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PROTESTANTS AND THE FORMATION OF KOREAN
SELF-RECONSTRUCTION NATIONALISM
1896-1937

KENNETH MAURICE WELLS

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Except where acknowledged otherwise,
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original research done by myself.

K. M. Wells.

KENNETH M. WELLS

ABSTRACT

The concept of the nation-state is one of the most powerful political and emotional concepts of modern times. While Korea's Protestants were among the first to introduce the concept to Korea, they consistently urged that it be based, not on political confrontation between races, but on reconstruction of the national character founded on individual reform.

The weakening of the traditional Confucian, aristocratic social and political structure by the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars coupled with energetic Protestant mission activity among the lower and higher classes of rural and urban Korea, facilitated the rise of Christianity as a strong rival in defining the nature and goals of society and nation. Korean Protestant nationalists attributed Korea's weakness to ethical and spiritual decay and proposed as a solution an ethical nationalism of stewardship, civic morality, Christian education and self-reliance. Their campaign was initially political and placed them in the arena of international rivalry over Korean territory which was decided in Japan's favour by her defeat of Russia in 1905.

The Japanese Government-General, installed in 1910, recognised that the Protestant Church and its schools were the strongest focus of resistance to its colonial policy of assimilation and proceeded to incarcerate Protestant leaders and bring the schools under direct control through legislation. Despite persecution and the exile of numbers of its leaders, Protestant Church growth continued. Through the symbols of its faith, the political structure of its churches and

its identification with the reconstructive "remnant" of Ancient Israel, the Protestant community in Korea and in exile developed up to 1918 an image of itself as the cradle of the new, democratic Korea of the future.

This image became weakened after the 1919 March First Movement when the prestige of the West and liberal-democracy diminished and socialist movements introduced a new socio-political formula. Self-reconstruction ideals continued to be promoted by some Protestants as the source of a new national civilisation without which no genuine Korean state could emerge or survive. This nonpolitical nationalism involved considerable tension *vis-à-vis* competing streams of nationalism and among its own practitioners, but amidst Japanese pre-emptive action and charges of compromise and naivety, self-reconstruction nationalists advocated a third way between resistance and resignation. In its economic form, self-reconstruction ideology enjoyed support from nonrevolutionary socialists.

The movement was crushed in 1937 with the onset of the second Sino-Japanese War. Its vision of the nation as a spiritual, cultural community sustained many Koreans during the years of colonial subjection and continues to inspire a following among Koreans today.

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ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

CDU	<i>Chōsen dokuritsu undō</i>
CMSS	<i>Chōsen mondai shiryō sōsho</i>
CTS	<i>Chōsen tōchi shiryō</i>
GGPAB	Government General Police Affairs Bureau
GSC	<i>Gendaishi shiryō: Chōsen</i>
NKH	<i>Naimushō Keihokyoku hen: Shakai undō no jōkyō</i>
USPM	United States Presbyterian Mission Archives
YCH	Kim Ŭl-han, <i>Yun Ch'i-ho Chŏn</i>
YUL	Yōnsei University Library