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Searching for New Perspectives on Contemporary History of Korea: Rethinking  
Decolonization, Military Occupations, and the Ideas for a Democratic Korea


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## Conference Proceeding

## **Formal Decolonization and Informal Reconnection: Korean and Japanese Christian Intellectuals in the Post-colonial Era**

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This paper seeks to trace the historical formation of that progressive Christian movement (hereafter referred to as the “progressive faction”) which emerged in the 1960s and grew into a meaningful current in Korean society. Specifically, it asks how, in a religious landscape dominated by conservatism, such an alternative current was able to take root and expand. I propose that one of its key origins can be found in the theological education that Korean students received in Japan during the colonial period. The progressive Christian intellectuals who came to prominence in the 1960s had, in many cases, studied not at the conservative seminaries within colonial Korea but at theological institutions in Japan—such as Aoyama Gakuin or Kwansai Gakuin, or Doshisha—where they encountered relatively liberal and open academic environments. The intellectual formation and networks they developed in Japan significantly shaped their political and social engagement after liberation.

To support this argument, this paper first provides an overview of the theological landscape of colonial Korea, highlighting the limitations of domestic seminaries. It then turns to the Korean Christian youth who, critical of these conditions, chose to study in Japan, where they were ex-

posed to more progressive theological education. The paper demonstrates that many of these individuals later became central figures in the progressive Christian movement in post-liberation South Korea. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate the intellectual continuities that linked the colonial and post-colonial eras and to argue for the transnational dimensions of modern Korean Christianity.

My research has focused particularly on two institutions: Aoyama Gakuin University and Kwansai Gakuin University. Using enrollment records, internal documents, and alumni memoirs, I have reconstructed the experiences of Korean students at these schools. In the following section, I highlight key individuals and analyze the background and significance of their study-abroad experiences. The main conclusions can be summarized in three points.

First, Korean students who studied theology in Japan were motivated not only by frustration with the limited opportunities for higher education in colonial Korea, but also by dissatisfaction with the conservative theological education dominated by American missionaries within the Korean church. Additionally, they were disillusioned by internal issues such as regionalism and factionalism. Many of these students were critical thinkers who deliberately distanced themselves from the dominant structures of the Korean ecclesiastical establishment.

Second, through their study-abroad experience, these students became more theologically and socially progressive, further distancing themselves from traditional norms of the Korean church. They engaged with advanced theological and academic scholarship, encountered Christians from diverse national and denominational backgrounds, and interacted with politically progressive Christian socialists. These multifaceted academic and cultural encounters expanded their vision of Christian civilization and enabled them to critically reassess the state of Korean Christianity.

Third, upon returning to Korea, many of these students became leading figures in the progressive faction within Korean Christianity and worked to reform its conservative culture. While their activities were often constrained under Japanese colonial rule, some went on to establish new theological institutions grounded in a progressive understanding of

Christianity—ideas and institutions that had previously not existed in Korea. One such institution was the Chosŏn Theological Seminary (朝鮮神學院) founded in 1940. This seminary survived the colonial period and continued into the post-liberation period. In 1951, the institution was officially recognized as a university by the government of the Republic of Korea. It is known today as Hanshin University, a Christian institution whose students and faculty would later play an active role in Korea’s democratization movements beginning in the 1960s.

The early faculty, students, and affiliates of the university included many individuals who had received their education in Japan—not only Kim Jae-jun from Aoyama Gakuin, but also Sō Namdong (徐南同) from Doshisha University, Chang Chun-ha (張俊河) from the Nihon Theological Seminary, and Ham Sōkhōn (咸錫憲), a graduate of the Tokyo Institute of Technology and a disciple of Uchimura Kanzō, the leader of the Non-Church Movement. Their efforts influenced a new generation of Christian youth. Furthermore, many remained active as progressive Christian intellectuals even after Korea’s liberation and played significant roles in the democratization movements of the 1960s and beyond.

This paper does not seek to emphasize that these liberal Christian elites were simply “educated by the Japanese.” Rather, it seeks to shed new light on an important dimension of the Japanese Empire as a space that housed a diverse range of Christian cultures and institutions. Within this broader arena, “Japan-educated” Koreans had the opportunity to engage with more liberal and varied strands of Christian thought, and the intellectual and cultural influence they absorbed continued to exert a vital impact on Korean society long after liberation.

Motokazu MATSUTANI earned B.A. from International Christian University (1998), M.A. from the University of Tokyo (2002) and Ph.D. from Harvard University (2012). His research interests are in the modern history of East Asia with a special focus on the development of church-state relations in colonial and post-colonial Korea. His major publications include “Church over Nation: Christian missionaries and Korean Christians in Colonial Korea” (Ph. D. Diss., Harvard University, 2012), “US Occupation Policy on Shinto in Postliberation Korea and Japan,” in *Belief and Practice in Imperial Japan and Colonial Korea* (Springer Singapore, 2017), and 『民族を超える教會』(明石書店, 2020).