



# The rise and evolution of Korean Christian foreign missions and political interaction



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Korea has seen remarkable development into a key worldwide missionary force since the advent of Christianity in the late 19th century. Building upon this context, the objective of this article is to explore the historical and practical consequences of the increase in Korean Christian overseas missionary endeavours and their relationship with politics. The article emphasises the pivotal significance of political elements in the transition from quantitative to qualitative transformations in Korean Christian missionary movements. For this purpose, the study takes a political science approach, methodically examines the historical relationship between Korean Christian foreign missionary activities and politics, and demonstrates how Korean Christianity has evolved from a key influence in the national movement to a significant participant in contemporary politics, encompassing both international and domestic politics. Given the changing political landscape, the overseas missionary efforts of Korean Christianity have emerged as a crucial element of the country's soft power, serving to protect national interests and propagate its religious beliefs.

**Contribution:** This article explores South Korean Christian missions' historical and political evolution, from nationalist roots to global influencers. It highlights their role in South Korea's soft power strategy, shaping domestic policies and global perceptions. Moreover, it sheds light on Asia, especially Korea, becoming a pivotal hub for Christian missionary endeavours, reflecting a global shift in missionary focus.

**Keywords:** Korean Christianity; foreign missions; political interaction; historical development; international political environment.

## Introduction

Korea, being part of the Sinographic World and strongly influenced by Confucian culture, has rapidly transitioned from non-existent knowledge of Christianity to being a prominent global missionary nation within a little timeframe of over a century from the advent of Christianity in the 1880s. From the 1990s onwards, Korea has experienced a significant surge in international missionary operations, eventually becoming the second-largest missionary country globally, behind the United States. Nevertheless, South Korea's overseas missionary operations have been curtailed to some extent since the events in Afghanistan in 2007. In 2013, the Korean church ranked sixth in the statistics generated by Christianity Today in the USA. However, the number of missionaries dispatched per million people (1014) remains significantly higher than that of the USA (614) and is the highest among countries with populations over 5 million. This indicates that the Korean church remains the global leader in terms of missionary motivation (Christianity Today survey 2013). Undoubtedly, the missionary fervour, missionary ideology and missionary practices of Korean Christianity have exerted a significant influence on the advancement of Christianity in Asia and globally.

Prior to the 1990s, foreign missions in Korea were mostly evangelistic in nature. However, since then, the activity has become closely intertwined with domestic politics and national strategy, and the motivation for the missionary work has been imbued with a more political dimension. The political implications underlying the motivations for missionary activities in Korea have been examined by Chinese academics. In his 2018 study, Qian Yong and Zhao Yinji (2018:155–166) highlight the significant influence of political issues on the transformation of foreign missionary operations in Korea, shifting from a focus on quantity to a focus on quality. This work incorporates and revises certain data from the cited source. Tang Xiaofeng (2021:488) points out that Christianity in Korea plays an important role in politics, influencing the country's domestic and foreign affairs,

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while receiving government policy and material support aimed at consolidating power and enhancing the national image. Liu Yuchen (2020:72), on the other hand, argues that Korean Protestant Christianity's foreign missionary activities are an effective means of civil diplomacy, which has grown rapidly with the expansion of international relations and the government's acquiescence to become part of the country's soft power.

Through the lens of political science, this study seeks to investigate the political forces behind the presence of foreign missions in Korea. This study aims to methodically analyse the historical correlation between Christian foreign missionary activities and politics in Korea, considering both international and domestic politics. It will also examine the practical consequences of this interaction in modern society. The ultimate goal is to offer fresh insights into the relationship between religion and politics.

## **Transformation of the global Christian missionary movement: From the Western centre to the rise of Korea**

Since the 19th century, the epicentre of the global Christian missionary movement has experienced a significant geographical transformation. Initially, Europe, exemplified by Britain, led the movement; however, as the 20th century unfolded, North America emerged as the new hub. By the 21st century, the focal point of Christian missions had notably pivoted towards the southern hemisphere, particularly in Asian and African nations. The shift of the Christian missionary centre to the Southern Hemisphere is attributed to the region's population growth, strong religious culture and increasing social needs, which have facilitated the spread of Christianity. Additionally, globalisation has accelerated resource sharing, further enhancing the international influence of Southern Hemisphere churches and driving this geographical shift. It is noteworthy that the world's largest Supervisory Church, the largest Presbyterian Church and the largest Charismatic Church are not located in their traditional European or North American strongholds but are all found in Seoul (Chung 2014:328), South Korea, underscoring the rapid expansion of Christianity in the country and heralding a new religious geography. This shift coincides with a global religious resurgence, during which the Christian missionary movement has undergone substantial changes, including increased gender and racial diversity among missionaries. The emergence of terms such as 'third church' and 'changing missionary complexion' indicates a new visage of Christianity. Furthermore, the rise of 'counter (reverse) missions', 'immigrant missions', and the repositioning of cities such as Seoul and Nairobi as new missionary centres, akin to Boston and Nashville, underscores the trend of globalisation in Christian missions (Xu 2008:3). In this context, Korean Christianity's development stands out. It has achieved remarkable domestic growth and has become a significant

force in political life, exerting considerable influence on the nation. Korean missionary activities have also embraced globalisation, with missionaries operating worldwide and playing a pivotal role in the global dissemination of Christianity.

Korea's foreign missionary endeavours can be traced back to 1912, evolving through embryonic, pioneering and rapid growth phases, particularly in the 1990s (Kim 2011:110–124). In 1979, the number of Korean overseas missionaries was a mere 93, which surged to 1645 by 1990 (Moon 2006:276). In 2007, Korea's foreign missionary activities reached a peak, with the number of overseas missionaries increasing by 18.8% year-on-year to 17 697, accounting for 15% of the total number of overseas missionaries in the world according to the standards of Foreign Missionaries (FM), making Korea the world's second largest exporter of missionaries (GODpia News 2008; Korea World Mission Association [KWMA] Research and Development Office 2016).

According to the latest statistics from KWMA, a Korean missionary research organisation, 21 917 Korean long-term missionaries from as many as 223 missionary agencies (mission groups and altars), 451 short-term missionaries (affiliated with mission groups), and 950 foreign international missionaries dispatched by Korean mission groups have been active in 174 countries and territories around the world as of 2023 (KWMA Research and Development Office 2024). The rapid growth in the number of Korean missionaries reflects the expansion drive within domestic churches and a strong cultural emphasis on foreign missions. The steady development of Korean churches provides a solid foundation for sending missionaries, while Korean Christian communities' commitment to global service and the mission of spreading the gospel has garnered broad social support and resource backing for missionary activities. This combined internal and external momentum has established Korea's significant position in the field of global missions.

## **Domestic political factors in Korea becoming a major Christian missionary power**

As a cultural and social force, the intersection of religion with politics is inevitable, primarily manifesting in societal power structures and interest distributions, thereby influencing all strata of social life (He 2001:6). In Asia, the propagation of Christianity has frequently been entwined with colonialism. However, the trajectory of Christianity in Korea has been unique, swiftly merging with nationalist sentiments to combat foreign colonial dominance and emerging as a pivotal force within the national movement. This distinctive characteristic has endowed Korean Christianity with a significant role in the nation's political evolution.

During the Japanese colonial era, the Korean Church was a cradle of the independence and Enlightenment movements.

The involvement of Christians in the renowned 'March 1st Movement' was particularly conspicuous, with 16 of the 33 signatories of the 'March 1st Declaration of Independence' identifying as Christians (Christian Korean Newspaper 2014). The Japanese colonial administration perceived Christians as the impetus behind the movement, and of the 9458 individuals arrested, 3373 – representing 35% – were Christians (The Korea Christian Newspaper 2016). Korean scholars have noticed that 'in the March 1st Movement, the epicentre of the masses was Christianity, with most leaders being Christians, most movement venues being Christian congregations, and Christianity suffering the most (Kim 1992:318)'. Based on the theory of political opportunity structure, Korean Christianity has continually gained space for development within the nationalist movement and democratisation process, uniting the public under a religious identity to advocate for political rights. During this period, Christian churches became pillars of national unity, laying the foundation for Christianity's profound influence in Korean politics.

Post-liberation, South Korea saw Christian elder Syngman Rhee become the first president. Subsequently, although in the domestic political history of South Korea, Presidents Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) and Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013) were both church elders prior to their elections, and Presidents Yun Bo-seon (1960–1961), Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993) and Park Geun-hye (2013–2016) were also Christians, the relationship between politics and religion during their tenures did not reach the same level of intimacy as it did during the presidency of Lee Seung-man. Upon assuming power, Lee Seung-man immediately initiated a 'honeymoon period' in the relationship between politics and religion. Lacking a domestic political foundation, Lee actively sought the Christian community's backing, enabling the Church to amplify its political sway. In the 1952 presidential election, approximately 3500 churches and over 700000 adherents supported Lee Seung-wan (Park 2003:179), evidencing the Church's mobilisational potency in politics. Via newspapers and religious networks, the Korean Christian Church campaigned for Lee Seung-wan and fostered a societal atmosphere that sanctified voting as a 'divine mission'. This reinforced the Church's ties with political authority and solidified its societal influence, significantly bolstering its social base. The Church attracted numerous social elites, reinvigorating the organisation, and, with their social influence, enhanced cooperation with the government, thus propelling the Church's development. Numerous pastors evolved into social and political leaders, elevating the status of believers.

Under the regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, the Christian community's dominance in Korean politics waned, diminishing its political clout. This decline is partly attributable to Korea's traditional Confucian governance, inherently authoritarian and hierarchical, conflicting with Christianity's principles of equality, justice, freedom, democracy and human rights, leading to pronounced

church-state conflicts. Despite Christianity's inability to directly engage in governmental political activities or significantly sway political decisions during the transition to democracy, it played an indispensable role in the democracy movement. Christianity acted as a conduit between civil society and its rights, leveraging its political engagement experience and international democratic support to connect the government with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and participate in public affairs, preventing potential social unrest and extremism.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Korean Christianity actively contributed to social stability and economic growth, enabling a peaceful transition to democracy without severe disruptions. President Kim Dae-jung affirmed that 'Christianity provided spiritual guidance for the country's modernisation and democratisation (Centre for Religious Studies of the State Administration of Religion 2007:510)' and without Christian faith, democracy would be unattainable. The Church's significant impact on civic movements corresponded with a rapid increase in Christians and churches from the 1960s to the 1980s (Kim 2000:117), peaking in spiritual fervour and stimulating missionary zeal, although foreign missionary activities remained nascent and limited in scale.

With Korea's political democratisation, Christian political engagement evolved. Christianity often disseminated its political views through its influence, realising its will via political leverage by Christian members of the National Assembly and executive leaders. In the early democratic era, the Korean economy's rapid growth led to a surge in Christian believers (Miao 1998:45). However, as society stabilised, the Church's roles were supplanted by advanced social security systems and civic organisations, slowing down the growth of believers and marking the first decline in 2007 (Kukmin 2013). Against this backdrop, the Church's political involvement shifted, with churches influencing government officials and infiltrating political ideology subtly. Korean Christianity primarily influenced domestic politics through individual citizens, groups, and the political hierarchy, raising public awareness and expanding its political influence, becoming a vital force in Korean politics.

The increased influence of Korean Christianity on domestic politics is equally reflected in its profound impact on the government's foreign policy. This was particularly evident during the Lee Myung-bak administration. As South Korea's third president of Christian elder origin, Christian influence in the government reached an all-time high during his presidency. Nine of the 16 ministers in the government cabinet are Christians, and as many as 70 of the 170 members of the National Assembly of the ruling Grand National Party are Christians (Naver News 2009). By virtue of their overwhelming dominance within the government, Christian forces have directly and indirectly influenced South Korea's foreign policy and relations. In addition, Korean Christianity has been heavily funded through its prestige and position within the government. Since the 1990s, the Ministry of



Sports, Culture and Tourism (MOCAT) has not only strongly supported domestic Christianity-related activities but has also provided substantial funding to support the dispatch of overseas missionaries. During the Lee Myung-bak administration from 2008 to 2012, the ministry provided 1906 million won to Christian organisations under the name of 'Support for Religious and Cultural Activities', with nearly half of the funds going to the 'General Christian Federation of Korea' (Voice of the People 2013). The 'General Christian Council of Korea', established in 1989, serves as a church organisation characterised by its conservative and evangelical attributes, actively fulfilling its mission to propagate the Christian faith and the gospel. As a member of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the Council is particularly zealous in its missionary activities directed towards North Korea and third-world countries.

During the Park Geun-hye administration, foreign missions were further emphasised, with the government acknowledging the importance of global missionary and service activities by religious workers as a form of civil diplomacy (Naver News 2013). Despite a temporary reduction in funding for religious groups under the Moon Jae-in administration due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the subsequent Yun Seok-yeol administration saw a swift increase in investment in religious groups, with allocations stabilising at over 80 billion won, indicating sustained governmental support for religious development (The Seoul Economic Daily 2023).

Following South Korea's democratisation, the political engagement of Korean Christianity underwent significant changes, fostering a closer relationship between the Korean church and the government. This mutual support and cooperation have positioned South Korea as a leading nation in global missionary work. From the 1970s to the 1990s, South Korea experienced rapid economic growth, which led the government to shift its focus towards enhancing its national image and increasing its international influence through the development of soft power, particularly in the cultural sector.

The expansion of Korean Christianity's influence in overseas missions coincided with the government's objectives of elevating South Korea's global standing. Christian missionary activities were seen as a tool to advance national prestige and diplomatic presence. Simultaneously, Korean churches benefitted from state policies and support, which enabled them to expand rapidly. Not only did this facilitate the churches' primary goal of evangelism, but it also allowed them to play an active role in supporting South Korea's broader cultural diplomacy initiatives.

This strategic partnership between the church and the state demonstrates how religious institutions can contribute to national objectives, particularly in the realm of soft power and cultural export.

## Interactive development of Korean Christian foreign missions and the international political environment

Christian foreign missionary endeavours are primarily facilitated through two avenues: church-sponsored initiatives and civilian interactions, both of which are contingent upon a stable international political climate. Amicable international relations not only amplify the scope and frequency of cross-country interactions but also create additional opportunities for Christian evangelism. However, if international relations are strained, missionary activities may be hindered.

In the 1950s and 1960s, under the international cold war, ideological rivalries led to limited contact between different countries and difficulties in civil interaction. This was also the period when the ideological confrontation between the North and the South on the Korean Peninsula was most acute. In diplomacy, South Korea adhered to the 'anti-communist line' and the 'Hallstein-Doktrin principle of diplomacy' and refused to establish diplomatic relations with any socialist country or neutral country. The 'Hallstein Doctrine' referred to here is the fundamental principle of West German foreign policy in the mid-1950s, named after the State Secretary of the Foreign Office of the Federal Republic of Germany, Walter Hallstein. In the context of South Korean diplomacy, this principle is manifested by the stance that South Korea is the sole legitimate government on the Korean Peninsula, does not recognise the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, and refrains from establishing or maintaining diplomatic relations with any country that has diplomatic relations with North Korea. This is akin to the One-China policy advocated by the government of the People's Republic of China. As a result, Korea refused to establish diplomatic relations with any socialist countries or neutral countries, and only 16 countries had diplomatic relations with Korea until 1960 (NKChosun 2013). In the international political landscape of the Cold War, Korea's overseas missionary activities encountered many obstacles. The international situation during this period was so complex and volatile that not only countries with opposing ideologies imposed restrictions on the activities of Korean missionaries, but also countries with similar political camps, such as Japan, imposed many restrictions on the entry and activities of Korean missionaries. Such political constraints have directly affected the number of Korean overseas missionaries and the geographical distribution of their missionary activities, resulting in a very limited number of missionaries being sent overseas and the areas they cover.

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the easing of the Cold War, Korea began to pursue a multifaceted foreign policy, establishing diplomatic relations with the socialist countries of Eastern Europe and other countries, which facilitated both official and private exchanges, and the number of countries with which Korea has established diplomatic relations increased rapidly to 114 countries (NKChosun 2013). From this period, the number of Korean missionaries sent overseas began to

increase significantly, and by the 1980s, the number of Korean missionaries could be found in OM (Operation Mobilisation), OMF (Overseas Missionary Fellowship), SIM (Serving In Mission), GBT (Global Bible Translators) (Kim 2011:124), and other international missionary organisations. Benefiting from improved international relations, Japan and the Philippines became the countries to which Korea sent the most missionaries in the 1980s (Park 1997:330–331).

By the 1990s, the conclusion of the Cold War and the diminishing of ideological tensions allowed Korea to establish diplomatic relations with socialist nations such as the Soviet Union and China, increasing the total number of countries with which Korea had diplomatic relations to 145 (NKChosun 2013). During this era, the external conditions for foreign missions in Korea were highly favourable, and Korean Christian missionary organisations and adherents engaged in global missionary work, often facilitated by activities such as business, education, travel, migration, study tours and employment. Since the mid-20th century, within the framework of the 'the global resurgence of religion', the new Christian missionary movement has significantly reshaped the world's religious landscape and emerged as a pivotal influence on international relations. In the context of religion and international relations, Scott M. Thomas has defined the 'global resurgence of religion' as a phenomenon where religion gains increasing significance and persuasive power. This is characterised by the growing importance of religious beliefs, practices and discourses in both personal and public spheres, as well as the escalating influence of religious figures, non-state actors, political parties, communities and organisations within domestic politics. Furthermore, this resurgence is exerting a substantial impact on international politics (Thomas 2005:28–32).

The pathways through which missionary activities impact international relations can be understood in several key dimensions (Xu 2010:47). Firstly, shaping foreign policy is one of the most direct ways in which missionary work influences global affairs. Religious beliefs and values transmitted through missions affect the decisions of policymakers, mould public opinion and reach ordinary citizens in both the sending and receiving countries. This religious influence becomes embedded in national discourse, impacting how foreign policies are formulated and implemented.

Secondly, missionary activities often serve as a source of legitimacy for a country's foreign actions. For instance, the contemporary concepts of 'just war' and 'humanitarian intervention' can be traced to Christian theological roots. These religiously driven ideas provide moral and ethical frameworks that justify foreign engagement, especially in international conflicts or humanitarian crises.

Thirdly, missionary work can involve direct or indirect engagement in international affairs. This can occur through Christian organisations that are either state-related or operate as non-state actors. These organisations often influence global

politics and diplomacy, navigating international relations independently or in concert with their home governments.

Fourthly, Christianity as a tool for transnational identity formation is particularly evident in Western nations, where religious identity often plays a more significant role in international relations than ethnic, class or gender identities. This religious identity fosters a sense of shared values and principles across borders, which can strengthen alliances and cooperation between nations.

Fifthly, soft power is one of the primary avenues through which missionary activities contribute to a nation's international influence. By promoting values such as humanitarianism, education and cultural exchange, Christian organisations enhance their host country's soft power. This influence not only raises the nation's international profile but also helps shape foreign policies in a manner aligned with religious and cultural objectives.

The rise of South Korea's foreign missionary work in the context of the global religious revival can be seen not only as a result of Christian spiritual commitment to the slogan 'spreading the gospel worldwide', but also as a product of South Korea's cultural diplomacy, aimed at expanding its international influence and showcasing its emerging power following its economic boom.

After the 1980s, and particularly throughout the 1990s, South Korea's economy experienced rapid growth. The country's gross domestic product (GDP) soared from 101st in the world in 1962 to 11th place, while its per capita gross national product (GNP) surpassed \$10 000. In 1996 (Park 2012), South Korea successfully joined the OECD, marking its entry into the ranks of developed capitalist nations. Following its Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) membership, South Korea began to align itself with global standards not only in the economic realm but also across various sectors, actively pursuing its 21st-century goal of becoming a globalised, 'unified central nation'. This ambition included becoming a model state admired internationally and fostering a prosperous and comfortable society for its citizens.

As part of its broader globalisation efforts, South Korea adopted the strategy of 'nation-building through culture' as a means to achieve these objectives. Within this framework, the overseas missionary activities of Korean Christian organisations perfectly aligned with the nation's development goals. Beginning in the 1990s, the South Korean government provided substantial support for these missionary endeavours. In turn, these missions expanded the country's cultural exports, enhanced its soft power, and strengthened its identity alignment with Western nations. Moreover, these activities helped improve South Korea's diplomatic relationships with the countries where missions were active and promoted inter-Korean exchanges, contributing to a reduction in tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

As Korea's status solidified as a developed capitalist nation, its Christian missionary endeavours aligned with the country's strategic developmental objectives. Consequently, since the 1990s, the government has actively supported and financed Korean Christian missions abroad, recognising their importance in enhancing the nation's cultural soft power.

## Conclusion

Since the 1970s, propelled by the global trend of religious revival and de-secularisation, Korean Christianity has risen to become the world's second-largest missionary nation among emerging Christian countries. This status is not attributable to a single element but rather to a confluence of factors, including the domestic political milieu, the intrinsic evolution of Korean Christianity, economic prosperity, and the nation's cultural identity and consciousness. With its swift economic ascent, the Korean government has increasingly focused on nurturing soft power, such as cultural influence, to elevate the country's global image and standing. The expanding reach of Korean Christian missionary activities has aligned with governmental objectives to boost national prestige. State support has thus presented Korean Christianity with the chance to flourish and disseminate its teachings, simultaneously bolstering Korea's cultural export initiatives.

The impact of political factors on Korean Christian foreign missionary endeavours has been ambivalent. It has significantly amplified the global reach of the Korean church, broadened Korea's influence in mission fields, and established a basis for stronger political and economic relations with these nations. Conversely, political considerations have also introduced numerous challenges to Korean missions, occasionally straining inter-Korean and Sino-Korean relations.

In the post-democratisation period, the conservative inclination of Korean Christianity has become pronounced, with its political engagement often led by conservative factions and channelled through church alliances, NGOs and religious-affiliated political parties. Regarding foreign missions, Korean Christianity has vigorously advocated a robust stance, mirroring the political influences shaping missionary tactics and orientations.

The symbiotic collaboration between Korean Christianity and the government has facilitated the church's global expansion and integrated Korean Christianity into the nation's soft power apparatus. However, amidst fluctuating political landscapes, Korean Christianity grapples with the challenge of maintaining a balance between political engagement and religious impartiality, all while safeguarding national interests and propagating its beliefs.

This study reveals the multifaceted role of religion in the construction of national soft power, offering new perspectives for understanding the interaction between religion and politics. Future research could further explore how Korean Christianity continues to exert its influence in developing countries.

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This article is completed by Q.Y. and Z.Y. The first author, Q.Y. was mainly responsible for writing and methodology, and the corresponding author Z.Y. is responsible for supervising, reviewing, editing, methodology and resources.

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This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

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