

2017

Project Eagle

Robert S. Kim

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PROJECT EAGLE

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PROJECT EAGLE

THE AMERICAN CHRISTIANS OF
NORTH KOREA IN WORLD WAR II

Robert S. Kim

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*To my grandfather and grandmother,
Pak Doo Jae (1909-50) and Chu Yong Ai (1911-2004),
who lived through the events that this book describes.*

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PREFACE

On September 20, 1884, a young physician from the United States arrived in the little-known country of Korea, which was ending a long period of isolation and opening itself to foreigners for the first time in centuries. He was the first of hundreds of American Christian missionaries who served in Korea for over half a century, establishing a special relationship between Americans and Koreans at a time when few in the United States had ever heard of Korea. They spread Christianity throughout Korea, established its first universities and hospitals, and brought Western ideas and science. They began the process that made South Korea the modern, successful, and technologically advanced society that it is today.

Sixty years later, during the final months of the Second World War, an army of Koreans in exile was poised to return to Korea to start the liberation of their country from the empire of Japan. It was the product of the first alliance between the United States and Korea, made between the Korean government in exile and the U.S. intelligence service, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Called Project Eagle, it united OSS officers who were sons of the first American missionaries in Korea with a Korean liberation movement led by Christians inspired by American ideals, brought to Korea by the missionaries.

Memory of this first American alliance with the people of Korea is nonexistent in the United States. Other than a few Korean Americans, no one remembers that Americans once had a special relationship with

Koreans over a century ago. Project Eagle disappeared into the classified records of the Central Intelligence Agency soon after the Second World War, completely forgotten by the time that the United States began to pay attention to Korea during the Korean War. Even during the wave of Second World War remembrance from the 1990s onward, Project Eagle escaped notice, as its last participants faded and passed away. Americans' historical memory of Korea essentially commences with the Korean War of 1950–53, overlooking several generations of shared experience.

The role of Pyongyang as the virtual capital of American Christians in Korea has been especially forgotten. Pyongyang and other cities in what is now North Korea were the main centers of Christianity in Korea a century ago, the hotbeds of the movement that made Korea the heavily Christian nation that it is today. At a time of widespread debate about the eventual fate of North Korea and of work to rescue and reach out to people in North Korea by Korean Christians, the forgotten American heritage in North Korea has taken on a new relevance that demands remembrance.

This book resurrects the lost history of these six decades of common experience between Koreans and Americans. The main vehicle for describing it is the story of three lives, one Korean and two American, spanning the entire period and all of its main events. The Korean is Kim Ku, the foremost leader of the Korean struggle for independence from Imperial Japan. He emerged from humble origins to lead a movement of exiled Korean patriots who kept the dream of Korean independence alive. The Americans are Clarence Weems and George McCune, leading Christian missionaries in what is now North Korea who lived and raised families there for over three decades. Their sons, also named Clarence Weems and George McCune, then became the leading minds behind the U.S.-Korean alliance of the Second World War as wartime intelligence officers in the OSS.

NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

This book uses current place-names and romanizations, except in a few instances where an older name or romanization will be clearer for a Western reader. For example, the names Beijing and Shenzhen are used in place of wartime references to Peiping (Peking) and Canton. On the other hand, the wartime spelling Chungking is used instead of the modern romanization, Chongqing, and the historical name Mukden is used instead of the current name Shenyang. Similarly, romanization of Korean names will use the revised system officially adopted in Korea in 2000 instead of the older McCune-Reischauer system, except where names under the older system or nonstandard names are in general use in English-speaking countries. Two such names are those of Kim Ku and Syngman Rhee, the two leading figures of the Korean independence movement.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Reconstructing little-known events from seventy years earlier is a difficult task, and numerous individuals in the United States and Korea were essential to this instance of it. Members of the Weems and McCune families generously offered their family histories and personal memories from Korea, without which telling the stories of Clarence Weems and George McCune would have been impossible. They include, but are not limited to, Peter Weems, Jonathan Weems, Helen McCune Lawless, Antoinette McCune Bement, and Heather McCune Thompson. Robert Sargent, son of Clyde Sargent, contributed invaluable memories and photographs of his father in China, especially his involvement in Project Eagle. Kim Dong Jin, founder of the Hulbert Memorial Society, provided essential insight and access to people and resources in Korea. The staffs of the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, the Presbyterian Historical Society in Philadelphia, and the United Methodist Archives and History Center at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey, patiently responded to my many requests for information over the course of several years. Last but far from least, my colleagues in the U.S. government over the years have taught me numerous lessons on how military and civilian organizations of the U.S. government work overseas in wartime, without which properly understanding the events described in this book could not occur.