



Contentious Relations: *Christianity and Modern State-building in Korea*

Balancing Communities: Nation, State, and Protestant Christianity in Korea, 1884–1942.
By Paul S. Cha. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022. 244 pages. ISBN: 9780824891084.

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In this reappraisal of the first sixty years of Protestantism's history in Korea, historian Paul Cha argues that both critics and apologists of the American Protestant missionary enterprise in Korea at the turn of the 20th century have oversimplified—even caricatured—the nuanced process through which missionaries and Korean Christians co-labored to build the kingdom of heaven under the modern state-building projects of late Joseon (1880s–1910) and the Japanese colonial state (1910–1945). In *Balancing Communities: Nation, State, and Protestant Christianity in Korea, 1884–1942*, Cha sets out to weave together two parallel and interlocking narratives: missionaries' constant struggle to define and negotiate with political authorities on what constituted the *proper* boundary between church and state, and the making of the equal-yet-hierarchical partnership between white missionaries and Korean Christians. While the book's overarching argument—"the act of balancing overlapping and at times competing communal demands—whether religious, national, or political—played a formative role in shaping Protestantism in Korea, functioning simultaneously as a source of agitation and as a mechanism for maintaining the status quo" (5)—could have been sharpened to offer more analytical

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clarity (e.g., what was the ‘status quo’ for the various actors being examined?), the seven body chapters that make up *Balancing Communities* present thoughtful and remarkably even-handed deliberations on critical moments of contention, controversy, and cooperation that shaped the limits and reaches of the American missionary enterprise in Korea from the arrival of the first Protestant missionaries to their exodus in 1942.

What is worth noting is that Cha reexamines this early history not to explicate the exceptional “success” of the Protestant church, but to reveal the complexity of the relationships that formed among white (American) missionaries, Korean converts, government officials, and diplomats, among other figures. In the introduction, Cha presents two main historiographical interventions that the book undertakes. First, Cha argues that the postcolonial search among South Korean scholars and church historians for Korean agency, autonomy, and creativity in developing modern ideas and institutions has obscured or sidelined the missionaries at the cost of assessing the ground-level politics of missionary evangelism and the *imagined* Christian community. Second, the author takes issue with the analytical limitations posed by flattened portraits of Western missionaries as racist imperialists, for which the case of Korea presents a fascinating site given that the colonizing state power was not a Euro-American empire but Japan. These two aims motivate Cha’s discussions throughout *Balancing Communities*, suggesting that missionaries frequently found themselves in positions of vulnerability as their ventures into Christian institution-building demanded carefully calibrated strategies that oscillated between challenging and cooperating with the Korean and later colonial state. While I think the author misses opportunities to consider other ways missionaries in Korea were still embedded in and embodied systems of power premised on imperial mandates to “convert,” “civilize,” or “modernize” non-white people beyond the diplomatic position of the US legation in Korea, the book’s strengths lie in drawing out the voices and agency of Korean historical actors, from King Gojong to the first generation of Korean church leaders.

The first chapter complicates an oft-told narrative that the first

Protestant missionaries and converts in Korea avoided the fate of their Catholic counterparts by securing the court's blessings. This *blessing* was the royal hospital Jejungwon, granted to American Presbyterian missionary Horace N. Allen (who formally entered the country as a medical doctor to the US legation) after he saved the life of King Gojong's nephew. However, Cha shows that "the tangling of the Presbyterian missionaries with the government soon proved less a fortuitous event than an unfortunate yoke" (18). While missionaries staffed the hospital, the royal hospital was a government institution, and this arrangement placed the missionaries squarely under the watchful eyes of Gojong's officials and put pressure on them to adhere to the government's edicts outlawing any form of Christian evangelism anywhere, lest they jeopardize the mission's future. The "yoke" of this arrangement soon sowed serious discord among the first-generation Presbyterian missionaries, who clashed over the mission's policy and the imbalance of decision-making power among the cohort of missionaries. In the next chapter, Cha explores the various strategies—such as purchasing property under the names of Korean converts and invoking treaty rights as *private* citizens—that the missionaries employed to begin disentangling themselves from the court to make inroads into the interior for more overt evangelism.

The following chapters turn to the making of the early Korean Protestant church community. In chapter 4, Cha explores how the missionaries' adoption of the Nevius Method, which called for native churches to be self-financing, self-governing, and self-propagating, paradoxically facilitated the formation of a disciplinary space where "every catechumen, full lay member, and leader was both an object to be observed and a subject who observed" (66), with the missionaries surveilling at the top. As Cha explains, the rapid growth of the Korea mission field inspired marvel but also cultivated suspicion among missionaries and the Home Board (Presbyterian) that the converts were "rice Christians" who flocked to churches for material motivations. However, the "sincerity tests" that Korean converts were subjected to rankled Korean church leaders like George L. Paik, who while speaking in the spirit of cooperation and fellowship

critiqued that most presbyteries in the U.S. would have to close “if American elders had to abide by the same standards as Koreans” (73). In chapter 5, Cha zooms in on the fascinating intersection of Christian conversion and transforming communal identities in the Hwanghae region to show how “Koreans [Protestant and Catholic] took advantage of the materials provided by their association with missionaries to transform the nodes of sociopolitical power in the province” (77).

The final three chapters of the book undertake the challenging—and controversial—task of placing under the microscope the conflict between missionaries and Korean Christians and the Japanese colonial state over, first, school governance in debates about the place of religion in *secular* education and soon after, the colonial state’s demand of allegiance from pupils at missionary schools and the broader Christian communities at the state-run Shinto shrines. What is especially illuminating about Cha’s contribution to the literature on not just church and state in Korea but the politics of spiritual mobilization as part of the Japanese empire’s *hwangminhwa*—the making of imperial subjects—is the author’s attention to the fractious responses to the state’s increasingly coercive demands on mission-run schools. The controversy over shrine worship was not only a theological quandary (i.e., did it constitute idolatry?) but a question of who got to settle this question and for whom—as well as how should this history be remembered today? This question paradoxically created a “sincerity test” among the missionaries, as the Pyongyang-based conservative leaders questioned the faith of colleagues and Korean partners who wanted to comply and keep schools open. By magnifying these fault lines and deliberating on the consequences of decisions that were made, *Balancing Communities* brings to light just how contentious and impossible the act of balancing competing demands of faith, allegiance, and fellowship proved to be—with, as Cha duly stresses in the conclusion, the enormity of the consequences ultimately falling on Koreans.

Balancing Communities offers readers interested in Korean Christianity and religion and politics more broadly much to chew on and even debate. At times, however, I found the book’s argumentative refrain—that the act of

balancing communal and state demands was a nuanced process—proved too diffuse to tie together the complexity of the historical narratives and discursive analysis that the book examines. This, I think, may be the baggage of the book’s even-handed treatment of Western missionary ventures, acknowledging their proximity to imperialism while attempting to approach them as nuanced individual actors. For example, in chapter 3, where Cha dissects the politics of conversion as a Foucauldian regime of missionary power and Christian subject-making, he also cautions against “reduc[ing] the [missionaries’] use of the phrase ‘rice Christianity’ to racism” (59). Here and elsewhere, the author names but sets aside race as a limiting category of analysis, even while the book’s careful analysis shows how the racial ideologies undergirding Christian civilizing mission and uplift—“had converts including leaders, truly transformed from heathens to Christians?”—insidiously shaped white missionaries’ relations with Koreans, despite the gaining currency of a universal, transcendent idea of one body in Christ. Thus, I could not help but wish for the author to lean into the analytics of race and religion rather than create a binary of racist/not racist. Doing so could have also widened the potential readership to scholars working on religion and empire in the United States and other sites of imperial formations.

With those critiques aside, I recommend this book to specialists of Korean Christianity, including scholars of Korean Catholicism, who should find in *Balancing Communities* compelling points of departure for further questions and exploration of what it meant to be Korean and Christian as well as American and Christian at the crossroads of colonial imperialism, nation-building, and modernization. And while some of the arguments and conceptual considerations in the footnotes could have found better place in the main text, the book’s compactness and readability make it appealing as a required reading in courses that introduce advanced undergraduates to conflicts between religious communities and states in East Asian contexts.