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**Twelve Influential Early
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Twelve Influential Early Korean Preachers

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Yi, Gi Pung (1868–1942)

Myung Jin Chae¹

I have heard from many people that the first page in the book entitled, The History of the Korean Church, stored in The Library of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., records that a bully had struck the missionary Moffett in the jaw, but later repented, and became a missionary to Jeju Island. My father always told me this when he was alive: "It breaks my heart even now that I struck Moffett with a rock." (From Yi's daughter)²

Introduction

Yi was one of Korea's first pastors, and the first missionary sent by the Korean Church. He was led to repentance after assaulting Samuel A. Moffett, a missionary in *Pyeongyang*, in 1893, and was later baptized by W. L. Swallen.³ In 1908, Yi set the cornerstone of Korean missions by going Jeju Island as the first missionary sent by the Korean Presbyterian Church to the outer provincial regions. He planted churches in *Jeju*, *Gwangju*, *Suncheon*, *Yeosu*, and other locations. In 1933, while strongly opposing the Japanese colonial government's imposition of Shinto worship, Yi was accused of spying for America and imprisoned. He was released on bail for health reasons on June 13, 1942, and died a week later in the *Wuhakli* Church.⁴ As one of Korea's first pastors the issues and features of Gi Pung Yi's ministry and missionary efforts are very important.

Historical background

On November 21, 1868, Gi Pung Yi was born. From childhood Gi Pung Yi was witty and wise. Many adults in the village called him a prodigy. When he was six, he readily recited from the four books and five classics of Chinese philosophy, and at the age of twelve he won first place in a writing contest with his calligraphy. He was also coarse and tough. As he grew older and more

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² Sa-Rye Yi, *Missionary and Martyr: The Life and Faith of Rev. Yi Gi-Pung* (Seoul: Kiats, 2008), 73.

³ *North American Presbyterian Missionary: One World Tree Ancestry* (Seoul: Kiats, 2008), 33.

⁴ Yeosoosi Nam Myun Wuhak Li 223, Gi Pung Yi died at this church

http://yexpo.kr/new/bbs/board.php?bo_table=skin&wr_id=45



vigorous, he began to show his ferocious side. During the *Pyeongyang* senior advisor's parade he turned around and glared at the parade leader. He ran to the advisor, grabbed him by his leg and pulled him off his horse and threw him onto the ground. Because of his vigor, he was called upon whenever stone fighting happened at his village. He hated western people, so he hurt the missionary Moffett's chin by throwing a stone. However this incident when he hurt the missionary Moffett's chin burdened to him in his life, and it caused him to turn to God's way.

In 1898, he spread the gospel around *HamKyungDo*, Northeastern province of Korea as a *gwonseo* and in 1907 he graduated from *Pyeongyang* Presbyterian Seminary in the first class. He was ordained by *Yasogyo* presbytery (Presbyterian Church of Korea)⁵ on September 17 at *Pyeongyang Chang Dae Hyung* Church with 7 pastors.⁶ In 1908, he was sent by the presbytery as the first missionary to Jeju Island. Working on Jeju Island until 1915, he founded 10 churches. After that he took care of *Chung Nam Kwang Ju* Church, *Soon Cheon* Church, *Go Heung* Church, and *Jeju Sung Nae* Church. In 1921, he served as the tenth moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Korea, and in 1983 he struggled to reject worship at the Japanese Shinto shrines, was arrested, and accused of being a spy for America. In 1942, since Japan tortured him intensely, his health grew weaker and he was released from prison. After a last communion service at the *Wuhakni* Church on June 20, 1942 he died.

Relationship with Samuel A. Moffett

People called pastor Gi Pung Yi the Korean Apostle Paul. When he was a young man, he was a hot blooded man. Because of his strong character he was called upon whenever a stone fight happened with an outside village. One day he went to Missionary Moffett's house with his subordinates and damaged the house throwing the stones. And also he hit missionary Moffett's chin by throwing a stone. In addition to this, he damaged the Chang Dae Hyun church which was being built. However the incident in which he attacked missionary Moffett's chin pressed upon his consciousness and he had very hard time. One day he met missionary W. L. Swallen, and the missionary's similar appearance to Moffett made him to be very guilty. In a dream, Jesus came to him and asked, "Gi Pung, Gi Pung, Why do you persecute me? You will be the man who testifies of me." This incident made him to repent so deeply. After this incident, he went to visit missionary Swallen, apologized, and repented that he damaged missionary Moffett's house and hit his chin by throwing stones. He decided to live for God and to become a pastor in order to expiate his wrong behavior.

Gi Pung Yi is the man who persecuted me on the Pyeong Yang Street throwing a stone to me. However, after he repent, he got baptism on 1896. When he started to be Jesus' person, he worked for sending Gospel going

⁵ KIATS ed., *Yi Gi Pung: Essential writing* (Seoul: Kiats, 2008), 88.

⁶ Pastor Moffett established this church on 1893, the first church of Pyeong An Do.
http://kcm.kr/dic_view.php?nid=39594

around regions. Because he was hard worker, I ordained him such a colporteur. Now he is working as a leader. – Missionary Moffett⁷

Gwonseo, a Bible Seller

Before Gi Pung Yi entered the *Pyeong Yang* Theological Seminary, his very important achievement was that he was working as a colporteur, or Bible seller and Bible recommender (*Gwonseo*). Later after 1915, the term *gwonseo* became more popular. Under the control of Korean Bible Society, Bible sellers were in charge of the area of their work. They went into areas where the gospel had not been preached, distributed Bibles, and shared the gospel. Furthermore, traveling within the districts to which they were assigned, *gwonseos* distributed Bibles during the day and taught the scriptures and the gospel to those interested at their lodgings (either an inn or a reception room for male guests) in the evening. Therefore, the *gwonseos*' work of proclaiming the gospel made them forerunners to the missionaries. They were the advance guard for the missionaries. In the case that people showed interest in the gospel, they would set up a meeting place and establish a gospel gathering. Once the gathering grew, missionaries would come, baptize the people, and establish a church. Because the role of the *gwonseo* has never been mentioned in the history of the Korean Church, most historical books record that the establishment of the early Korean church was done by missionaries. As more people try to see the history of the Korean Church from a perspective independent from the missionaries, it is very encouraging that studies on *gwonseo* are becoming more thorough. *Gwonseo*'s activities were closely intertwined with the activities of the missionaries placed in the mission stations in each region. As shown earlier, the gospel began to penetrate Wonsan from 1892 through American Northern Presbyterian missionaries, such as Gale.⁸ Around 1894, Swallen, another Northern Presbyterian missionary, also arrived in Wonsan and led Yi Gi Pung and others to repentance. Therefore, Yi Gi Pung moved to Pyeongyang from Wonsan around 1901 and carried out the office of a helper, assisting missionaries such as Swallen. Then he was admitted to the seminary in 1902. Although he had strong support from Swallen and Moffett for his admission, what was equally important was his experience as *gwonseo* from 1899 to 1901. *Gwonseos* did not simply sell and distribute Bibles, but because they also had to preach the gospel and lead Bible studies, it meant they had a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Because of their thorough knowledge of the Bible, experiences such as being a *gwonseo* became an important part of the qualifications for admission into the seminary.

Jeju Island Mission

⁷ On April, 1889, ordained Korean missionary by North America presbytery. On 1890, came through Incheon Jemulpo, started his first mission at Mapo. http://edu.ubf.or.kr/xe/?document_srl=494

⁸ KIATS ed., *Yi Gi Pung: Essential Writing* (Seoul: Kiats, 2008), 89.



The most important achievement of Gi Pung Yi's mission is the Jeju Island mission. There were many problems to take the gospel to Jeju Island, especially island closure and the exclusive character of the island residents. Also people had strong doubts about foreign religion. These things made it difficult for Gi Pung Yi to spread the gospel on Jeju Island. The hardest thing was the ancestral rite. The ancestral rite is very important in understanding the family relationship of Jeju Island people. Usually in Korean culture, the first son has the responsibility for the ancestral rite. However, on Jeju Island, they have to have the ancestral rite called *Yoon Jae* for which not only the first son but all the sons have the responsibility. If they don't have sons, the brother-in-law should have the responsibility. This ritual meant to them that they could not make their parents as a ghost. Because Jeju Island has some special features and historical situations, shamanism and Buddhism have taken deep root. Also Jeju Island people thought that the popular beliefs are their way of salvation. Especially there were many shamans and gods of the snake, so that there were approximately 18,000 idols on the island. But Gi Pung Yi's volunteer mission that filled what the people needed was very helpful in spreading the gospel to the people. For example, he visited homes and helped with the male's role when the women went out to catch shellfish in the water, and he helped people recover from flood damage.

The Martyr

As one may know, from 1936, the Japanese governor general's enforcement of Shinto shrine worship brought the Catholic Church and the Methodist Church onto their knees.⁹ And also in September 1938, the Presbyterian general assembly succumbed to Shinto shrine worship by passing a resolution that Shinto is not a religion but a patriotic ritual that is not contrary to Christian doctrine. Although the Korean church had given in on an official level, from this time on, there arose a movement to oppose Shinto worship individually or in groups. The resistance movement of Rev. Yi and pastors in the *Suncheon* synod became active around 1940, and this made it impossible for them to attend the general assembly during 1940-1941. This absence was most likely due to their being arrested and detained by the police who discovered their resistance movement. As we can see from Yi Gi Pung's strife and suffering in prison, and as mentioned in his daughter's memories, it seems that the eighty year-old pastor was willing to be martyred even in this last battle. However, the Japanese colonial government did not allow him even the glory of martyrdom in jail. Released from prison because of sickness, he was taken to God in his pastoral residence of *Wuhakni* on June 20, 1942. Though he passed away quietly outside the prison, he had poured out his life before the cross, fighting righteously and alone in opposition to Shinto shrine worship to firmly uphold the integrity of his faith. By taking upon the suffering of the Korean people and the sin of the church, while choosing the thorny path of martyrdom, Rev. Yi became a living witness of the Korean Church.

⁹ Shintoism, also *kami-no-michi* is the indigenous spirituality of Japan and the people of Japan. It is a set of practices, to be carried out diligently, to establish a connection between present day Japan and its ancient past.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shinto>

The Features of Mission

The Korean Church community started spreading gospel 28 years after first accepting it. This was amazing work unmatched in other countries. Even the missionaries who came to Korea to spread the gospel were surprised. Gi Pung Yi was sent to Jeju Island in 1907. While at sea, the boat was wrecked because of the strong ocean waves, and pastor Gi Pung Yi fell overboard into the water. But a female diver in Jeju found and saved him. Gi Pung Yi preached the gospel to her, and she was the first person who accepted the gospel on Jeju Island.

Volunteer Mission Supporting the Needs of the Islanders

On Jeju Island usually women worked as sea divers, so there was a need for worker at the farming jobs. Pastor Gi Pung Yi helped the farming workers as volunteer so that he could be close with males on Jeju Island. Also Jeju Island's strong rainfall sometimes made serious problems. Sometimes people were in great danger because of floods, and it was really hard to save many people. However, whenever these situations arose, Gi Pung Yi jumped into the water and saved people, even though it was dangerous. His sacrifice volunteer mission opened peoples' hearts little by little to accept the gospel. Human relationship mission pastor Gi Pung Yi tried to meet and make a deep relationship with the people who were famous politically, but exiled. It endeared him to Jeju Island people as a special person. The representative person is Yung Hyo Park, who played the leading role of *GapSinJungByun*.¹⁰

When pastor Gi Pung Yi was in a very dangerous situation because of the *Hansung* newspaper incident, Park saved him from serious trouble. The *Hansung* Newspaper incident is when Gi Pung Yi left Jeju Island, he gave some information about Jeju Island people's customs to the *HanSung* Newspaper Company, and this information was printed in the newspaper. When the Jeju Island people read the article about Jeju Island by Gi Pung Yi, they were angry and tried to kill him by means of stones. Also in 1911 Yi made a deep relationship with Sung Hun Lee who was exiled because of the army school incident. Yi not only had a special relationship with high status people, but he also made deep relationships with Jeju Island people.

Healing Mission

Because Jeju Island was very far from land, there were many people who struggled with diseases, and Gi Pung Yi was very troubled about it. In the beginning of his mission, he was called "half doctor" and his wife had professional medical skills. But these things were not enough for the Jeju Island people. However, his mission was settled down on Jeju Island, and support was continued from the Presbyterian Church. He could help people medically and it was very helpful for him in spreading the gospel to the people. Sometimes when there were diseases which he was

¹⁰ Park, Yeong-hyo (1861 - September 21, 1939) was a Korean *Joseon* Dynasty politician, enlightenment activist, diplomat and, during the Japanese Colonial Period in Korea a Pro- Japanese activist. See *GapShinJungByun* in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Park_Yeong-hyo.

not able to treat through his limited medical skill, Gi Pung Yi healed them through prayer. Not only healing missions but he had spiritual war also. One day, he healed a crazy man who always stole people's belongings. After praying all night, he healed the person by prayer, and people thought Gi Pung Yi was the strongest spiritual person. Since that time people who were sick came to his church.

The Shortcomings of Gi Pung Yi's Mission

Gi Pung Yi was prepared well spiritually, but he did not have the basic cultural knowledge of Jeju Island nor did he engage in deep exploration of the customs of the people. He started to learn by experience when he arrived on Jeju Island. In those days Yi was a pioneer missionary so it was not easy, but this shows us that such knowledge is necessary to spread gospel. Jeju Island was exempted from the Korean Churches' missionary attention and in-depth knowledge and study. Even though it belongs to same country, Korea, the language and culture were totally different, so Yi had to experience many difficult times.

An example is the understanding of the mission area. When a missionary is sent, the self-awareness of the missionary is changed in response to the reception received by the people. Because the outsider needs to approach to the receiver, the outsider missionary will encounter this problem. Therefore most missionaries did not think about how cultural knowledge influences theological knowledge. So they thought only in terms of an academic viewpoint. If they studied theology enough, they may know it is important culturally, but they do not know it practically. They learned theory about another culture, but it was not enough for them. Because they were not trained in cultural studies they experienced cultural shock. Gi Pung Yi is a case of one who was not trained well. Nevertheless, Gi Pung Yi succeeded in overcoming these cultural shocks. However, mission without enough training is seriously lacking.

Conclusion

Gi Pung Yi is the minister, who was attached the modifier "first." He was one of the first Korean pastors, the first Korean missionary, and the first Korean missionary martyr. On Jeju Island where people are so exclusive and used strong dialects, he jumped into the situation of hardship with the passion of gospel. Finally the power of God's Holy Spirit appeared, and then he healed the mentally ill, sick patients, and took care of people who were poor. In the Japanese colonial era, he was tortured by Japanese officers because he did not worship at the Shinto shrines. However he did not surrender and eventually he died for his faith to God. In the face of persecution he rejected unfaithful behavior for the love of Jesus Christ. Because of Gi Pung Yi, Korean Christianity could stand, and be the strongest missionary making country the next to America. We should not forget about his passion, faith, and mind to live for God, and follow the narrow way of Jesus Christ.

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