years ago.

Another GMF mission participant was Bae, a poet and essayist who later published a book of stories based on her experiences in Africa. In one chapter, she tells the story of how her small group traveling on a bumpy road in Uganda started tossing out cheap plastic sandals for the children running after their truck. At first it was fun and the children seemed happy about the gifts, but then Bae was struck with a childhood memory from South Korea. Her childhood best friend Misun was an orphan, Bae wrote, who used to chase after US soldiers for handouts in much the same way as the Ugandan children. One day, Misun was accidentally hit in the face by something that the US soldiers had tossed, and it left a hideous scar on her face. Misun despises US soldiers and the US to this day, and feels deeply ashamed for having begged for such meager handouts, with the scar reminding her of the rage and shame throughout her entire life. Compelled by this memory, Bae suddenly yelled at the driver in Uganda, startling him to a halt: "Stop throwing! Please stop throwing!" And she burst out crying, she wrote, overwhelmed with nostalgia and a sense of irony that she was doing exactly what the US soldiers had done.

It is noteworthy, however, that Bae's analogy did not lead to an analysis of privilege and power. She mostly regretted the method by which the gift was given – and the unintended consequences. She wrote:

I thought to myself, when we try to help people, we must respect their dignity. The invisible heart [intention] is far more precious than tangible objects. If only the US soldier had treated Misun a bit more carefully that day, she would not be still suffering from that experience ... And Misun might be trying to repay the debt of the soldier's gift by helping others. But instead, Misun still believes to this day that US soldiers and rich people in general are all in the business of hurting the poor, and her heart is filled with great anger towards the rich, and the world at large.

(Bae 2007: 183–6)

Like Tae and Bae, many of the GMF missionaries in Africa frequently became emotional about their own past and the nation's historical past. The journey to Africa was like traveling backwards in time, and it conjured up bittersweet memories of loss, suffering, and what they narrativized as an indefatigable will to survive. Memories of post-war devastation and poverty in Korea, recounted through narratives of Christian modernization and capitalist deliverance, may have been intended to inspire Africans interested in emulating the South Korean development model, but the memories also served to privilege the generation now in their fifties or older, who constitute Korea's "development generation."

Born in the last days of Japanese colonial rule in the 1940s, this generation came of age during the devastation following the Korean War in the 1950s, and witnessed the establishment of the American provisional government and military bases throughout South Korea in subsequent years. They joined the reconstruction, modernization, and state-led industrialization efforts in the 1960s, saw one repressive regime after another in the 1970s, and lived through the growing struggles for democracy and clamor for economic advancement, culminating in the euphoria of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. In 1996, the initiation into the OECD marked South Korea officially as a member of the "league of the richest nations in the world." Only the development generation can claim to have personally experienced the range of bitter hardship and sweet success of modern Korean history, having borne the fruit of economic development through their own sweat, tears, and blood.

However, this depiction of the development generation elides many details and internal contradictions, as collective biographies typically do. Some individuals would have collaborated with Japanese colonizers and profited handsomely from ties to the military dictatorship. Needless to say, not everyone in the development generation would have resorted to eating food scraps discarded by US military bases. Many would have in fact disapproved of student-led pro-democracy struggles as premature and foolish, and accused them of being Communist-instigated, ill-advised protests of youthful idealism. But in hindsight, the grand historical narrative of modern Korea is told through the triumphalist lens of market capitalism and liberal democracy as a *fait accompli*. Regardless of their ideological allegiances past and present, and their actual contributions, all present-day Koreans can claim the protagonist status in the marvelous history of achievement in modern Korea. Like the inerrancy of the Bible or the supremacy of Christianity among all other "false religions," Korean evangelical missions in Africa left little room for ambivalence or alternatives. Everybody was considered a passenger in the linear, progressive trajectory of capitalist development and Christian salvation.

The GMF missionaries on this trip often insisted that they had nothing to do with the colonial powers or the imperial legacies of European Christianity, either in practice or intent, and clearly stated that the Korean missionary position was non-colonial and non-Western. Indeed, they asserted that Koreans were in a better position to be world evangelists. "Koreans are not racist like the white Europeans," a GMF leader said on many occasions, "and we are not high and mighty like the Americans. You will never see Europeans or Americans getting their hands dirty, working alongside Africans or eating with their hands, or sitting on dirty floors. Koreans don't mind, and Africans like us better for it."

In part because colonialism was understood as a thing of the past, it was easy for Korean missionaries to distance themselves from the colonial legacy of proselytizing missions. But because of the marked political and theological affinity to American Protestantism that characterizes Korean evangelicalism, the missionaries also traced, paradoxically, a direct genealogy between themselves and Americans. In other words, they drew parallels between American missionaries in Korea at the turn of the last century and Korean missionaries in Africa today. Unlike Europeans, American missionaries were rarely portrayed as agents of empire. Instead, Americans were nearly always regarded as benefactors to Korean Christians, who remain grateful and indebted.

“Just look at Korea today,” Korean evangelicals often say, “our country has come a long way.” Others agree – evangelicals worldwide marvel at Korea’s “miraculous” economic growth and advancement in the capitalist world order, and applaud Korea’s transformation from a “mission-receiving” country to the second largest “mission-sending” country in the world.<sup>10</sup> Optimistic observers forecast an even brighter future – that Korean Protestant missions will soon eclipse centuries of European- and American-led missions and herald a new era of South-to-South mission flows (Johnstone, Mandryk, and Johnstone 2001; Moll 2006). Such triumphant narratives are reproduced by Korean evangelicals who unequivocally associate the nation’s economic growth with the growth of evangelical Christianity in South Korea. For many, religious missions are basically analogous to dispatching relief aid – sending the Good News to needy corners of the world “unreached” by Christianity.

### **Prosperity Gospel and a theology of winners**

Generally speaking, proselytizing overseas missions and foreign development aid share certain similarities: caring strangers with good intentions, perceived need and the promise of relief, and the arrival of goods and personnel with hopeful but uncertain outcomes. GMF missionaries in East Africa relied heavily on what is known as the Prosperity Gospel – a theology that holds that material prosperity is evidence of God’s favor, either preordained or earned. But particularly noticeable was the fact that the Prosperity Gospel also operated on a national unit of scale, in which the wealth of nations – not individual persons or families – was determined by the degree of the *nation’s* devotion to the Christian faith. Despite the fact that “Africa” is a continent of 53 countries, each with a particular socio-political dynamic and historical experience, “Africa” was frequently seen as a parallel unit of comparison to “Korea.” South Korea’s wealth, in other words, was seen as evidence for God’s favor, while “African” poverty was interpreted as a result of insufficient Christian faith. Tyranny and political uncertainty, persistent poverty, the AIDS pandemic, and the perceived threat of Islam’s southward movement on the African continent were all understood as “signs that Christianity had not taken hold of the souls of African people.”<sup>11</sup>

In the case of evangelical missions that embrace the neoliberal ethos – and Korean missionaries are not alone or unique by any means – the development ethos fundamentally relies on a “theology of winners” – one that presumes development

as a necessary win, an indisputable improvement from being poor to being prosperous (Pask 2006). Economic aid, moreover, was considered as an unproblematic equivalent to charity, a compassionate gift from the haves to the have-nots. It is here that we find that Korean Protestant mission theology, while resonating with the broader neoliberal exhortation of market participation, self-reliance, and personal responsibility, also draws strength from an unexpected, homegrown genealogy. It is a theology that paradoxically juggles the universality of neoliberalism – according to which the state is supposed to recede behind market forces – with the particularity of Korean experience of authoritarian state-led development. In other words, the assemblage of neoliberal capitalism and the Protestant ethos of perpetual self-improvement were articulated with a distinctly Korean model of authoritarian developmentalism. The question remains, how is this assemblage put together? What explains this political-theological cooperation? How is it that the Korean developmental state, epitomized by state-led modernization programs like Saemaul Undong could outgrow its mandate for rural development and national mobilization and reinvent itself as a relevant model for the neoliberal world order (Ferguson 2006)?

Contemporary missions depend on the pastoral power of capitalist development, whereby the missionaries not only convert but educate, discipline, and reproduce governable subjects suitable for wage labor in God's Kingdom. I argue that the assemblage is held together by the collective historical experience of what I call "the gospel of capitalist deliverance." Offered by Koreans to the developing world as a blueprint for both economic and spiritual progress, this evangelical-capitalist gospel is a powerful political theology produced through a resonance machine – comprised of selective elements of modern Korean history and geography, reverberated through the prevailing political rationality we know as neoliberalism (Connolly 2005). Consider the oft-cited definition of neoliberalism – as a theory that privileges market exchange as "an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs" (Treanor 2005). Neoliberalism is not an abstraction. It is a set of ideas and practices – an ethic – invigorated by experience and faith. Devotees of neoliberal capitalism and evangelical Christianity sustain and reproduce their faith by engaging in practices that constantly fortify their disposition. Overseas proselytizing missions are one such practice, effectively nurturing and structuring both intent and outcome through embodied praxis.

In many ways, this chapter is precisely about the contemporary heirs to that legacy – evangelical missionaries who have transfigured their historical experience into a homegrown political theology of development worthy of worldwide attention and devotion. Their self-confident testimonies reveal the paradox of Rostow's modernization theory – a paradoxical convergence of Korean exceptionalism and the universalizing teleology of market triumphalism, a curious mix of "we have done it" pride and "anyone can do it" humility (Rostow 1971, 1960). The contemporary terrain of neoliberal globalization is paved not only by the might of nation-states or the sway of "free market" rhetoric, but also by the grassroots evangelists who remain firmly ensconced in the virtue of their faith and practice.

### **Saemaul Undong as a model of Christian neoliberalism**

“If a man will not work, he shall not eat.” Work or starve – the unworthy, unproductive subject can expect no handout. In this producerist exaltation of the work ethic above all else, virtuous are those who toil diligently – regardless of whether it involves cultivation of land or wage labor in the service economy. Productivity itself is promoted as worthiness. Conversely, the non-productive subject is deemed unworthy of life itself, deserving of nothing in return for his/her idleness (Song 2008). This very Bible verse was also the centerpiece of Margaret Thatcher’s infamous “Sermon on the Mound” delivered during her reign as British prime minister. She used the verse as a theological justification for neoliberal capitalism, extolling the enterprising self and the mandate for individuals to fend for themselves without state aid (Thatcher 1988). Her ideas about the virtues of diligence, market transactions, and personal responsibility upheld neoliberalism as the guiding economic doctrine and the prevailing political rationality for years to come (Harvey 2005).<sup>12</sup>

It was not Thatcherism that compelled GMF’s Deacon Shin to appeal to this verse in Tanzania, however. Rather, he used the verse as part of a distinctly Christianized narrative of Saemaul Undong. Also known as the New Community Movement, Saemaul Undong was officially launched in 1970 as a state-led modernization and rural development effort. It remains a subject hotly contested along ideological lines – was it a ruthless campaign for rural development or a great historical achievement despite its brutal political repression? While there is general consensus that Korea’s experience of industrialization and modernity was compressed and militarized (Abelmann 2003; Moon 2005), through significant sacrifice and suffering, disagreement remains on whether and how far Park Chung Hee and Saemaul Undong should be credited with Korea’s post-1970s economic growth. On one hand, these are irreconcilable ideological differences – some stake a claim for the need for a “strong state” in development pursuits while critics remain unforgiving of the state violence and the human toll involved (Paik 2005).

Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to understand Saemaul Undong and the associated ideas about development simply as top-down state rhetoric. As a moral discourse, Saemaul Undong strongly shaped how people interpreted, understood, and engaged in the pursuit of a better life. Saemaul Undong certainly contained moralistic aspects, particularly in its emphasis on discipline, productivity, and collective mobilization. It began primarily as a rural development and agricultural modernization plan and shifted to a national mobilization project, broadening its focus from a work-ethic-building movement to a panoptic disciplinary system (Han 2004; Davis 2004). In a 1972 speech, Park implored:

By widening the narrow farm roads, we are opening up a spiritual path for unhindered progress of the nation. The Saemaul Undong repudiates the diseases of inertia and indolence bred in the shade of ease and complacency and represents a spiritual revolution to eradicate the evil habits of waste and luxury.

(C.H. Park, cited in Jager 2003)<sup>13</sup>

Contrary to popular belief, Saemaul Undong did not expire with the installation of a civilian government and democratization. In April 1989, Saemaul

Undong headquarters was renamed the National Council of the Saemaul Undong Movement, "in an attempt to emphasize its nature as a private sector-led organization" (Anon. 1999: 43). Its profile has diminished significantly in recent years, but it continues its operation, often collaborating on international development and training programs with non-governmental organizations and government agencies such as the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA).

During its heyday, Saemaul Undong anthems blared from public announcement speakers at the crack of dawn, urging citizens to rise early to work and exercise, and mobilized even primary school children to sweep the streets in mandatory "neighborhood beautification campaigns." These are common collective memories for anyone who spent time in South Korea in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>14</sup> Saemaul Undong is commonly remembered not for its narrowly defined rural development policies that ultimately failed, but rather as a driving moral force behind the spectacular economic achievement of the Park era. To the Tanzanians, Deacon Shin introduced Saemaul Undong as follows:

There was an outstanding leader, Park Chung Hee, who became the President [of Korea]. He came from a farming family. He learned from Kim Yong-ki, a Christian leader and a diligent person, who led a movement to awaken the people, who started the Canaan Farmer School.<sup>15</sup> Mr. Kim believed that man comes from the land, and man must learn to till the soil. It's in the New Testament. If you don't want to work, don't eat. That was President Park's inspiration for Saemaul Undong. In the 1960s, President Kennedy also said, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but ask what you can do for your country." That's the spirit I respect. I hear many people complain that the government doesn't do enough, that the elders and the politicians don't do enough. But instead of blaming others, you must find a way to help yourself.

What is remarkable is the way that Deacon Shin cast Saemaul Undong as an offshoot of a little-known Christian agrarian project called the Canaan Farmer School. In the economic development seminar and throughout the GMF mission programs in East Africa, the Canaan Farmer School and its founder Kim Yong-ki were highlighted to such an extent that Kim nearly became synonymous with President Park Chung Hee. In other words, Saemaul Undong was presented to the Tanzanian and Ugandan participants as a *Christian* endeavor, and President Park was portrayed as a *Christian* farmer-cum-national leader. At no point was there any mention that Park was not a Christian himself, that he was actually accused of promoting policies that favored Buddhists, or that he was a repressive dictator who came to power through a military coup and was deposed by assassination in 1979. No matter – these were historical details. Since the missionaries were presenting themselves as development experts, and since South Korea was presented as a model of development, the spiritual impetus for Korea's development success had to be legitimized and presented through a distinctly Christian lens.

Not only does Deacon Shin's account stress the agrarian roots of Park Chung Hee, it also legitimates Park's authoritarian rule (1963–79) as "outstanding leadership."

Even President John F. Kennedy – ostensibly an “outstanding leader” himself – is lumped together in this hodgepodge of a political-theological discourse in which Park’s disciplinary state, Kennedy’s call for public service, and Kim Yong-ki’s rural renewal program all become blended within a transnational, transhistorical Christian ethics of diligence and personal responsibility.<sup>16</sup> Whether through military dictatorship, democratic presidency, or spiritual leadership, the three capable men in Deacon Shin’s narrative simply lead others in working hard and doing right.

### **Lessons from the Canaan Farmer School**

The Canaan Farmer School is an obscure agricultural training institute founded in 1962 (Kim 1984). Although it claims to have been the inspiration behind Park’s Saemaul Undong and a continuing “spiritual locomotive” behind Korea’s development, it is not recognized anywhere in the scholarly literature as having significant influence or effect.<sup>17</sup> Discussions about Christian influences on President Park Chung Hee surround his speeches, especially since he spoke frequently about “spiritual revolutions” and “spiritual awakenings.” Archival photos published on the Canaan Farmer School website show that Park visited the organization in 1962, but it is unlikely that Park’s economic development policies were ever self-consciously religious or explicitly devoted to promoting Christian theology.

Deacon Shin snickered during the economic development seminar: “Unlike you in Africa, we have a very cold winter in Korea. We have no food growing outside. No bananas, no pineapples on the street.” He and the other missionaries believed that laziness was rewarded in Africa, where one could eat without working. But the suggestion that Africans are stricken with laziness because of an abundance of a “naturally” growing food supply is patently false and undeniably racist. Such a statement is effectively used to offer a contrast to another popular claim – that Koreans have had to work very hard to cultivate their “human resources” because Korea lacks the abundant “natural resources” with which Africa is endowed.

The GMF missionaries reproduced the claim on countless occasions. One day, I accompanied a group of Christian politicians from Korea on a tour of Jinja and the famed source of the River Nile, guided by a member of the Ugandan National Parliament who herself grew up not far from Jinja. When we arrived at the waterfront, a former official in the Korean Ministry of Maritime Affairs and Fisheries marveled at the sheer volume of the River Nile, and exclaimed, “All this water! If only they would build dams and do *something* with it!” He had done no research and knew nothing about the local infrastructure or history of water use, but this being Africa, he assumed that the local people would have neither the initiative nor the capacity to utilize their natural endowments. He simply linked uncultivated natural resources with uncultivated human capacity, and said to the Ugandan hosts – through my Korean–English interpretation – that great things will result from a collaboration between Ugandan natural resources and Korean human resources.

But how then to inspire the work ethic if survival is not at stake? The Korean missionaries prepared a curriculum featuring a document called *Handbook of the Canaan Farmer School*, which states prominently on the cover: “Our vision is to eradicate poverty in all [sic] Africa by the year 2050 through sharing the Christian

spirit and technological and agricultural techniques originating from the Canaan concept.” The booklet offers a brief history of Canaan Farmer School, which serves “as a training ground for molding proper character” and “[heightening] the nation’s self-reliance.”

In “Detailed Guidelines of the Blessed People,” a list of 59 items provides instructions for “daily life of faith,” “economic life,” “social life,” and “family life.” During the economic development seminar, Deacon Shin read aloud every single item on the list, taking nearly two hours for discussion. He did not see these lessons as examples to be modified and adapted to local settings – they were presented simply as commandments from Korean history. Here are some examples:<sup>18</sup>

#### *Economic life*

- Use domestic products.
- Don’t waste toothpaste.
- Don’t waste soap.
- Don’t eat snacks between meals.
- Don’t visit coffee shops and tea houses too often.

#### *Social life*

- Don’t cut in line when waiting.
- Don’t eat while walking.

#### *Family life*

- Rise early and go to sleep early.
- No divorce without the church’s approval.
- Work at least four hours before each meal.
- Protection against poverty ensures anti-Communism and victory over Communism.
- No one likes misery and pain, but it must be understood that one who experiences misery and pain most likely invited these to himself.

This eclectic mix of instructions makes some sense in the context of Korean history. To shed light on a few: directed consumption of domestic products was reflective of the Korean state’s protectionist policies in the 1960s and 1970s. Under the military dictatorship, coffee shops were among the few spaces where the dissident and the discontented could gather in spite of laws prohibiting public assembly, so the warning against frequent visits to coffee shops implies a dual directive: fiscal austerity and acquiescence to authority. In promoting frugality in matters national and personal, waste of any kind was discouraged. Anti-Communism was practically a state religion in the decades following the Korean War, and economic development was understood as a matter of national security.

Needless to say, these outdated and culturally specific lessons from 1970s Korea did not translate well in Tanzania, and the puzzled participants repeatedly asked for clarifications: why are coffee shops worse than pubs, and why no snacks? What if one became hungry between meals? And how much exactly constituted

too much toothpaste? Deacon Shin and his assistant instructor soon became overwhelmed by the barrage of questions, and told the participants to try to interpret the lessons according to their local context. As in other international development efforts, the Korean mission activities are clearly inspired by Christian conceptions of virtue that conjoin the worldly and spiritual aims of life, governing the most mundane endeavors (Bornstein 2003; Rist 1997).

Perhaps the most telling question, however, was posed on the second day of the seminar. A buffet lunch of curried goat and fried tilapia was served with the ubiquitous lukewarm bottles of orange soda. As the participants sat down to eat their lunch, Deacon Shin approached a small group. “How do you like the seminar so far?” he asked, and the participants nodded respectfully and approvingly. One man, who I later found out was a local government official with an advanced degree in soil sciences, asked Shin, “But I have a question. Are you from North Korea or South Korea?”

Deacon Shin did not know that in the mid-1970s, North Korea had supplied modest amounts of military equipment and training to several African nations, including Tanzania and Uganda, and that North Korea’s political and economic initiatives among the nonaligned nations had made it a recognizable presence in Tanzania. The fact is, many Tanzanians knew of North Korean leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il even though they had never heard of LG or Samsung. To a South Korean missionary as fervently anti-Communist as he was devoutly Christian, nothing could have been more appalling than the possibility that someone might attribute the triumphant economic advancement of capitalist South Korea to the famine-stricken, still-Communist North Korea. Shin blushed visibly and pointedly emphasized *South* Korea during the rest of the seminar.<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Korean evangelical missionaries in Africa constructed and presented Korean history as a teleology of modernization, industrialization, and Christianization – amounting to a master narrative of achievement and deliverance. Emphasizing Korea’s transformation from a “missionary-receiving” country to a major “missionary-sending” country, Korean missionaries functioned as self-proclaimed emissaries of capitalist development – understood to be synonymous with wealth, health, and the Christian Gospel. In a sense, the case suggested a modification of Weber’s famous thesis that Protestant ethics provided a necessary ethos for capitalism – the capitalist developmentalist ethos seemed to drive the Protestant ethics just as well.

I have also argued that the project of world evangelization was fueled not only by the missionaries’ religious convictions, but by their own personal and historical experiences narrativized in terms of an inevitable connection between evangelical Christianity and neoliberal capitalism. Drawing strength from firsthand experiences, the GMF missionaries utilized the Korean history of economic and Christian growth as a wellspring for a distinctly Korean/American political theology of development, and offered it as a blueprint for both economic and spiritual progress. Short-term missions may be ineffectual in producing actual converts – or achieving particular teaching objectives – but they certainly help

reproduce evangelical-capitalist subjectivities through structures of journey and hardship, reinforced through nostalgia and narratives of deliverance.

The contemporary Korean missionary enterprise inherits from multiple legacies. Unmistakable is its resemblance to the nineteenth-century "civilizing missions," especially those favored by the American Protestants who were instrumental in establishing Christianity in Korea at the turn of the twentieth century. But Koreans are not simply mimicking their predecessors – they claim to be indebted and empowered. Beholden to the American benefactors who brought them the Christian Gospel, Korean evangelicals in turn envision their role as enlightening and leading the Third World out of poverty, gratefully and humbly following in the footsteps of their American predecessors. It is no surprise then that the emergent conservative Korean Christian Right – its power and popularity amply demonstrated by the astounding size and scale of megachurches and Christian public gatherings in recent years – is characterized by a fundamentalist theology and fervent commitment to pro-Americanism, fused with a faith in capitalist development. The poster child of this political-theological formation is President Lee Myung-bak, known as much for his Christian faith as for his neoliberal developmentalist track record. Lee made a fortune in construction, razing and cementing his way to the nickname of "Bulldozer." Unless the "benevolence" of American dominance in Korea is contested, and unless the triumphant historical narrative of Korea's own development trajectory is complicated and called into question, it is likely that the Korean version of the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine will continue to reverberate and gain strength, now with a powerful friend in a Christian-neoliberal administration.

## Notes

- 1 All biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise specified.
- 2 Global Mission Frontier (GMF) and all names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.
- 3 Direct quotations come from author communications or interviews unless otherwise specified.
- 4 The missionaries had prepared to screen a sleek promotional video produced by the Seoul Metropolitan Government, featuring such monuments to modernity as high-rise apartment complexes, the Incheon International Airport, Pohang Industrial Complex, and the KTX "bullet train."
- 5 Gramsci emphasized the importance of the complex interplay between ideas and beliefs, motivating mechanisms, and material practice. He recognized that persuasive narratives can convince people that a certain course of history is not only possible, but desirable and inevitable. Importantly, Gramsci argued that the power of persuasion depends on how well ideas and beliefs become embedded in "practical activity," animated through actual experiences and material conditions that together become "common sense." This insight informs how I think about the function and utility of overseas field missions for the project of world evangelization. See Forgacs (2000). Also see Han (2010) on how missions are designed to involve both those who go and those who send – by fundraising, by spiritually supporting through prayers, etc.
- 6 Dwight L. Moody (1837–99) was an American evangelist known by some as the "father of the American evangelical movement." This popular quotation appears in several places including Kritzinger (2003).
- 7 Quoted in Harvey (2005: 23).

- 8 A handful of local participants in the summer mission programs have continued their involvement in part through GMF's fledgling transnational education project – sponsoring young African Christian students to pursue professional, technical, and seminary education in South Korea.
- 9 Anonymous interviewee. Uganda. July 2006.
- 10 The claim that Korea sends the second-largest number of missionaries worldwide, second only to the United States, has been repeated in the media and by scholars as though it is a verifiable fact. This figure first appeared in the English-language media in the evangelical almanac, *Operation World* (2001), a publication that relies on dubious self-reporting by local informants and anonymous contributors. The statistic is given credence and popularized in part by Moon (2003). Moon is the Executive Director of the Korea Research Institute for Missions (KRIM), an intermediary mission agency which produces an annual survey. The KRIM survey in 2000 reports that there were 8,103 Korean missionaries at work outside of Korea at the end of 2000 – including *only long-term missionaries sent by mission agencies*, not self-funded or independent missionaries dispatched by a church congregation, and counts only those who commit to over two years of missionary service. In 2006, based on the latest KRIM statistics and the updated edition of *Operation World*, Moon demoted Korea to third-place mission-sender with 12,874 missionaries, outranked by India with 41,064 missionaries (Korea Research Institute for Missions 2006). Despite these changes, Korea's so-called status as the second-place sender of world missions circulates widely and problematically, often without any attributed source or explanation.
- 11 Interview with Anonymous in San Jose, California. September 2, 2005. He cited from *Operation World* (2001) which states, "Pray for mobilization of churches to tackle the causes and effects of AIDS. They alone have the belief system, moral authority and local presence to be effective in ministries of prevention and care. Pray that out of this tragedy may emerge a more effective, caring, relevant, attractive Church in Africa" (23).
- 12 For instance, Assemblies of God, the world's largest Pentecostal denomination, quotes the same verse and states on their website: "For one who is physically able to work to choose to accept welfare handouts rather than to work seems contrary to the spirit of Scripture." Assemblies of God (no date). On Thatcherism, see Hall (1988) and Hall *et al.* (1978).
- 13 Park Chung Hee, Address Commemorating the 11th Anniversary of the May 16 Revolution and the May 16 National Prize Award Ceremony, May 16, 1972, in *President Park Chung-hee's Collected Speeches*, vol. 9, p. 181; as cited by Jager (2003).
- 14 For instance, since I was born in Seoul in 1972 and grew up during the Park era, my childhood memories are full of national mobilization campaigns such as "Consume Barley Day" and "Eat Potatoes Day," as well as various "beautification" campaigns involving street sweeping and window washing for primary school children. Mr. Shin, the missionary leading the economic development seminar in Tanzania, knew that I grew up in Korea so at one point during the seminar, he called me to the front of the seminar to join him in singing the Saemaul Undong anthem. Much to my dismay, I found myself singing along, remembering after all these years the cheery tune and propagandistic lyric.
- 15 The name Kim Yong-ki is alternatively Romanized as Kim Yong Ki, Kim Yong-gi, or Kim Yong Gi. I follow the spelling most recently used by the official Canaan Farmer School.
- 16 According to Bamyeh. "Ask not what your country can do for you, not just because it is unbecoming of the definition of citizenship to do so. In an age doubly haunted by globalization and budget deficits, with each of the two monsters demanding the sacrifice of the other, your country has made its choice: it decided that it can do nothing for you" Bamyeh (2000).
- 17 Not in Cumings (2005), Jager (2003), or Eckert and Yi (1990).
- 18 In a later section titled "Living Constitution for the People of Canaan," more lists aim to govern people's conduct, character, and self-realization.
- 19 The failures of Korean missionaries in Africa extend beyond language barriers or

cultural misunderstandings. A recent op-ed pointedly criticized the Korean ambition to export Saemaul Undong at all cost, partly because "African politics has moved beyond ideological fascination and sloganeering." The author, an African economics researcher, argued that "Saemaul Undong works best under a wave of strong political mobilization by a political leader who galvanizes a whole country behind one central cause," i.e. an undemocratic dictatorship (Munyi 2008).

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