

CHAPTER 2

The Roots of the Korean Adventist Church

To better understand the Korean Adventist church in North America, we may want to study how the church first emerged in Korea before branching out to North America. Such historical knowledge should be helpful to those who are not familiar with the modern history of Korea, especially that country's relations with the United States which have spanned more than a century.¹

Readers are strongly encouraged to review Appendixes B and C. The chronological description of modern Korea and the Asian American community listed there will show the historical context in which the Korean Adventist church established itself both at home and in America.

THE IMMIGRATION ROOTS OF THE KOREAN ADVENTIST CHURCH

The first Koreans to hear the Adventist message were two commoners dreaming of a better life in Hawaii. The history-making event did not take place in Korea, however, but in Japan in 1904. The two dreamers were Hung Jo Sohn and Hung Yul Lee. Recruited by the agents of Hawaii sugar plantation owners, they sailed first to the Kobe harbor in Japan for a medical examination.² Korean laborers who passed the physical examination were to obtain entry visas to the then American territory of Hawaii. At that time, Korea did not have

12 *Context and Continuity*

adequate Western-style medical facilities to handle large numbers of people. The first Western medical doctors to Korea were American missionaries who had arrived only about twenty years earlier in 1885. The American missionary doctors had to establish their clinic from scratch. Trying to convince the Koreans of the effectiveness of their quaint Western medicine was not easy for the foreigners. So the American government used Japanese medical facilities in screening the Korean labor applicants.

One may wonder why two men, with so many of their countrymen, would want to go to far-away islands in the first place. The age-old Confucian norms would have discouraged men from leaving their families and ancestral villages. Filial piety was the core of Confucianism, and it would be shameful for a man to leave his parents and family. Neglecting one's filial duties was a cardinal sin. Such duties would include caring for his parents and performing the annual ancestor worships, among other things.

Toward the end of the 500-year-old Yi dynasty (1392–1910) at the dawn of the twentieth century, the political circumstances of Korea were very precarious. The last Korean kingdom was steeped in continuous political turmoil. As a result, the shattered nation became a pawn in the hands of the surrounding superpowers in northeast Asia.

During much of the second half of the nineteenth century, the United States, China, Japan, and Russia were involved in political manipulations seeking to control the small hermit kingdom. Separated only by a narrow strait from the Korean peninsula, Japan seemed to have an upper hand in the political jockeying of the superpower. For the island nation to the east, the Korean peninsula was a valuable land bridge connecting itself to the mainland of Asia, especially China. At that time, Japan was a rising empire since the Meiji Reform in 1868 following its acceptance of America's demand for an open trade.³ The reform began modernizing Japan after the model of Western nations, including the United States. Soon its political ambition was to expand the empire into China and beyond.

Japan had long viewed Korea as a strategic acquisition for expansion, and in 1592 it had even invaded Korea. But Japan was defeated

by the Korean navy led by Admiral Soon Shin Lee. The situation was different for the Korean kingdom at the beginning of the twentieth century, however. The worsening domestic conditions had forced many Korean men to search for better opportunities elsewhere.

Around the time Mr. Sohn and Mr. Lee left for Japan, the last Korean kingdom, Yi Dynasty, was about to become a Japanese protectorate, a prelude to the eventual colonization of the country for thirty-six years. Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and became its colony in 1910 when it was annexed to Japan.⁴ Only the final victory of the United States in the Pacific War in August 1945 ended the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea.

In the meantime, the Hawaiian islands were experiencing a severe labor shortage in its booming sugar farming and sugar refinery business. The Hawaii sugar plantations relied heavily on labor recruits from Asian countries. When the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 to prohibit importing Chinese workers, the plantation owners turned to Japan first and then to Korea. As the Hawaiian islands are located almost at the half-way point between the American mainland and the Pacific rim of Asia, it was easier and cheaper for the sugar plantation owners to bring laborers from Asia by steamships than to bring Americans either from the Midwest or from the east coast.

During the labor recruitment drives in Korea, some American missionaries encouraged their church members to migrate to Hawaii. In the opinion of these missionaries, it was a sure way of escaping from the dire poverty in Korea (Patterson and Kim 1977).

On December 22, 1902, in the midst of a cold winter, the first ship left the Inchon Harbor near Seoul with 121 Korean applicants headed for Japan. But only eighty-six individuals from the first group boarded the next ship in Kobe for their final destination. Some of those left behind departed for Hawaii later, but others had to return to Korea. The Korean workers were promised sixteen dollars a month for laboring hard from dawn to dusk six days a week (Yoon 1989). The first Korean labor recruits aboard the S.S. Gaelic steamship arrived in Honolulu on January 13, 1903. It was the historic beginning of over a century of Korean immigration to America.