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Title: Korean Christianity

**Summary**

There are certain inconsistencies in the way Syngman Rhee, the first Korean president, and his policies have been evaluated by historians. Some regard him as a power-hungry dictator who used his confrontation with communism to amass and retain power, while others regard him as a patriot and an activist for freedom. It often stems from the fact that his policies eventually seemed different than the ideals and dreams he always espoused.

Rhee’s anti-communist stance stemmed from fears that China and the Soviet Union wanted to establish a puppet communist regime in North Korea, with a vision to develop a socialist bulwark. Rhee can be credited to have prevented South Korea's Bolshevization and forged a concrete alliance with the U.S. Rhee was an ardent believer in a market economy and liberal democracy since his youth; therefore it is not accurate to accuse him of making South Korea a U.S. colony after Japan. Moreover, he cannot be termed as an ultra-rightist fascist because, in spite of being an ardent anti-communist, he desired to adopt liberal democracy as a basis for government, and prevent class warfare which could potentially stem from a communist revolution. Furthermore, he saw Christianity to not just be a true religion but as a means for making western democracy and freedom possible, as it forms the right mindset for it, and prefers a non-violent approach. He managed to unite popular sentiment through his one-nation ideology and equalitarian policy, and improved social integration yet could not see to the establishment of a state grounded on Christian values that came as a result of the increased politicization of Christian groups. However, a key aspect of Rhee’s politics, in which he saw considerable success, was to build an anti-communist stance to prevent what he saw as class warfare in the name of revolution.

In the novel, the Martyrs, the relationship between truth and politics is addressed that answers the question of whether deception, done in sincerity, contributes to political community building. The question is important because Korean history is rife with manipulation and mass propaganda in which people are told what they want to believe rather than the truth. In the story, Colonel Chang and Mr. Shin lied about their condition one for his state, and the other for his religion. However, sometimes this sincere deception, when accepted by the masses, can lead to a collective self-deception; however, it can still create and retain national adhesion and unity.

In politics, this deception is used through stereotyping, mass propaganda, and public manipulation, yet, requires even the most totalitarian governments to maintain certain aspects of reality in it to stay in power or vindicate their cause. This can be seen from Mr. Shin and Chang's example in the novel, who sacrificed themselves to uphold religious truth and political community.

**Critical Reflection**

In my opinion, the two readings in spite of being written by different authors on different time periods collude with each other to help us understand the motives of Syngman Rhee and his politics of anti-communism. The readings have allowed me to observe that while the world saw Rhee’s strong stance against communism to be driven by a quest for political power, there was more at play. He had strong leanings towards liberal democracy and a market economy since his youth, and he was highly concerned about preventing class warfare, something communist revolutionaries had typically employed to destabilize other countries and expand power.

Therefore, if he engaged in propaganda and public deception, it was out of a sincere will to maintain social integrity in the Korean Republic and was in line with his vision of the *Puk Jin Tongil.* I believe that the myths that were manufactured aimed to help unify the Korean public and serve its interests, through creating grounds for a U.S. invasion of communist North Korea, whom he portrayed as an evil and irrational regime. Although, the policy may have also led to greater conflict between the two states. However, I do not believe that Rhee, despite having dictatorial tendencies, was a fascist who only wished to consolidate power. I see him more as a charismatic yet fallible leader who had to deviate from some of his own ideals to maintain independence, national cohesion and social integration for the betterment of the Korean people.

In this regard, he may have had to manufacture certain convenient myths, such as the anti-communist *Puk-Jin Tongil* vision, in order to create a unique identity for South Koreans, and create for them an enemy in the form of communism. However, as the example of Shin and Chang from *The Martyrs* shows, that myths also require adaptation to reality and have to be pragmatic; otherwise, they can lose adherence and effectiveness. In this regard, the anti-communist propaganda and myths in South Korea sought to counter the pro-communist North Korean propaganda in order to draw defecting social groups to their sides, and eventually reunite.

The novel, *The Martyrs,* gives a good account, in my view, of why sometimes engaging in such deceptive tactics can become a necessity in politics. At times, when propaganda warfare is reaching its peak among the two rivals, exploiting the execution of the Christian priests was important for the South. Chang wanted to use the execution for propaganda purposes but feared that two survivors in the execution might have defected to the communists, which would harm the morale of Korean Christians, whose spirit he needed, in his battle against Communism. The story of the death of Chang and Shin reveal to us that sometimes it is wise not to disclose the ugly truth to the masses if it can lead to adverse political and social impacts upon a nation. In my view, this strongly relates to the policies that Rhee developed to further his anti-communist agenda.