

Special Feature

Syngman Rhee's Vision and Reality:  
The Establishment of  
the Nation and Thereafter

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## Introduction

Many of the historical criticisms leveled at the first President of the Republic of Korea Syngman Rhee are well known. These criticisms can be summarized as follows. First, while the scope of the state was clearly defined in the Constitution as including the entire Korean peninsula, Syngman Rhee pushed ahead with the establishment of a separate government in South Korea only, thus passing the burden of the national division into two Koreas onto ensuing generations following the foundation of the country. Second, he paved the way with his unilaterally pro-American diplomacy for the opening of another colonial era in the aftermath of that of imperial Japan, namely what has been referred to as so the ‘colonial era of the United States.’ Third, his excessive thirst for power led to the establishment of a divide and conquer political strategy designed to get rid of his political enemies that drew him into conflict with the likes of Park Yongman, An Changho, Kim Gu, USAMGIK (United States Army Military Government in Korea), and the Korea Democratic Party (*Hanmindang*). Lastly, Rhee is accused of having rigged the presidential elections held on March 15, 1960, a move that had the effect of devastating the constitutional government and ravaging democracy.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Examples of negative pieces involving Syngman Rhee include: the article contributed by an anonymous writer called ‘Sogong’ (笑公) on March 31, 1925 to *The Independent (Dongnip Sinmun)* entitled “Advice for Syngman Rhee”; the article that appeared in the *Sinhan Minbo* on May 7, 1925 entitled “Tears over President Rhee’s Dismissal from Office” contributed by the Korean National Association of North America; *Jaemi Hanin Osimnyeonsa* [The 50-year History of Koreans in the United States] written by Kim Won-yong in 1959; and “*Daehan Minguk Imsi Jeongbuui Jojik, Unyeong gwa Dongnip Bangnyagui Bunhwa, 1919-1930*” [The Organization and Management of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea and the Emergence of Different Independence Strategies: 1919-1930], written as a Ph.D. dissertation by a member of the History Department at Seoul National University in 1999. In such essays, Syngman Rhee was described as a rabid pro-American and divisionary figure. To this end, Kang Jeong-gu has claimed, “We have a historical duty and responsibility to establish a unification process that is based on an independent, peaceful, and national community in this the era of independent unification. At this point in time, any attempt to reinstate Syngman Rhee – whose contributions such as the establishment of a separate South Korean government, unification policy based on the forced annexation of North Korea, adoption of the president-for-life system, infringement on the rights of a constitutional government, and dictatorial politics have already been well documented – raises worries that our national history will once again be distorted as part of an amateur reevaluation of this public figure that does not involve any particular academic considerations” (Kang 1995:23).

The first criticism, namely the portrayal of Syngman Rhee as the villain responsible for the division of the two Koreas has recently been dispelled on the grounds that the Soviet military already had plans to launch a separate government in North Korea, and to transform the latter into a socialist bulwark, from the moment they entered the North. The veracity of such claims has been supported by the diplomatic documents made public following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. Meanwhile, the criticism that actions such as the amendment of the Constitution undertaken in 1954 and the rigging of the presidential election of March 15, 1960 constituted an affront to constitutional democracy perpetuated by Syngman Rhee has been met by new opinions that the nature of Rhee's responsibility for such actions should be determined based on the extent to which he acted of his own volition. In other words, if Rhee was directly involved in the rigging of the election campaign, then this should be regarded as a matter of morality; however, if such events occurred regardless of his own volition, then his incapacity to rule should be the aspect singled out. To this end, the April 19 Revolution of 1960 can be regarded as having to some extent made the historical assessment of this matter clear.

The second and third criticisms mentioned above, namely that Rhee paved the way with his unilaterally pro-American diplomacy for the onset of another humiliating colonial era in the aftermath of that of imperial Japan, in the form of American imperialism; and that he was a divisive figure unable to overcome his desire for power, have proven to be more problematic. There is a need in this regard to closely examine such evaluations from the standpoint of historical actuality and truth. This is because these two issues can easily descend into debates featuring starkly different positions determined in large part by the background of the debate participants. Given this reality, the present study seeks to focus on these two issues as a means to uncover the true nature of Syngman Rhee and of the 'Republic of Korea' which Rhee wanted to establish.

### **Syngman Rhee's Perception of the Founding of a Nation and the Truth regarding his 'Pro-American' Policy**

During his speech marking the proclamation of the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, Syngman Rhee spelled out the eight elements that would become the basis upon which the Republic of Korea was founded.

He also made it clear that the Republic of Korea was the rightful heir to the legitimacy and identity of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea established in Shanghai, and highlighted the fact that some 30 years had already passed since Korea had chosen the path of democracy. At this time, Rhee clearly identified liberal democracy and a market economy as the fundamental basis of the Republic of Korea. His belief in liberal democracy and a market economy were not new, but rather had been engrained in his mind since his youth. In this regard, the United States was for him the model that should be followed. Rhee had already made his opinions regarding the United States' status as the ideal state known in *The Spirit of Independence (Dongnip Jeongsin)*, a work which he penned at the age of 30 while incarcerated on political charges.<sup>2</sup> For Syngman Rhee, the United States, a young independent state that had established the fundamental basis of the country in the form of the separation of powers, popular sovereignty, and a constitutional government, was a good example for other states to follow.

In fact, evaluations of Rhee's opinions of the United States rooted in what is defined as his toadyism-based perception and 'unconditional' praise for the United States have a tendency to gloss over the truth. For starters, Rhee pointed out that the happiness that currently filled the hearts of the people of the 'earthly paradise' (Rhee [1904] 1993:84) known as the United States had come at a cost. To this end, Rhee claimed,

The happiness these foreigners enjoy today has not been present since ancient times, nor did it come about by happenstance. Their ancestors rose up when they could no longer endure oppression; the people endured great bloodshed and material sacrifice to build a lasting foundation to pass on to their offspring. Subsequent generations have since kept and preserved the foundation. (Rhee [1904] 1993:61)

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2. "... The North American continent is located to the west of the Atlantic and east of the Pacific. Its size is much smaller than Asia's, but is almost twice that of Europe. The existence of this continent had not been known in the past, until, more than 400 years ago, Columbus discovered it. Thereafter, Europeans gradually went over, opened the land, and established a nation. The indigenous barbarians slowly disappeared. Today there is, in the northern part, a big land called Canada, a British territory; in the southern part is America (the United States), the home of the Americans who are in our country in large numbers. It is a new nation that was established not so long ago. Its culture and civilization are progressing daily and, before long no nation may match it...." (Rhee [1904] 1993:67).

For Rhee, the United States' prosperity was the result of the costly struggle which its people had waged to get out from under the thumb of British control, and not of any advantages that had been enjoyed from the outset.

In short, Rhee's pro-American stance was not based on unilateral praise or worship of the United States, but rather on the assumption that the United States was a country that had actualized a spirit of independence in which man enjoyed freedom from birth. To Rhee, no country should be regarded as the subject of permanent praise or worship. In this regard, Rhee viewed the traditional worshiping and veneration of China as one of the most crucial mistakes that had been made in the history of the Korean nation.

In the past, we regarded the veneration of China as our natural duty, and China as the biggest country in the world. The time has come for us to realize how foolish we were and to understand the impact that such foolishness has had. While we should lament the fact that we depended on other countries, we should also enlighten the ignorant compatriots (*dongpo*), work hard to overcome the humiliation we feel today, and establish the foundation for a permanently prosperous country. (Rhee [1904] 1993:128)

Syngman Rhee keenly criticized what he perceived as the veneration of China in a manner that was devoid of any signs of independence, and lamented the outcome which this mindset of protecting the country by depending on China had brought about. Rhee sharply pointed out that any nation that had a mindset that revolved around blind dependence on other countries was one that had become little more than a slave state.

Even if 19,999,999 of twenty million compatriots are killed, as long as one of us is armed with a firm resolve to protect the sovereignty of Daehan, we need not worry that our independence has disappeared and have nothing to fear even if the other countries of the world look down on us. (Rhee [1904] 1993:35)

In reality, Syngman Rhee could never agree with anybody that he regarded as creating obstacles to the establishment of the foundation of the country based on the spirit of independence that was rooted in Koreans' own self-determination, even if that entity was the United States. President Rhee

continued to advocate the slogan ‘March North’ (*bukjin tongil*) during the period in which all the signs pointed to an end to the Korean War. Moreover, he added further fuel to the fire, and shocked the world in the process, by unilaterally releasing North Korean prisoners of war. Such actions were taken despite the fact that he knew they would result in a worsening of relations with the United States. These examples can be regarded as shedding some light on the basic mindset of Syngman Rhee. Rhee’s wife Francesca Donner recalled in her memoirs what Korea-U.S. relations were like at the time.

Some of the pro-Japanese politicians within the allied forces who had never known the sadness of a nation that has lost its country or been on the receiving end of contemptuous treatment at the hands of others, had once mocked Present Rhee for being ‘an old kook crazy about independence.’ I have heard that there are still some leaders of the allied nations that refer to the President as a ‘unification nut’ or ‘Sickman Rhee.’ I cannot but be pained at the thought that the Korean policy of these allied nations is being handled by such people. However, we have no choice but to deal with them wisely. The President has pledged that we will achieve unification regardless of any hardships or sacrifices we may encounter. (Donner Rhee 2010:424)

Syngman Rhee’s ardent desire for unification and anti-communist stance resulted in his being regarded as a laughingstock or a mental patient by the allied powers during this period, with this view being especially prevalent within the United States. In the aftermath of his release of North Korean prisoners of war without its agreement, the United States began to prepare various scenarios in which Syngman Rhee was removed from power. Many of these plots have been exposed through the recent testimony of some of the key figures from this period.<sup>3</sup> For his part, Syngman Rhee’s faith in the allied powers, including the United States, was far from unbreakable. Rather, he was clearly aware that the primary motivation of the allied nations’ participation in the Korean War was not that of ‘helping or saving Korea.’

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3. Paik Sun-yup, who was at the time the Army Chief of Staff, was invited by the US Department of Defense to visit the United States. In his account of the Korean War (2011:318-330), he coolly recollected how U.S. politicians screened him in order to ascertain whether he could be a potential alternative in the ‘post-Syngman Rhee’ era.

A look at the decisions made by the United States and the United Nations with regards to their intervention in the Korean War makes it obvious that the leaders of the allied forces' primary reason for participating in the Korean War was not that of saving Korea. The President never expected nor wanted any foreign countries and their militaries to fight this battle and suffer for Korea. The President's goal is to, in conjunction with General MacArthur, thwart the global objectives of the communist forces, thereby bringing an end to the tragedy that is the division of the fatherland and the separation of the Korean nation.

Syngman Rhee clearly perceived the communist forces as being engaged in a campaign that spread well beyond the Korean peninsula. More to the point, Rhee was convinced that this communist plot for world domination lay at the heart of the tragedy that was the Korean War. Viewed from this standpoint, Syngman Rhee's 'pro-American' leanings should be viewed from within the wider prism of 'anti-communism.'<sup>4</sup> Syngman Rhee was a leader who passionately devoted himself to the achievement of Korean independence, and the establishment of a liberal democratic state that would promote freedom, democracy, and the market economy, while also serving as an anti-communist bulwark.

## **Syngman Rhee's Notion of Liberal Democracy and Anti-communism**

Seo Jung-seok, one of Syngman Rhee's most ardent critics, has stressed that Syngman Rhee's political ideology was a coarse one rooted in "a fascism-based ultra-rightist brand of anti-communism under which no proper political structure could be established." To this end, Seo has argued,

The ultra-rightist anti-communists of Korea, including Syngman Rhee,

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4. Shin Ok-hee conducted a study on the uncomfortable relationship that existed between the Syngman Rhee and Eisenhower governments during the second half of the 1950s. In his study, Shin identified Syngman Rhee's policies toward the Soviet Union and Japan, which ran contrary to the atmosphere of 'mini détente' that marked the general relationship between the Soviet Union, the United States and Japan, as the main reason for the 'deepening conflict' between the United States and Korea. Shin also stressed that Syngman Rhee's 'anti-communist' and 'anti-Japanese' mentality placed a heavy burden on the United States. See Shin (2004:37-61).

did not have any clear political ideology, vision, or knowledge outside of what can best be described as a reactionary negation of revolutionary logic. They did not regard ideological warfare, or responding to such warfare with an ideology of their own, as being important. Rather, they focused on mobilizing the police or other forms of terror to suppress and coerce the public. Furthermore, while these ultra-rightist anti-communists superficially advocated democracy, an ideology that ran contrary to their intentions, they for obvious reasons tried to hide their veneration of Hitler and support for Japanese militarism. (Seo 2005:19)

Here, attention should be drawn to the fact while Syngman Rhee clearly identified liberal democracy and a market economy as the key concepts of the founding ideology of the country he sought to bring about, his critics have taken issue with what they perceived as ‘his lack of any clear political ideology, vision, or insight.’ However, Syngman Rhee made clear from early onwards his desire to adopt the notions of ‘liberal democracy’ and a ‘market economy’ as the basis of national governance.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the evaluation of Rhee’s anti-communist stance as nothing more than a reactionary negation of revolutionary logic can be viewed as an approach that represents an excessive degradation of the ‘value’ of anti-communism, and that does not take into account the international dynamics that prevailed on and around the Korean peninsula at the time.

From an early age onwards, Syngman Rhee possessed a good understanding of the true nature of Russia. For instance, he was cognizant of the fact that Russia’s seizure of Vladivostok in 1854 and the subsequent spread of its influence in Manchuria were motivated by its desire to gain access to the Pacific Ocean. He was also aware that Russia’s quest for a warm water port along the Pacific Ocean had resulted in its having designs on Korean ports such as Hamheung and Wonsan. Rhee’s apprehension of what he perceived as

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5. Rhee’s belief in the market economy is also evidenced in the speech he gave to commemorate the establishment of his government. “This government has decided to foster international trade and industrial development in a manner that reflects the needs of our country. The ability to greatly improve the living standards of the Korean nation requires that we develop numerous industries, export our agricultural and industrial products to other countries, and import the products that we do not yet ourselves produce. As such, it is essential that factories, commerce, and labor develop in a joint manner. Managers must not focus on solely exploiting labor, and labor should not behave in a manner that is detrimental to capital” (Monthly Choson 2004:181-182).



Russia's imperialist orientation had already been made clear in his *The Spirit of Independence (Dongnip Jeongsin)*, written during his incarceration at Hanseong Prison.<sup>6</sup> Having been born out of the Bolshevik Revolution that occurred prior to the March 1st Independence Movement of 1919, the Soviet Union set out to expand its influence in Japan-controlled Korea. In this regard, its implement of choice was the fueling of class warfare based on the notion of the 'rise of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie.' The participation of communists in the provisional government, which had been temporarily ignored in the name of carrying out anti-Japanese activities during the period that followed Japan's occupation of Manchuria in 1931, had by 1942 become a problem that could no longer be ignored. Syngman Rhee was not only aware of the threat posed by Bolsheviks armed with the ideology called communism and their territorial ambitions as far as the Korean peninsula was concerned, but also of that posed by the western allies' ill-advised willingness to sweep the matter of the independence and self-determination of Korea under the rug in order not to aggravate the Soviet Union.<sup>7</sup>

In his letter sent to Syngman Rhee on January 4, 1928 in which he requested the latter's opinion regarding the possibility of the likes of Jang Deok-su, Yun Hong-seop and Kim Do-yeon joining the ranks of the Korean Society (*Dongjihoe*), Yun Chi-young asked Rhee, whom he referred to as the Father of Korea, the following questions: 1) whether Rhee agreed with the revolutionary independence movement and would allow the use of violence,

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6. For more on these discussions, see Oh (2008:420).

7. At the time of the inaugural assembly of the United Nations in San Francisco in April 1945, Syngman Rhee wrote a memo to his friends in which he spelled out his state of mind. "I have made it clear that the recognition of the government of Korea in exile is the only effective means to stop the Soviet Union's occupation of Korea. Confronted with assertions that the Korean government in exile has been removed from Korea for so long that it cannot represent the Korean people, and that as such there should be a general election to establish a new government once the war ended, I answered as follows: Please grant temporary approval to the provisional government based on the understanding that a general election monitored by the United Nations can be held when Korea is liberated. My companions and I repeatedly aired our positions during meetings at the U.S. State Department, interviews with the press, appearances on radio programs, and in our contributions to magazines. However, all of this was to no avail. There were no indications that high-ranking officials within the U.S. government were considering our suggestions. I inevitably concluded that President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill had decided that while Korea would, on the surface, have an independent government, it would in fact be controlled by the Soviet Union" (Robert 2002:216).

2) whether Rhee would contact the Soviet Union as well as ‘small and subject nationalities,’ and 3) whether Rhee agreed with the socialization of industry policy. Syngman Rhee sent the following reply: 1) “There is no room for the word ‘revolutionary’ within our independence movement and I am opposed to violence against justice and humanity,” and 2) “I would of course contact small and subject nations as well as the Soviet Union. However, it is difficult for me, given the fact that I am implementing the Korean independence movement from the United States, to promote communism. Moreover, it is more important for us to find our own survival strategy first. What’s more, the separation of classes can be regarded as an obstacle to the implementation of the independence movement” (Committee for the Compilation of Documents Pertaining to Syngman Rhee 1998, 16:13). Syngman Rhee’s belief in non-violence and diplomatic activities geared towards the United States, and in the anti-communist nature of the independence movement, were formed well before the establishment of the Republic of Korea. This belief was rooted in strong opposition to a communist ideology that advocated class warfare.

Syngman Rhee’s opposition to the invasive nature of communism became even more pronounced following the events in neighboring China. As China’s power began to wane, it increasingly took the hand of help offered by the Soviet Union, a denouement that provided cover for the development of the communist movement in China. These events made an indelible impression on Syngman Rhee.

[Sun Yat-sen] made several personal appeals in which he asked the United States to provide moral support for China’s efforts to implement the principles of democracy. While the United States had sympathy for China, the influence of Japanese propaganda proved to be much stronger. No replies were ever sent to Sun Yat-sen’s requests. (Rhee [1940] 1987:247)

This historical development had a great impact on Syngman Rhee.

This was the start of the communist movement in China. Doctor Sun has always been criticized for this turn of events, a turn of events that Japan subsequently used as a propaganda tool. If Doctor Sun had lived longer, he could have made it clear to his successors that he refused Marxism. One day when Sun was giving a lecture about the Three Principles of the People, he was given a copy of *The Social Interpretation of History* written by Maurice

William. This book so influenced Sun Yat-sen that he stopped advocating communism. (Rhee [1940] 1987:247)

Syngman Rhee was also very weary of the militarism-based fascism of Japan. Rhee's negative perception of communist ideology was in large part motivated by the fact that it could not coexist with 'liberal democracy.' For Rhee, the aggressive and expansionary nature of communism was clearly on display in the Soviet Union's blunt messages to the international community that it had designs on Northeast Asian countries such as China and the Korean peninsula.<sup>8</sup>

### **Class Struggle Ideology vs. Christian Spirit**

Some critics of his concept of establishing the country based on the tenets of Christianity have argued that 'for Syngman Rhee, Christianity was not a religion, but a concrete power base.' While the need exists to more clearly define what this perception of a 'concrete power base' was based on, what we do know is that Syngman Rhee regarded 'Christianity' as a 'true religion' that had proven its merit throughout history, and as the 'driving force' that, via the actualization of the 'spirit' of Christianity, had made the spread of Western democracy possible. Rhee regarded Christianity as more than a mere personal religion; in fact, he viewed the 'spirit of Christianity' as the driving force behind the achievement of independence, and as the main implement that would help protect the country from a communist invasion. Rhee's belief in the establishment of the country based on the Christian spirit was not one that suddenly sprung up after liberation. Rather, it had already taken root in his mind during his youth. In this regard, Yi Deok-ju has pointed out,

... Syngman Rhee's Christianity-based concept of national salvation, and his belief in the establishment of a country based on the tenets of Christianity, was of course also at the heart of the struggle ideology and methodology employed by the Christian national activists who participated

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8. Syngman Rhee's worries about the Soviet Union were subsequently confirmed when the latter not only propped up the Kim Il-sung government in North Korea but assisted it in its attack on South Korea that launched the Korean War.

in the independence movement within Korea and abroad during the Japanese colonial era... (Yi and Jang 2009:81)

To Syngman Rhee, the ‘revolutionary will’ to protect oneself and one’s country from foreign invasion represented the essence of independence. The United States, which had achieved its independence from Great Britain at great cost, proved to be a good source of inspiration. However, the American War of Independence and the ‘precious freedom obtained as a result of the outcome of the revolutionary war’ were not the property of the United States because of any racial superiority. Here, Rhee maintained that the United States’ achievement of independence was made possible by the fact that it possessed the mindset, desire for independence, and most of all ‘religion,’ needed to bring this about. Thus, for him, the securing of independence and autonomy had not been the result of any special racial superiority that the American people might possess.

It is a religion which emanates from the thoughts of men and which plays a decisive role in forming their mindset. The religion of Anglo-Saxons, Christianity, boasts a teaching system that places great value on the struggle for freedom.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the traditional religions of Joseon, and in particular Confucianism, Christianity is rooted in the principle that all men are equal under God, and reveals how men can become truly free by doing away with evil customs, foolish habits, and sin. The Confucian teaching system is based on the belief that a king should rule the state in a virtuous manner. Meanwhile, the people have no choice but to wait for providence in cases where the ruler rules in a manner that is devoid of virtue. (Rhee [1913] 2008:178)

For Syngman Rhee, the basic elements of modern democracy, such as popular sovereignty and an independent spirit, were rooted in an individual

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9. “People around the world have always claimed that it is the nature and disposition of the people in Asia that makes possible the advent of despotic governments and the absence of any political revolutions in these lands. Meanwhile, as the belief in freedom and equality is embedded in Anglo-Saxons (or what we can more commonly refer to as the people of Great Britain and the United States), such revolutions have been a regular feature of Western history. However, my extended studies on this subject would seem to indicate that these differing outcomes have not been the result of the nature of the individual races, but rather of the religions to which they adhere” (Rhee [1913] 2008:175).

consciousness structure formed in large part by 'religion.' "Those people who study the Bible, and in particular the New Testament, unconsciously begin to develop revolutionary thought. This is because the Bible teaches the truth and the truth is what sets a person's mind free" (Rhee [1913] 2008:178). Both Christianity and Communism talk about 'revolution.' However, unlike the notion of revolution based on 'class warfare' designed to resolve the conflicts between the proletarians and Bourgeoisie found in communist ideology, Christianity asserts that all humans are equal before God. As such, the actualization of this spirit brings about 'revolutionary results' within societies where discrimination between rich and poor as well as between noble and commoner was regarded as the norm. Contrary to communism, Christianity refuses the 'use of violent means' to actualize its spirit. Christianity, as Syngman Rhee understood it, was rooted in the 'change of heart' and in the practice of neighborly love' that was made possible by this 'change of heart.'<sup>10</sup> Syngman Rhee, who converted to Christianity at the end of the Joseon dynasty, and more specifically while he was at death's door in Hanseong Prison, had an absolute belief in the tenets of Christianity. Christianity was a religion that brought about real changes in people's lives. At the same time, the societies and countries who, in their capacity as the body which actualized the spirit of Christianity, guaranteed individual freedom, were those who came closest to the ideal image of societies and countries that practiced the 'morals of neighborly love.' Syngman Rhee truly believed the following.

Those civilizations of the world who adopted Christianity as the foundation of their societies have seen a high level of morality be achieved even amongst their common classes. Our country is currently trying to rise up from its ashes and to sprout buds from rotten soil. However, even if we interact with the entire world, we will never be able to achieve such goals

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10. "Those who have been inspired by Jesus move away from their former lives in which they lived only for their own welfare and are sorry for all of the sins they committed to advance themselves at the expense of others. They begin to think of others' interests, pain, sadness and joy first, and to love each other based on the teachings of the Bible... They say that Jesus is the true grapevine and we are its branches. If the branches are not attached to the grapevine, then no fruit will be produced. In addition, as we all worship one God, we become akin to one body and one family. As such, we begin to work with a common mind and body regardless of where we emanate from geographically" (Rhee [1913] 2008:149-150).

if we do not adopt Christianity as the foundation of our society. As such, we should accept Christianity as the foundation for everything, and seek to become persons who work for others, rather than ourselves, and who strive to promote the common good of our country. We should do our best to raise our country to the level of the United States and Great Britain. (Rhee [1904] 1993:199)

## Syngman Rhee's Ideal regarding the Actualization of an Equalitarianism-based Society

During the speech marking the establishment of the government in which he identified the eight elements on which the country should be founded, Syngman Rhee spoke at length about the principles of reciprocity and equality between the capitalists and laborers. Shortly after the establishment of the government, Rhee revealed the identity of the country he sought to bring about as being based on a ruling ideology which he referred to as the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui* 一民主義).

I am a firm believer in the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*). The national policy of this newborn country should be based on the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*). (Rhee 1949:4)

The four principles of the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*) consisted of:

1. Overthrow lineages and pedigrees and promote equal rights, “unite as one nation under the one law of one state”
2. Reap the benefits of the market based on joint cooperation between land holders, capital and labor
3. Establishment of equality between the sexes and national unity
4. Elimination of class divisions and regionalism (factionalism)

(Rhee 1949:17-22)

Syngman Rhee was especially passionate about the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*). Rhee made it clear that this concept of one nation (*ilmin* 一民) had been at the heart of his 50-year quest for independence, and that he would adopt the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*) as the national policy of the newborn

country (Rhee 1949:7-8).

Criticism of Syngman Rhee's notion of *ilmin juui* has revolved around the extent to which Syngman Rhee and his followers pursued the concept of equality in human relations widely regarded as constituting the basic ideology of modern society on a metaphysical level.

Given that respect for human rights and equality before the law represent fundamental elements of equality, it becomes difficult to envision how equality could truly have been actualized under an ultra-rightist anti-communist dictatorship, police state, and authoritative government such as that of Syngman Rhee. Moreover, not only Syngman Rhee, but also Rhee's followers, acted as if they were above the law. (Seo 2005:40)

However, Rhee's slogan, 'actualization of an egalitarian society,' which constituted an element of his one national ideology (*ilmin juui*), should not be perceived as nothing more than empty idealistic words, or as a deception rooted in a lack of historical awareness that was meant to do little more than cover up extra-legal acts.

The land reform implemented by the USAMGIK (United States Army Military Government in Korea), and the Korean government after the establishment of the government, was in fact a historically significant measure. More to the point, the Korean land reform implemented following liberation in 1945 was aimed at replacing the landlord-oriented land ownership system with the farmer-oriented one needed to create the basis of a capitalist society.<sup>11</sup>

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11. "Land policy after liberation can be separated into the measures implemented by USAMGIK and those put forward by the Korean government. Some of the most important measures implemented by USAMGIK included those of setting maximum rent rates which landlords could charge their tenants and the distribution of returned farmland. The proposed setting of maximum rent rates for tenancy was little more than a provisional policy that acknowledged the existence of the landlord-tenant relationship and sought to achieve a balance between tenancy rates and tenant rights. ... Meanwhile, up to two *jeongbo* of returned farmlands were sold to individual farmers. Farmers were expected to return 20% of the income earned from the sale of the products produced from the land to the government every year for a period of 15 years. The establishment of a special act on returned farmland in 1951 made it possible for farmers toiling returned and regular farmland to annually pay the government 30% of the income earned from the land for 5 years. The distribution of returned farmland was significant in that it not only constituted actual land reform, but also set the standards for the distribution of regular farmland in the future" (Daum Encyclopedia).

A closer look at the land purchased by the government under the Land Reform Act, as well as the cause of individual transactions, reveals that more than 90% of overall farmland that was acquired was purchased from non-farmers; Moreover, only 4.8% of the land bought out was in fact made up of lots of three *jeongbo*<sup>12</sup> of farmland or more, with the rest consisting of lands that had been owned by government organizations, Buddhist temples, and local autonomies. The farmlands obtained by the government through the Land Reform Act were to be distributed, in order of priority, to the farmers who were currently farming the relevant lots, farmers who were farming excessively small pieces of land for their farming capacity, the bereaved families of patriots who had previous agricultural management experience, hired farmers who possessed farming skills, and farmers who had returned from overseas. All in all, a total of 604,867 *jeongbo* of farmland was redistributed through the land reform. This consisted of 342,365 *jeongbo* of regular farmland, and 262,502 *jeongbo* of returned farmland (statistics compiled on December 31, 1970). This accounted for 27.6% of all farmland (2,192,546 *jeongbo*, statistics compiled on December 31, 1947) and 41.8% of all tenant farmland. A look at the farmers who received farmland reveals that while 1,016,338 farmers received regular farmland 655,032 others were awarded returned farmland, totaling 1,671,370 farmers. (Daum Encyclopedia).

Although land reform started during the USAMGIK period, it was only implemented in a rapid and comprehensive manner following the establishment of the Korean government. The emergence of the Korean War made it impossible to complete all the planned land reforms. Nevertheless, it is important to point out that such reforms did in fact begin in a comprehensive manner following the amendment of the Land Reform Act on March 10, 1950, the passage of the Enforcement Ordinance of the Land Reform Act on March 25, and the adoption of the Enforcement Regulations of the Land Reform Act on April 28, 1950. These land reforms had the effect of transferring ownership of the majority of the farmland possessed by the Japanese during the colonial era to Korean farmers. Meanwhile, the farmland controlled by Korean landlords was reallocated to farmers in accordance with the land reforms and landlords' disposal of their own lands. As such, these

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12. One *jeongbo* of land measures approximately 9,917.4 m<sup>2</sup>.



measures provided a decisive opportunity to dismantle the colonial landlord system that had been formed during the Japanese colonial era. Lew Young-ick (2006:549) has asserted that while land reform had been attempted by kings in the past, efforts to this end carried out in the aftermath of the imposition of the rank land law (*gwajeonbeop*) during the reign of King Taejo of Joseon had inevitably ended in failure. Lew claims that the tenant farmers who found themselves freed from the oppressive tenancy system and the instability of tenant rights subsequently became Syngman Rhee's support base, and has also argued that they owed their ability to eat white rice to Rhee. Sin Pyeong's assessment of the significance of land reform included the following quote attributed to the former president of the Constitutional Government Society of the Republic of Korea (*Heonjeonghoe*) Song Bang-yong, a man who had been at the forefront of the farmers' movement in the Bongnam-myeon, Gimje-gun area of Jeonbuk Province at the time:

Tenant farmers toiled under such bad circumstances that they were in fact slaves rather than people. How can they pay attention to national affairs when they are consumed by ensuring that they can eat? Viewed from the standpoint of such circumstances, land reform can only be regarded as a revolution and a huge step forward. As a result of these reforms, the tenant farmers who possessed land could afford to send their children to school. Land reform was an investment in the richness that we enjoy today, and a measure that made it possible to overcome our dark past. (Sin P. March 25, 2010)

Syngman Rhee and the new Korean government had to remove the vestiges of colonialism and protect the ideological identity of the Republic of Korea exemplified by liberal democracy and the market economy from the rising threat posed by communism. Here, Rhee's equalitarian policy rooted in the one nation ideology (*ilmin juui*) should be regarded as having played an important role in uniting popular sentiment. This can be perceived as the main reason why while Syngman Rhee can be labeled as an ardent 'anti-communist,' he should not be considered as a 'ultra-rightist anti-communist.' Although the meaning may differ depending on how 'ultra-right' is defined, Syngman Rhee cannot be regarded as an ultra-rightist who unilaterally supported capitalists against labor, was indifferent to the gap between the rich and poor, and protected those classes with vested interests. While Rhee was a

passionate ‘anticommunist,’ the political decisions he made during his tenure make it impossible to define Rhee as an ultra-rightist. Rather, a look at his socioeconomic policies point to the fact that Syngman Rhee was in reality a ‘gradual social reformist’ who made efforts to overcome the obstacles between rich and poor, between classes, as well as social strife, through legal rather than violent or forceful means.

### **Syngman Rhee’s Emphasis on Diplomacy and the Task of Social Integration**

As mentioned above, some critics of Syngman Rhee have claimed that he was a divisive force who fomented dissention rather than unity. In fact, during the period in which he carried out the independence movement from Hawaii, Rhee openly fought with Park Yong-man, who served as the editor-in-chief of the Korean National Association (*Daehanin gungminhoe* 大韓人國民會)’s bulletin *Sinhan Minbo* 新韓民報 in 1911 and as the editor-in-chief of the *Sinhan Gukbo* 新韓國報 after he relocated to Hawaii in 1912, over the policy line which the independence movement should pursue. In 1914, Park Yong-man rented a plantation on which he planned to use the youths who had followed him to Hawaii as common laborers. That same year, he organized the anti-Japanese Korean Military Corps (*Daejoseon gungmin gundan* 大朝鮮國民軍團) with the goal of providing military training to these youths. Park envisioned the 130 soldiers that were trained under his auspices as representing the first wave of a force that would wage a war that would result in independence being achieved through ‘armed resistance.’ Thereafter, Park Yong-man convened, in conjunction with others such as Sin Chae-ho and Sin Suk who opposed Syngman Rhee’s diplomatic approach to the achievement of independence, the so-called ‘Military Unification Conference’ (*gunsu tongil chokseonghoe* 軍事統一促成會), during which time he called on all independence forces to be integrated under one military command as part of the achievement of independence through force of arms. As far as the strategy to achieve independence was concerned, Syngman Rhee believed that Koreans should develop the capability to officially implement large-scale warfare within all individual states where Koreans live, while limiting the use of small scale military exercises. He also stressed that at the current juncture

the strengthening of Korean diplomacy within the international community was inevitable if Koreans were to gain justification, as well as support, from neighboring countries for their struggle.<sup>13</sup> Syngman Rhee was not an absolute pacifist who unconditionally excluded the use of military force.<sup>14</sup>

Syngman Rhee called for the establishment of a separate government in South Korea after liberation; to this end, this policy line put him at odds with the likes of Kim Gu and Yeo Un-hyeong who advocated the establishment of one unified government that would control all of Korea. Seeking to bring about a 'unified government' that included both North and South Korea, Kim Gu visited North Korea along with Kim Gyu-shik on April 19, 1948. During this visit, Kim Gu met directly with Kim Il-sung to express his opposition to the establishment of a separate government in North Korea. However, the unification talks between Kim Gu, Kim Gyu-shik, and Kim Il-sung were in fact nothing more than a charade hatched by the Russian Chairman of the Provisional People's Committee for the Five Provinces, Nikolai Lebedev. Kim Gu inevitably crossed the 38th Parallel and returned to South Korea empty-handed. Syngman Rhee was aware from early onwards that Kim Il-sung was merely a figurehead put in place by the Soviet Union as part of its strategy to gain control over North Korea. According to recently released Soviet materials, Stalin had, a mere month after liberation, already drawn up plans to use the forces that had been dispatched to North Korea to occupy the latter, and to eventually establish a separate socialist dictatorship in North

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13. "The best policy is to bring an end to small-scale violence within Korea and instead focus on making the necessary preparations for our future plan; meanwhile, within the international community, we should advocate non-violence and exhibit the spirit of the March 1st Movement. The carrying out of sporadic small-scale resistance activities armed only with dynamite and bullets cannot be expected to bring about any concrete results. However, it is the enemy that will find itself without answers once we have made our desire clear and completed our organization of millions of heavily-armed people. This kind of undertaking will make a big impression that will inevitably draw international sympathy and support for our cause." (Committee for the Compilation of Documents Pertaining to Syngman Rhee 1998, 16:14)

14. Syngman Rhee used the following example to support his opposition to the antiwar pacifism that had taken root in the United States. "Dr. Floyd Tomkins of Philadelphia once said during a speech given to the League of the Friends of Korea, 'There can be no neutrality as long as brutal acts are committed. I am not the kind of Christian who would respond to a rascal attacking my sister by going to my room in order to pray that God 'protect my sister.' I would only go and pray after I had beat up the rascal and saved my sister.' I wish there were more Christians like this." (Rhee [1940] 1987:234-235)

Korea. In keeping with this plan, Stalin summoned Park Heon-young and Kim Il-sung to Moscow, at which time he assessed just how suited they would be to the achievement of his ends. Shortly thereafter, Stalin selected Kim Il-sung as the leader of North Korea, and started to establish the North Korean regime. Fully expecting that he would play a leading role in the erection of a government in North Korea, the Soviet Union appointed Kim Il-sung to the post of Chairman of the Provisional People's Committee for North Korea on February 8, 1946. Furthermore, during the process of establishing a puppet regime and constitution in North Korea, the Soviet troops even went as far as to bestow the name of this new country, which would heretofore be referred to as the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. In this regard, Kim Il-sung can be perceived as having been a complete puppet of the Soviet Union. While Syngman Rhee had sought well before he came out against the Soviet and American idea of a trusteeship in Korea to establish a unified government on the Korean peninsula, he realized that Soviet control over the North essentially made his dream unachievable. Rhee was also aware of the fact that the Soviet Union planned to get Kim Il-sung to remove those who supported liberal democracy, and to establish a unified leftist country in Korea. To this end, Rhee's keen understanding of what was unfolding on the ground can be seen as having been instrumental in his decision to establish a separate government in South Korea. Syngman Rhee's perception of the political situation surrounding the Korean peninsula was consequently confirmed by the United States and United Nations. Having reached the conclusion that a government regime had already been established in North Korea, these entities decided to forge ahead with the establishment of a separate government south of the 38th Parallel.

Meanwhile, Syngman Rhee's desire for social integration was made evident from the moment the country was established. The Second National Assembly Elections were held on May 30, 1950, or shortly before the outbreak of the Korean War. This election was marked not only by the downfall of the National Democratic Party (*Mingukdang*), whose political base had collapsed as a result of the implementation of land reform, but also the Syngman Rhee-led Korean National Party (*Gungmindang*) set up in opposition to the National Democratic Party, which experienced a decrease in seats from 70 to 24. Meanwhile, the majority of seats (127 seats) were assumed by independents. Of course, the fact that there was no party nomination system resulted in many cases in which the supporters of these political parties were elected

as independents. However, progressives such as Jo So-ang and like-minded groups that promoted unity between left and right and the holding of North-South Korean unification talks, and which featured election pledges such as the achievement of peaceful unification through the withdrawal of the American and Soviet militaries, were also elected. As such, the May 30 election saw a weakening of the power of Syngman Rhee and his National Democratic Party. However, the Korean War broke out a mere month after the election following a sudden attack by North Korea. The North Korean forces easily advanced southwards thereafter. Meanwhile, after having fled first to Daejeon and then Daegu, the Rhee government convened a meeting of the National Assembly within the Gyeongnam provincial government building in Busan on July 27, 1950. The decision was then taken on August 18, 1950 to adopt Busan as the temporary capital.

In the aftermath of the outbreak of the Korean War, Syngman Rhee had to focus all his energy, with the help of the United States and United Nations, on pushing back the North Korean forces. Meanwhile, a second presidential election was held in the temporary capital of Busan in 1952. Having decided to abandon the indirect presidential election system, Syngman Rhee proceeded to amend the Constitution so as to make possible the implementation of a direct presidential election system. He had also overseen the establishment of the Liberal Party in 1951. Rhee was subsequently reelected as president. During this process, Rhee was criticized by opposition parties for having used coercive methods such as the proclamation of martial law to ensure his reelection. While plans were in the works to bring the war to an end in 1953, Rhee came out strongly against the proposed handling of war prisoners, post-war settlement, and armistice. By releasing the North Korean prisoners of war right before the establishment of the armistice, Rhee effectively put himself at political odds with his lifelong ally the United States. In addition, while a bill to make it such that two-term limits did not apply to the first president, namely Rhee himself, was voted down by the equivalent of two-thirds of one vote in the National Assembly in 1954, the outcome of the vote was overturned after the amount of votes in support of the motion was rounded off to the nearest whole number. With the bill having been passed, Rhee was thus free to be elected as president for a third term in 1956. In December 1958, Rhee amended pertinent laws such as the National Security Law to pave the way for his victory in the next presidential election. Rhee began to

be condemned by opposition parties and public opinion alike for the Korean economy's failure to live up to expectations. Rhee was held accountable for this failure, which was perceived as being a direct result of his attempts to implement an economic policy that was based on the granting of privileges to particular conglomerates (*chaebol*). Although Rhee was reelected as president for a fourth term on March 15, 1960, he was subsequently forced to resign in the face of the April 19 Revolution launched by a population angered over what they perceived as Rhee's rigging of the election. Syngman Rhee died in exile in Hawaii in 1965.

Consequently, Syngman Rhee failed to achieve the social integration that he had dreamed of bringing about in the newly born Republic of Korea, a desire that stood at the heart of his 'one nation ideology' (*ilmin juui*). The fundamental dream of establishing a 'state based on Christian values' was dashed amidst the growing participation of Christian groups in politics and the subsequent formation of a collusive relationship between the religious and political forces.<sup>15</sup> However, Syngman Rhee's desire for social integration was also high on the list of tasks established by the military government that grasped power through the May 16 Revolution that brought an end to the Second Republic. The slogan of 'anti-communism' was also adopted by ensuing governments.<sup>16</sup>

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15. In this regard, Kim Heung-su (2006:212) has argued that, "The Syngman Rhee regime also made active use of Christian groups during the presidential elections; it was at this point that the collusive relationship between the church and state emerged, and that the vision of a state built on Christian values disappeared."

16. During a memorial address after the death of Syngman Rhee, Park Chung-hee, who had refused to allow Syngman Rhee to return to Korea shortly before his death, complimented Rhee's efforts to bring about enlightenment, independence, and the development of the fatherland, but also criticized what he viewed as his misrule at the end of his lifetime. Park said, "However, this should only be viewed as part of Doctor Rhee's lifetime devotion to the nation rather than the whole. His misrule was caused by external factors. I do not think that anyone will ever question the patriotic spirit that animated Doctor Rhee. His saying, 'United we stand, divided we fall,' will forever be seen as his last will and testament. These words should be regarded as a proverb that lies at the heart of the survival of our nation" (Monthly Choson 2000:185).

## Conclusion

Historical evaluations of the first president of the Republic of Korea Syngman Rhee have been by and large incongruous. Rhee has been evaluated as an important politician, and as an independence activist and patriot who played the leading role in the establishment of the Republic of Korea. On the other hand, he is also regarded as a dictator whose hunger for power made him unable to fathom the thought of any political dissension. Such contrary evaluations continue today, more than 60 years after the liberation of Korea.<sup>17</sup>

This study reviewed the existing evaluations of Syngman Rhee and, from the standpoint of his status as the individual who designed the foundation of the soon-to-be-born nation, analyzed his vision and dreams for the Republic of Korea. Moreover, it also delved into the form which his vision and dreams took after they encountered the political reality on the ground. Faced with demands emanating from all social classes within the newly born Korea, as well as the confrontation with communism, Rhee's dreams and ideals inevitably moved in a different direction from what he had originally intended. Here, we could easily conclude that Rhee's obstinate stance to protect the country from a communist invasion was in reality the result of his self-centered desire for political power.<sup>18</sup>

However, what is clear is that the communist plot to occupy the Korean peninsula given form in the Korean War that broke out in 1950 was not hatched at the national level, but rather one that was plotted out by the international communist alliance led by the Soviet Union and China. To this end, Syngman Rhee can be viewed as a leader who stopped the Bolshevization of South Korea, and concretized relations with the United States and other

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17. Rhee In-su, who was the adopted son of Syngman Rhee, attempted to apologize to the families of those who lost their lives during the April 19 Revolution during a ceremony to commemorate the revolution that was held in 2011. However, his overture was rejected by the bereaved families. This instance can be regarded as very telling of the current state of our nation.

18. Kim Yeong-myeong (1991:115) has argued that "the spread of the anticommunist mindset brought about as a result of the Korean War had the effect of emblazoning Syngman Rhee's image as the embodiment of anti-communism, a denouement which in turn drew added support for him amongst the public."

allies.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Rhee decisively pursued land reform, a move that was rooted in his desire to bring prosperity to the new Republic of Korea and foster the formation of new capital. Rhee was a market economist who intended to implement economic policies that were in keeping with the concept of free trade, and reflected the interests of all social classes, including capitalists and laborers. In addition, Rhee was also a man with a clear desire to bring about social integration, and a fighter who protected the Republic of Korea's independence and liberal democracy from external influences.

For all of these reasons, the Republic of Korea still today owes a debt of gratitude to Syngman Rhee for the resolve and vision he displayed as the first leader of the newly born Korean state.

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19. Paik Sun-yup, who recently wrote his memoirs about the Korean War, recalled that the majority of the enemies they encountered along the front lines during the Korean War were Chinese Communist Forces and not those of Kim Il-sung (Paik 2011).



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## Abstract

A thorough analysis of Syngman Rhee's vision of the Republic of Korea that goes beyond a mere historical evaluation of Rhee as the first President of the Republic of Korea is required in order to evaluate the direction taken by Korea in the contemporary era. Syngman Rhee has been evaluated as an independence activist and patriot who played a leading role in the establishment of the Republic of Korea. On the other hand, he is also regarded as a dictator whose hunger for power made him unable to fathom the thought of any political dissension. Such historical evaluations of Syngman Rhee hinder discussions on the identity of the newly born Republic of Korea, particularly as Korea now faces the task of re-highlighting its core identity. In this regard, the examination of the birth and development of the state based on the task of fostering a better understanding of Syngman Rhee's basic vision for the newly born Republic of Korea, while removing the 'mythical elements' raised by various discourses, represents an essential element of any such efforts.

This study not only points out the need for an active discourse that is based not on Syngman Rhee as an individual, but on his role as one of the core figures behind the establishment of the Republic of Korea, but also analyzes Rhee's visions and ideals for the establishment of the Republic of Korea and examines how his ideals were refracted when combined with the political reality on the ground.

**Keywords:** establishment of a state, liberal democracy, market economy, independence, anticommunism, political reality, identity