



Making Democracy Compatible with Mission: *James Earnest Fisher as a Missionary and US Information Officer in Korea, 1919–1948*

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Abstract

*This paper examines the ideas and activities of James Earnest Fisher (1886–1989) in Korea. Fisher first came to Korea in 1919 as a missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and taught at Chosen Christian College until 1934. Having published *Democracy and Mission Education in Korea* (1928), based on his PhD dissertation, Fisher introduced John Dewey’s ideas on democracy and education to colonial Korea and tried to reinterpret the goals of mission education there. He argued for democracy as an educational goal when many Koreans were energized by new trends such as socialism. After Japan’s defeat in 1945 and with Korea under divided occupation, Fisher returned to Korea in 1946 as a USAMGIK official for political education and public relations. He sought to propagate American democracy in southern Korea, participated in the US-USSR Joint Commission talks in 1947, and helped to establish the South Korean government in 1948. Fisher’s ideas and activities show a unique aspect of Korean-American relations in terms of how Christian mission and a certain view of democracy were articulated under Japanese colonial rule, and during the formative period leading to the establishment of the Republic of Korea.*

Keywords: James Earnest Fisher, democracy, mission education, Korean-American relations, US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), Methodist Episcopal Church, South

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Introduction

Soon after Japan's surrender in August 1945, US forces occupied the Korean Peninsula south of the 38th parallel, while Soviet forces occupied the northern part of the peninsula. The United States established a military government in its occupation zone—the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945–1948)—and sought to set up there a US-friendly regime. Because there were no meaningful experts on Korea in the US government, American missionaries who worked in Korea during the Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) became the most important group within the USAMGIK. In this context, James Earnest Fisher (1886–1989),¹ as a missionary and scholar with many years of experience in colonial Korea, came to play an important role as an USAMGIK official in the years leading up to the establishment of the Republic of Korea south of the 38th parallel.

Fisher first came to Korea as an educational missionary and worked mostly at Chosen Christian College (currently Yonsei University) as a professor from 1919 to 1934. During that time, he introduced John Dewey's ideas on democracy and education, and tried to reinterpret the goals of mission education in colonial Korea. After returning to the United States in 1934, he went to work for the US government, and after the outbreak of World War II served as an officer in the OSS (Office of Strategic Services), the forerunner of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). With the end of the war, he returned to Korea as Director of Political Education in the Office of Public Opinion, Ministry of Public Information of the USAMGIK (Fisher 1977, 214).² Fisher's ideas and activities reflect the character of the

1. Though Fisher's birth year is 1886 (Fisher 1977, 311–313), his 60th birthday was greatly commemorated in Korea when he was working for the USAMGIK in 1947. "Pibaksa hoegapyeon" (Dr. Fisher's 60th Birthday Party), *Jayu sinmun*, September 24, 1947. All the newspaper articles cited in this paper came from the Korean History Database of the National Institute of Korean History, available at <http://db.history.go.kr>.

2. For Fisher's biography, there is to date no good reference. "Appendix: Biographical Sketch of the Author" found in Fisher (1977) is the only existing biography of Fisher. Thus, the author pieced together the chronology of Fisher's life from Fisher's various writings. For example, for World War II and the immediate postwar period, his autobiographical *Pioneer of Modern Korea* is particularly informative (Fisher 1977, 211–227, 311–313).

Korean democracy that was being formulated during the era of US military occupation, a topic which has not received sufficient scholarly attention.

Fisher is not mentioned in well-known studies on the post-1945 period (e.g. Cumings 1981; 1990). Moreover, postcolonial/postwar South Korea, as an outpost of the Cold War, put “security over democracy” in nation-building, particularly during 1945–1953 (Brazinsky 2007, 13–40). Even if Fisher has been mentioned, his ideas on democracy have not been seriously addressed in terms of understanding the postwar framework of democracy in South Korea (Park 2002). Scholarship, and particularly Korean scholarship, has only recently begun to focus on Fisher’s ideas on mission and democracy, primarily during the colonial period (Lee 2012; Hwang 2016).

Most existing literature analyzes the contents of Fisher’s dissertation-based book published in the late 1920s (Fisher [1928] 1970), rather than its relationship with his actual activities. Fisher’s ideas have been examined together with those of Horace H. Underwood (1890–1951), who worked with Fisher at Chosen Christian College, as propounded in Underwood’s book, *Modern Education in Korea* (1926) (Kang 2014). These two missionary-professors shared similar concerns about colonial education and institutions. Another academic focus of existing literature is the relationship between Fisher’s book and John Dewey’s education philosophy and democracy (Cho 2014). This last trend is understandable considering Fisher was an ardent supporter of democratic education as a student of William H. Kilpatrick, whose professor was John Dewey.

Though Fisher’s basic ideas on democracy and mission education during the colonial period have been expounded upon by several scholars, a number of important questions remain to be addressed. First, beyond the relationship between mission and democracy, how did Fisher conceptualize democracy? Second, what was the continuity and discontinuity in Fisher’s ideas about democracy between colonial-period and post-1945 Korea? Third, what was the legacy of Fisher’s ideas and activities in postcolonial/postwar South Korea?

This paper will deal with both Fisher’s ideas on democracy during the colonial period, and his post-1945 understanding of democracy,

Further, this paper will delineate the contours of the democratic projects of the United States in South Korea by way of Fisher's work for US public relations on democratic education in post-colonial South Korea. Traditional interpretations have argued the positive aspects of the American implantation of democracy in South Korea, while revisionist interpretations have drawn a negative picture of the US suppression of the Korean people's zeal for a unified and democratic Korea (Park 2002). However, the United States Army Military Government's ideas on democracy and institutions had a lengthy impact on South Korean history by defining South Korean democracy as an anti-communistic liberal democracy.

Fisher's Activities in the Colonial Context as a Missionary Educator

Fisher's Life and Korea

James Earnest Fisher first arrived in Korea in 1919 as a missionary educator and member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.³ He was born in Pikeville, Tennessee on August 12, 1886, and grew up mostly in Virginia and central Kentucky (Fisher 1977, 311). His father was teaching in Millersburg College in Kentucky, where Robert Alexander Hardie, a missionary member of the United States Methodist, South came to stay during his furlough period in 1905–1906 (Fisher 1977, 116). Hardie was a medical doctor who was born in Canada and went to Korea in 1890. He was also very well known as an initiator of the Great Awakening in Wonsan in 1903 (Fisher 1977, 109–123). Hardie's second daughter, Bessie, whom Fisher first met in 1905, later became Fisher's wife (Fisher 1977, 26).⁴

Fisher studied at Emory and Henry College, both located in the southern United States. Having completed his college education, Fisher went to the Philippines in 1911 and stayed there until 1914 while engaged

3. See the UCLA Online Archive Korean Christianity, available at <http://koreanchristianity.cdh.ucla.edu/biographies/missionaries/>.

4. They married in early 1919 and divorced in 1935, after returning to the United States.

in administrative work for the US Bureau of Insular Affairs, a division of the US Department of War. Before returning to the United States, Fisher also taught English in a public high school in Japan until 1916 (Fisher 1977, 311). During this time, he visited the Hardie family several times, so that he came to know Korea little by little. Back in the United States, he went to New York and enrolled in theological seminary during 1916–1917, and following this, enrolled in an MA program at Columbia University. Though he enrolled in the military in 1918, Fisher was able to complete his MA by late 1919. He was married to Bessie Hardie in November 1918, after she had completed her first term in Korea as a missionary (Fisher 1977, 116). As is well known, Fisher came to Korea in late 1919 and remained there until 1934. During the period 1925–1927, he was able to obtain a doctoral degree at Columbia University (Fisher 1977, 311–313). Since Fisher worked as a missionary-professor at Chosen Christian College, it is natural that his dissertation concerned mission education (Fisher [1928] 1970).

At that time, Columbia University had on its faculty John Dewey and his disciple, William H. Kilpatrick, who had studied the relationship between education and democracy. Moreover, the wake of the Russian Revolution (1917) and World War I (1914–1918) saw the emergence of new ideas, such as nationalism, communism, socialism, and atheism. Thus, Fisher's idea was to apply the new methodology of democratic education to Korea, and tackle these new trends which were also finding great popularity among young Koreans, who were leaning to Wilsonian and Leninist ideas in the search for a new Korean destiny. Thus, Fisher was one of the first missionaries to argue that missionaries needed to embrace these new intellectual trends. One could argue that Fisher's criticism of mission education was similar to that of Charles A. Ellwood, who, in his *Reconstruction in Religion* (1922), raised the question of how best to harmonize science, democracy, and religion (Whitaker 1972, 152–159).

It seems that as a result of personal issues with his wife and missionary attacks on his liberal positions, Fisher decided to return to the United States in 1934. But up to his departure from Korea he seems to have been on relatively good terms with Japanese colonial authorities, even mentioning that "Japan had done something toward supplying educational opportunities

for Koreans,” though there were some features “which may be very severely criticized from the standpoint of democracy” (Fisher [1928] 1970, 89). However, around the time of his return to the United States, Fisher noted that Japan had already begun to brace for aggression in China (Fisher 1946, 261). To him, Japan was becoming a totalitarian state where “the police and secret detectives were active day and night trying to find those who might not be loyal or who might in some way try to sabotage the great enterprise on which the Empire was embarking” (Fisher 1946, 262).

While working in colonial Korea as a missionary professor and a Board of Trustees member of Chosen Christian College, Fisher participated in various activities. He served on the Korea Mission, Methodist Episcopal Church, South as a board member and one-time chairman, while also holding memberships in the John Dewey Society and the Korea Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (Fisher [1928] 1970, 5–6). Fisher also worked with several Korean members in the Central Council of the Korean Methodist Church, particularly with Yun Chi-ho, the renowned Korean Christian leader, in handling many issues in the Methodist churches.⁵ Under the Korea Mission, there was the Songdo Higher Common School, equivalent to a middle school, where Fisher and Yun Chi-Ho were both Board of Control members.⁶ He was a very active teacher in the Chosen Christian College and sometimes he deeply involved in the affairs of that college’s library (Fisher 1933).

The Educator and His Democracy Education

Fisher’s *Democracy and Mission Education in Korea* was based upon his dissertation, which was accepted by Columbia University in 1927.⁷ The work posed basic questions on mission education for a changed situation in Korea and the challenges facing missions by the new ideologies of the 1920s.

5. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (Yun Chi-ho Diaries), June 6, 1931. These diaries are accessible through the Korean History Database, available at <http://db.history.go.kr/>.

6. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi*, November 4, 1932.

7. In his *Democracy and Mission Education in Korea* ([1928] 1970), Fisher used sources published as late as fall of 1927.

Thus, it is fair to say that Fisher's conception of democracy was "to integrate mission education in Korea with democracy under the marked influence of John Dewey and William H. Kilpatrick."⁸ Furthermore, it also seems accurate to assert, as Kilsoo Kang did, that "to Dr. Fisher belongs the honor of being the first to introduce to us a democratic philosophy of education in print, not as fragments but as a comprehensive and coordinated whole, at about the same time that it was developing in America."⁹

Horace H. Underwood (1890–1951), a second-generation missionary and son of Horace G. Underwood (1859–1916), also taught at Chosen Christian College. Underwood obtained a Ph.D. degree from New York University during his furlough in 1926 (An 2010).¹⁰ Though his book on mission education contains important statistics and information on colonial education in Korea, it does not deal with democracy and its relation with mission education. Rather, Underwood presented a more objective view of the educational systems and institutions of colonial Korea, while highlighting the positive contribution of mission education to overall education in Korea. By contrast, Fisher's work was more critical of contemporaneous mission education. Thus, Fisher's ideas on mission education were different from Underwood's more orthodox beliefs (An 2010, 235–237). However, though their ideas differed regarding mission education in Korea, upon Fisher's own recommendation Underwood came to work alongside Fisher in US government organizations such as the Office of Strategic Services (OSS; forerunner of the CIA) (An 2010, 235–236).¹¹

8. These are remarks by Kilsoo Kang in his "Forward" to Fisher ([1928] 1970, 6–7).

9. Kilsoo Kang in Fisher ([1928] 1970, 8).

10. Underwood's dissertation was published under the title, *Mission Education in Korea* (New York: International Press, 1926). This work is primarily concerned with mission education in the 1920s, so that it contains many useful statistics, but it does not approach its subject from any theoretical framework. Regarding Horace H. Underwood's work and activities in Korea, refer to An (2010).

11. Although Underwood and Fisher had different attitudes towards mission, they had a cordial relationship that predated their time together in Korea. Prior to coming to live in Korea, Fisher had visited many times, even attending the Underwood Christmas dinner in 1914 and 1915 (Fisher 1977, 263). As Fisher wrote, "Underwood and I got along exceptionally well, and were good friends. While we differed in our attitudes toward religious beliefs, we didn't let this

The fundamental question posed in Fisher's book is how to relate mission education to democracy. Fisher tries to explain the conceptions of democracy in education while criticizing the then existing aims of mission education in Korea. His approach to this may be summarized in the following steps: 1. Draw up the criteria of democratic education; 2. Reconstruct the aims of mission education; 3. Study the relationship between mission education and government control of education; and 4. Study the relationship between mission education and the problems in the daily lives of the Korean people (Fisher [1928] 1970, 11–12).

Fisher begins his book with a definition of democracy and then proceeds to criticize mission education and the practical issues of colonial Korea. However, he does not provide a clear-cut conceptualization of democracy. Rather it was more like a character or a dimension of democracy. To Fisher, democracy had been "expanded and deepened and made to apply to all of our institutions-political, social, economic, educational and religious" (Fisher [1928] 1970, 16–17). However, his conceptualization of democracy is its circumvention of the political. As a concept, democracy (a term that derives from a combination of the Greek *demos* [people] and *kratos* [power]), dates back to ancient Greece, when ordinary people or citizens "came to control (not merely to be consulted by) the powers of government" at a specific historical juncture (Lane 2014, 95). It was a political concept, rather than a social and cultural one.

Without providing a specific definition, Fisher argued that mission education should accept "democratic principles," so that "the aim of education should be to find out more about life and to increase and enrich, to enable human beings to live more satisfying lives, satisfying to themselves

interfere with our personal and social relations. He held to the orthodox Presbyterian theology and attitude toward the Bible and church, while I was much more liberal and modernistic in all of my attitudes on religious matters. But soon we learned not to discuss matters of doctrine, theology and the Bible. He was human and liberal and tolerant in his personal, professional and social relations and in no sense puritanical or overly pious. With regard to Sabbath observance, use of tobacco, and alcoholic beverages, he was far more broadminded than the majority of Protestant missionaries. For these and other reasons, we enjoyed a very friendly relationship in which our wives fully participated and cooperated" (Fisher 1977, 265).

and others” (Fisher [1928] 1970, 17). Thus, the existing educational objections were “all means for furthering the process of education, and so extending the meaning of life” (Fisher [1928] 1970, 18). In a similar vein, he suggested the following: “The aim of mission education in Korea is for missionaries to work with Koreans in their various life activities, for the purpose of bringing both themselves and the Koreans to a better understanding of life, and to a better control of the forces which make for the fullest and richest living” (Fisher [1928] 1970, 53).

Fisher’s definition of democracy was expressed in adjective form, rather than as a noun. It was similar to his mentor John Dewey’s usage of “democracy.” Beyond political community, Dewey provided a democratic education to the reader by saying that “upon the educational side, we note first that the realization of a form of social life in which interests are mutually interpenetrating, and where progress, or readjustment, is an important consideration, makes a democratic community more interested than other communities have cause to be in deliberate and systematic education” (Dewey 1916, 100–101).

Fisher explicitly criticized Western missionaries for making mission education primarily about winning adherents to Christianity. Fisher’s criticism reflected Korean society’s new attitude regarding the role of missionaries in late 1920s. There were several Korean intellectuals who criticized this position implicitly, if not explicitly. For example, Chough Pyung-Ok, also a professor and Fisher’s colleague at the Chosen Christian College, noted this trend when he wrote:

Re-examining and re-valuing their functions is the order of the day. This process is inevitable in the Korea of today. The pioneering era of Missions is fast passing away, and the constructive period of organizing Christianity is at hand. New days present new problems which require new forms of service and new methods of solution. (Chough 1927, 34)

Chough also argued that “in educational matters, the guidance of productive scholarship and scientific investigation will be most profitable field for them [missionaries]. In short, their service is going to be more and more

technical and general in character. Counsel rather than direction is the best policy.” Thus, in terms of practical mission policy, “there will be less demand for what might be termed ‘all-round missionaries.’ Scholars, scientists, professionally trained men and women and technicians will be needed.” This was for “building in Korea a temple of Christian civilization” (Chough 1927, 34). Fisher sympathized with Chough’s suggestions.

No doubt, there were many missionaries who criticized Fisher’s position, according to William Scott, who argued that Fisher perceived religion “as a means for the enrichment of all life rather than an end itself,” which implied that Christian evangelism had to be the ultimate goal of mission education (Scott 1929, 122). But a minority of missionaries welcomed its publication as follows:

Missionaries and Korean workers alike have shown a tendency to exalt “belief” at the expense of “knowledge,” and to court “busyness” to the neglect of “thoughtfulness.” We owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Fisher for thinking through our problems and giving us an impetus to re-think them through for ourselves....There are few who will fail to agree with Dr. Fisher that the teaching of so-called secular subjects may be made a religious service...Altogether, this book of Dr. Fisher’s is one of the best pieces of work which has yet been done by a Korean missionary. (Scott 1929, 122–124)

Thus, Fisher’s ideas were acceptable to some Korean intellectuals and missionaries. What’s more, Fisher’s book was commensurate with missionaries’ search for their new roles to play in the changed environment of colonial Korea of the 1920s, when socialism, nationalism, and traditional enlightenment vied for hegemony.

In his conclusion, Fisher boldly proposes that mission education “must be more scientific...must be more human...must be more educational” (Fisher [1928] 1970, 169–183). To Fisher, education on democracy should be a part of the mission goal, a position that resulted in a movement by conservative missionaries to compel Fisher’s resignation of his professorship. Fisher was severely criticized by some missionaries in Korea for being

“liberal,” mostly by members of the United States Presbyterian Mission, North (PCUSA). Fisher and Oliver R. Avison, then president of the Chosen Christian College and Severance Medical College received a letter from one missionary as follows.

You have taken such a positive and aggressive stand with the liberal as opposed to the orthodox belief concerning the Person and Work of Jesus Christ which orthodox view I hold to be the truth and as such a stand as yours cannot help but be hurtful to the belief of the students in the college and so also hurt the college, I feel compelled to enter my protest to your serving further on the faculty of the college. I do this as a member of the Board of Directors and I am also writing the president, Dr. Avison, asking that he take the matter up.

I am sorry to have to write this, but I feel it is a duty to my Lord and to myself, and trust that *you also will see the incongruity of your position and resign your position in the College* [emphasis added]. (Fisher 1977, 57–58)

In response to this and like letters, Avison did give in to such threats, by counter-arguing that “consideration ought to be given by Board and Mission members to the rights of teachers to hold interpretations of scripture different from those themselves [*sic*] hold, and to discuss their views freely with their fellow workers and fellow Christians without being in danger of being branded as non-Christians” (Fisher 1977, 59). However, Avison did not totally suppress other criticisms of Fisher’s approach to mission education.

Fisher returned to the United States in 1934 with his personal and professional problems in tow, in particular his marriage troubles and probably criticisms of his position on mission education. A year after his return he divorced his wife and also resigned from the Methodist Mission. He then entered US government service, holding several administrative positions in offices such as the National Youth Administration until the outbreak of World War II. Soon after the outbreak of World War II, Fisher went to Washington, DC as a specialist on East Asia in the Office of Strategic

Services (Fisher 1977, 312). In this position, Fisher served as a specialist on Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. He also strongly recommended several missionaries to the American authorities, including Horace H. Underwood, whom he urged the OSS to retain since Fisher knew of “no other person who was better qualified to be an advisor or consultant on Korea” (Fisher 1977, 271). With this type of recommendation, Underwood also came to work for the OSS, a work that made possible Underwood’s return to Korea in October 1945, while Fisher was able to return to Korea in early 1946. The two were now in Korea as American government officials or civil affairs officers, returning before most the former missionaries who had worked in colonial Korea.¹²

Fisher’s Activities during the US Military Occupation

Fisher’s Work in the Ministry of Public Information

The United States and Soviet Union decided to apply an international trusteeship to postwar Korea. Thus, when US Army Forces in Korea (USAFIK) landed in Korea on September 8, 1945, their occupation was provisional, hinging on the condition that the United States and Soviet Union would be able to find a compromise solution for establishing a single government for the entire Korean Peninsula. Thus, the occupying powers had no concrete policy towards postwar Korea except for the proposition that a trusteeship would be applied to all of Korea under international authority. Thus, amid some chaos, US policy only became concrete in mid-October 1945, a month after USAFIK had been established (FRUS 1969, 1073–1091).¹³ The following is an apt summary of US policy towards Korea at this time.

12. More research is required on Fisher’s activities during World War II, a topic that is beyond the scope of this paper.

13. SWNCC (State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee) 176/8.

In all your activities you will bear in mind the policy of the United States in regard to Korea, which contemplates a progressive development from this initial interim period of civil affairs administration by the United States and the U.S.S.R., to a period of trusteeship under the United States, the United Kingdom, China, and the U.S.S.R., and finally to the eventual independence of Korea with membership in the United National organization. (FRUS 1969, 1074)

According to directive, the USAFIK had to establish a civil affairs administration in Korea under the US Army Government in Korea (USAMGIK), and then liaison with the USSR for implementing the trusteeship conditions. This is why many American civil affairs officers came to Korea, Fisher among them.

Against this backdrop, Fisher returned to Korea in the first week of January 1946 as an advisor to a section dedicated to political education. To him, USAMGIK worked “along democratic lines,” because it gave Koreans an active part in the work with American “assistant directors” in every government ministry (Fisher 1946, 262–263). Arriving in Korea, Fisher’s immediate impression of the Korean people was that they seemed to “have a new spirit and go about their work or business or to school with a gayer mood,” which was good setting for a new start, the food and housing shortages notwithstanding (Fisher 1946, 264).

For its part, the USAMGIK organized the Office of Public Information (Gongbocheo), which became an independent office, and then elevated it to the Ministry of Public Information (Gongboguk) in early 1946.¹⁴ At the time of Fisher’s arrival in Korea, issues of public opinion and information were critical due to the complicated political situation in Korea. The Office had two important sections: Public Opinion and Information. The former had the Gallup Poll function while the latter played a public relations role regarding government policies (Fisher 1946, 268). One of Fisher’s first tasks was preparing a pamphlet for public dissemination on the subject of

14. This office was originally the Public Information Section under the Secretariat of the Japanese Government General. By USAMGIK Ordinance No. 47 (February 13, 1946) the office was redesignated the Ministry of Public Information.

“democracy as a way of life,” which was published in early as a book in 1947 and widely disseminated among Koreans (Fisher 1947, 267).¹⁵ The Office (later Ministry) of Public Information played a crucial role in outreach to the Korean public through such things as publications like *Farmers Weekly*, posters, and radio broadcasts (station JODK). Though Fisher’s book was widely disseminated, it is difficult to gauge what sort of impact it had on the Korean public.

The Korean political situation had a critical impact on Fisher’s efforts at democracy education. To him, two elements were important. The first was that Korea’s current political parties were not parties in the modern sense but more manifestations of clientele politics, for they were merely groups “gathered around a few leaders, and that their purpose is to gain possession of the government in order to distribute jobs and special favors to their constituents” (Fisher 1946, 267). The Ministry of Public Information where Fisher worked controlled political parties in southern Korea in accordance with the USAMGIK’s Ordinance 55, “Regulation of Political Parties” (Hanguk beopje yeonguhoe 1971, 127–130), whereby all the parties had to report their members and financial situation to the Office (later Ministry) of Public Information. To Fisher, this was a problem in Korean politics, for the Ordinance was too strict in its regulation of political parties.

The second key factor was that “the best organized and most active body in politics” was the communist party, which was heavily funded by the Soviets in northern Korea (Fisher 1946, 267). Unfortunately, the occupying Soviet forces were free to take anything from a Korean, as if any Korean who possessed something was an enemy of the Red Army (Fisher 1946, 267). In addition to these two facts, the national division of the Korean Peninsula was a fundamental issue in Korea (Fisher 1946, 267–268).

When Fisher worked in the Ministry of Public Information, his colleagues were Henry Döge Appenzeller (1889–1953), a second-generation

15. James Earnest Fisher, *Minjujuuijeok saenghwal* (Democracy as a Way of Life) (Office of Public Information of the South Korean Interim Government, 1947) (hereafter *Democracy as a Way of Life*). Though there is an English version of this manuscript, I will use the Korean version as it was widely circulated in Korea.

Methodist missionary, and Induk Park (1896–1980), an educator and female activist. Appenzeller arrived in Korea in February 1946 as a member of the Bunce Commission which had been sent to the USAMGIK by the US Department of State tasked with various civil administration duties in Korea. Appenzeller and Fisher were both “concerned with the political education of the Korean people in democratic ideology and practice” (Fisher 1977, 45). As Fisher wrote,

He [Appenzeller] made a weekly radio broadcast in the Korean language, dealing with current events and trends in the post-war world. I wrote editorials which were translated and published in Korea papers and periodicals. Mrs. Induk Park, who worked with us, gave radio talks directed especially to the women of Korea. We three had our desks in an elevated alcove in one end of a large room, which was the office of political education. The military administrators of this section were a Colonel Cleland and a Lieutenant Smith. We three, Henry, Induk and I, *all being old hands in Korea, were free to carry on our work with very little supervision.* We discussed our individual projects and exchanged ideas with the purpose of doing all we could to prepare the Korean people for the free united democratic government which we hoped was soon to come to Korea [emphasis added]. (Fisher 1977, 45)

Even before US policy toward Korea changed in mid-1947, when the second US-Soviet Joint Commission talks failed and with it the prospect of creating a unified provisional government, Fisher and Appenzeller were already prepared for educating Koreans or prepare to educate Koreans on democracy in a way that would be anti-USSR and anti-communist. This seems to have been in tandem with the USAMGIK’s position on communism, in contrast to the US Department of State, which had attempted to foster cooperation with the USSR.

Although Fisher was himself caught up in official US policy toward Korea, he was also able to work in a somewhat autonomous atmosphere. Further, his close relationship with General John R. Hodge (1890–1963), commander of USAFIK, contributed to this. This is demonstrated by the following anecdote related by Fisher.

A short time after I arrived in Korea in the first week of January 1946, I received a telephone call in my office from General Hodge's office requesting me to come to the General's office. I could not imagine why I was wanted by the General but hurried over and up to the office in the Bando Hotel. I was delighted and surprised when I came in to be greeted with my old college nickname, "Hant," by my old friend and schoolmate General Tom T. Handy, Deputy Chief of Staff who was on an inspection trip visiting the American military posts in the Far East....As Tom was a full General while Hodge was a Lieutenant General, the fact that he and I were friends of long standing evidently favorably impressed General Hodge toward me. (Fisher 1977, 128-129)

Actually, Fisher's ideas towards the Soviet Union and North Korea were not contrary Hodge's anti-communist approach. There were some US government officials who already took anti-communist attitude. As is well known, George Kennan, who was US deputy chief of mission to the Soviet Union in early 1946, sounded an anti-Soviet drumbeat:

There can now be little doubt that USSR wishes to assure earliest and most complete exclusion of other great powers from all connection with Korean affairs. Document which it submitted at Moscow Conference was designed to achieve this aim. USSR does not hesitate to advocate arrangements which formally call for early complete exclusion of all outside powers because Soviet regime in contrast to govts [sic] of other great powers has elaborate existing techniques and machinery for penetration and puppet domination of neighboring countries which it is sure it can apply successfully to Korea if other foreign influences are removed.¹⁶

No doubt, this position was also shared by Kennan's supervisor, W. Averell Harriman, American Ambassador to the USSR in 1945, even before trusteeship was formally announced in Moscow (FRUS 1969, 1121-1122).¹⁷

16. Chargé in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, January 25, 1946 (FRUS 1971, 620).

17. "USSR has made it clear that historically it regards Korea in much same light as Finland,

At the Moscow Conference in December 1945, the US and USSR ultimately agreed to a trusteeship over Korea, so that the US decided to support this policy in the SWNCC 176/18 document, adopted on January 28, 1946 (FRUS 1971, 623–624). However, due to stark differences on who would join the newly established Korean provisional government working in tandem with the international trusteeship organization, the first US-USSR Joint Commission, which was convened in March 1946, was dissolved without any concrete results. As a result, in June 1946, the United States adopted a new policy which would broaden the basis for Korean participation in Korean politics (FRUS 1971, 693–699). Consequently, the US State Department ordered that “the Commander of United States Forces in Korea shall take steps to institute a broad program of constructive economic and educational reforms for Southern Korea looking toward the creation of conditions favorable to the development of a strong and lasting democratic system in Korea” (FRUS 1971, 694).

When the second US-Soviet Joint Commission talks held in May 1947 also ended without any concrete results, the United States decided to move the Korea question to the UN General Assembly.¹⁸ Right before the UN-sponsored elections on May 10, 1948, conducted only in southern Korea (south of the 38th parallel), the United States decided it would support the new Republic of Korea with economic and military aid, including a military advisory group, in preparation for the withdrawal of American troops.¹⁹

With his expertise on both Korean issues and democracy, in May 1947, Fisher became a member of the Political Advisory Committee in the

Poland and Rumania—a springboard for attack on USSR. Therefore USSR may be expected to seek predominant influence in Korea. Soviet predominance is more likely to be realized through establishment of “independent friendly” Korean regime than through any system of international tutelage. Far from insuring Soviet paramount, a trusteeship would probably mean USSR having but one of three or four equal votes.” Ambassador in the Soviet Union (Harriman) to the Secretary of State, November 12, 1945 (FRUS 1969, 1122).

18. SWNCC 176/80, “Report by the Ad Hoc Committee on Korea,” August 4, 1947 (FRUS 1972, 738–741). At the time of imminent failure of the Second Joint Commission, this report recommended several options which included a referral of Korean issue to UN.

19. “Report by the National Security Council on the Position of the United States with Respect to Korea” (NSC 8), April 2, 1948 (FRUS 1974, 1164–1169).

Second US-Soviet Joint Commission. There, he still endeavored to establish a basis for the future provisional Korean government, which would realize the stated aims of the Moscow Conference of December 1945 (Fisher 1977, 216). However, the second Joint Commission failed for similar reasons, namely, because the United States and Soviet Union had different ideas about whether certain political and social organizations that had opposed trusteeship had to be consulted by the Joint Commission. The US position was that those organizations should be consulted, while the Soviets opposed the idea (Fisher 1977, 216). Fisher's main mission was to persuade Syngman Rhee to influence his followers to support the Joint Commission. However, as is well known, Rhee did not accept the Joint Commission's position. After the Joint Commission's de facto break-up in summer 1947, Fisher returned to the Department of Public Information and became deeply involved in preparations for the UN-sponsored elections of May 10, 1948, conducting educational programs about the election, and organizing the election's supervision (Fisher 1977, 217–218). In that sense, before the formal establishment of the Republic of Korea, Fisher was actively involved in public information activities disseminating a specific vision of the democratic way of life.

Fisher's Ideas on Democracy in the Post-Liberation Context

The standard dictionary definition of “democracy” is simply “a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections.”²⁰ Democracy usually requires “pluralism and the recognition that we need to find fair terms of living together as free, equal, but also irreducibly diverse citizens” (Müller [2016] 2017, 3). Thus, although democracy is a highly contested and complicated concept, it is against “the idea of a single, homogenous, authentic people,” which represents populism. (Müller [2016] 2017, 3). In its classical meaning,

20. Merriam Webster Online, s.v. “Democracy,” accessed November 9, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/democracy>.

democracy meant “the power of the people—including the poorest of the citizens—to *decide* (key policies in the assembly); to *decide* (in most legal cases); and to *control* (officials)” (Lane 2014, 125–126). However, the aim of this paper is not to provide an optimal definition of democracy, but rather to provide a contour of it as defined by James Earnest Fisher, that is, a specific version of democracy that was widely shared by Americans and a segment of elite Koreans in the immediate post-liberation period.

Across the political and ideological spectrum, the word *democracy* (*minjujuui*) was widely used among Koreans following their country’s liberation from Japan, but with different meanings and implications. In educational circles, O Cheon-Seok, who served as vice-minister and later minister in the Ministry of Education during the US military occupation of Korea, introduced Dewey’s democratic education to Korea in diverse ways, such as through publications, model experimental schools, and teacher education (O 1964, 408-415). Thus, education on democracy is something that should not be monopolized by a small group of people.²¹

We should examine Fisher’s conception of democracy in the postwar context through his book *Democracy as a Way of Life*. From the time Fisher came to Korea in January 1946, he was deeply involved in the Ministry of Public Information in the area of social education on democracy. From the start, Fisher was very articulate in contrasting democracy (*minjujuui*) with totalitarianism (*jeonchejujuui*) in the introduction to his book:

Democracy and totalitarianism are fundamental antitheses. Thus, the fact that a totalitarian state argues it is democratic, only reveals that it does not understand the meaning of democracy or else is sowing confusion among the people in order that they will not know the genuine meaning of democracy, or it is deceiving the people. We know that the people’s future destiny depends on a *clear differentiation between democracy and*

21. Both O and Fisher graduated from the Teacher’s College at Columbia University, in 1927 and 1931, respectively. Thus, they knew each other well. But under the USAMGIK, they worked in the Ministry of Public Information and Ministry of Education, respectively, so further research should be undertaken on their mutual cooperation and the common themes between political education and general school education.

totalitarianism, being able to understand it, and execute it. Thus, I realized that to achieve that I would need to do my best in explaining this [emphasis added]. (Fisher 1947, 1)

Totalitarianism here was clearly a reference to the USSR at the time. Fisher and his colleague Appenzeller worked together, though the Soviet Union at the time was an ally so that they were unable to attack it directly. However, they still explicitly propagated their own ideas on democracy. For instance, as Fisher later related:

We had orders not to attack or criticize Russia in her work in Korea. It was hard to obey this ruling when we were daily getting reports of the blatant propaganda that the Russians were spreading over the country in both north and south.

Henry had a keen and active mind, and in his radio broadcasts was able to counteract much of the communist propaganda without openly attacking our Russian "Allies." Henry Appenzeller made a significant and valuable contribution to the work of the US Military Government in Korea in his radio broadcasts during the year 1946. (Fisher 1977, 45–46)

Thus, it is significant that prior to the shift in US policy toward anti-communist containment in mid-1947, there were already groups preparing the way for an anti-communist democracy in the American-occupied southern zone of Korea. Considering Fisher's book was published in August 1947, Fisher and his colleagues were prescient in calling for a de facto separate government in southern Korea.²²

In *Democracy as a Way of Life*, Fisher's aim was very clear, namely to show that "the real value of democracy was realized in people's everyday life," and that "liberty and contentment" were critical in a nation (Fisher, 1947, 2). For Fisher, democracy "provides the best satisfaction to people"

22. With the failure of the second US-Soviet Joint Commission, which had held talks on the establishment of a Korean provisional government under a four-power trusteeship, August 1947 saw a shift in US policy towards establishing a separate Korean government in the south. However, Fisher had finished his book in February 1947 (Fisher 1947, 5).

(Fisher 1947, 3–4). To him, democracy is primarily concerned with the status of the individual in the form of the “respect of individual character” (*gaeseong-ui jongyeong*), so that immediately after liberation he expected “all social institutions will be reformed” (Fisher 1947, 4–5). Except for its first chapter, which presents a theoretical framework for democracy, Fisher’s book addresses social institutions, social attitudes, and diverse aspects of democracy in daily life. As for the theoretical framework, a democratic polity was “of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Fisher 1947, 7). He cited several parts of the American Declaration of Independence: “1. Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed;” “2. They are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness;” and “3. All men are created equal” (Fisher 1947, 8–15). To this he added, “4. Democracy supports minority parties,” while “5. Freedom of press, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly” were derived from the American Constitution (Fisher 1947, 16–17).

At the end of the first chapter, Fisher quoted his academic advisor, William H. Kilpatrick, “We have to know that democracy is an endeavor for social life based upon an ethical foundation” (Fisher 1947, 19–20). Thus, it was evident that Fisher’s conception of democracy followed the American model with emphasis on social institutions and social attitudes. Going beyond mere political institutions, democracy to Fisher was more of a lifestyle. Fisher’s focus was on the value and liberty of the individual, as well as diverse aspects of a democratic society, such as family, school, entrepreneurship, employment, media, the military, courts, and social institutions; he did not deal with socio-economic issues such as land tenure, the unequal distribution of property, and social justice. Even among legal advisors in the USAMGIK, there were criticism of Fisher’s idealized depiction of democratic judiciary, a US model.²³

23. Among them, though Fisher’s statement that “The real purpose of laws is to insure the attainment of certain basic human rights” (Fisher 1947, 204) is right, another aspect was to “impose on members of society duties toward other members of society so that there will be an ordered and peaceable way of life” (Selected Legal Opinions vol. 1. [1948] 1997, 107).

Interestingly, Fisher argued that USAFIK's mission was equal to that of the Christian missionaries. In September 1948, immediately after the Republic of Korea had been set up, Fisher wrote a eulogy for General Hodge, who had just left Korea, in the *Union Democrat*²⁴

General Hodge had a sense of mission, which was *fully equal to that of any of the long line of Christian missionaries* who have labored in this land. In his talks to military and civilian workers under his command, he often told them that we Americans are all missionaries, who are here for the definite purposes of helping Korean people toward the realization of their goal of an independent democratic nation [emphasis added]. (cited in Fisher 1977, 132–133)

Thus, to Fisher, the US military occupation, and the later work of the American military during the Korean War, were akin to missionary fieldwork, particularly in their support of democracy.

However, the relationship between Fisher and the first South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, was strained during the Korean War because of Fisher's connections with northern Koreans when he had worked in Japan during the Korean War. Before Fisher left Korea in late 1948, he met President Rhee. Their relationship appears to have been good, as the following anecdote of Fisher shows.

The last time I saw Dr. Rhee before the Korean War was on October 29, 1948 when I called on him at his office for a short farewell. As I remember this visit he was very warm and cordial, and thanked me for all that I had done during the years of the Military Government, and the many years before World War II, when I was teaching at the Chosun [sic] Christian University (now Yonsei University). I expressed my happiness and satisfaction that he was in the position that he held, and gave my best

24. The *Union Democrat* was published by Dr. Hugh Cynn (Sin Heung-u). It commenced publication in Seoul immediately following the general election of May 10, 1948, but terminated when Cynn was appointed by President Rhee as Korea's diplomatic representative in Japan.

wishes for him in the great work that was before him. I was glad that he had taken a few minutes from his very busy schedule for this few minutes of farewell after my three years of close association in this important period in Korean history. (Fisher 1977, 219–220)

Thus, at least before the Korean War, Fisher's relationship with Rhee seemed smooth, and even President Rhee seemed to expect Fisher would be a goodwill ambassador for Korea in the United States.

Fisher returned to the United States to work as a government official in the Department of State. With the outbreak of the Korean War, he returned to East Asia. After arriving in Tokyo on August 9, 1950, Fisher began work with the Psychological Warfare Section of the United Nations Staff (G-2 Military Intelligence) "...in charge of the operations in Korea against the Communist invaders from the north" (Fisher 1977, 220). Thus, he cooperated with Korean colleagues in Japan. But the problem was that the three Koreans with whom he collaborated belonged to the Heungsadan, an organization founded by Ahn Changho (An Chang-ho) and composed mostly of Koreans from the northwest. As a result, Fisher and Syngman Rhee's relationship became strained.²⁵

In addition to the issue with the three aforementioned Koreans, another issue arose when Syngman Rhee was supposed to send fifty Koreans to Japan to assist in translation and writing in the Psychological Warfare Section (Fisher 1977, 223–227).²⁶ However, among these Syngman Rhee

25. Koreans from the northern and southern part of the peninsula each had their support organizations—the Heungsadan and Heungeop gurakbu, respectively—and the two groups had a tense relationship, both in Korea and abroad, during the colonial and post-colonial era, though these tensions can really be traced back to the late Joseon dynasty. For more on this, see Kim (2011).

26. "The letter you received from Reverend Fisher is so typically 'missionary.' It shows how the poor man thinks only of himself. What amazes me particularly is that he thought the President had slighted him at the capitol ceremony in 1954 I can sure that the president may not have recognized him among the people who were gathered there." Francesca to Oliver, May 14, 1957, Syngman Rhee Letters, Korean History Database, accessed December 2, 2020, http://db.history.go.kr/item/level.do?setId=1&itemId=le&synonym=off&chinessChar=on&page=1&pre_page=1&brokerPagingInfo=&position=0&levelId=le_009_0250.

did not allow Koreans of northern origins to travel to Japan for fear of their anti-Rhee movement. This episode exposes the chasm in the post-liberation period in the South Korean ruling elite, many of whom were Christians, between those of northern and southern origins, a conflict that dated back to the early 20th century.²⁷ Though Fisher was not against the establishment of the Republic of Korea, he and Syngman Rhee did not agree as to the methods for ruling the new state. Fisher supported more lenient and democratic methods while President Rhee did not. Also, Fisher supported some Korean elites who criticized Rhee on the basis of procedural democracy, and these elites happened to be northerners. Immediately after the armistice in 1951, Fisher quit his work for Army Intelligence in Tokyo and taught in two Japanese universities until 1956 (Fisher 1977, 225–226). He then retired to Virginia. He did continue to travel extensively in East Asia, including Korea, until his death.²⁸

Conclusion

Fisher came to Korea in 1919, right after the March First Movement, and worked in Korea up until 1934, with the exception of the few years spent on furlough in the United States in pursuit of a doctorate degree. Fisher focused on new social and intellectual trends in trying to understand the role of mission and democracy in the 1920s, a focus seen particularly in his teaching and writings. As has been demonstrated above, he expanded his definition of mission activities in Korea to include more educating for democracy. During World War II, Fisher worked for the US government, specifically the Office of Strategic Services, where he researched and wrote about the Korean situation.

When he returned to Korea in early 1946 as a US government official, his mission was to educate the Korean public on democracy. His book,

27. See the article by Kun-woo Kim in this issue.

28. Fisher's activities in Japan during the Korean War and his later activities in the 1950s should be dealt with in a separate study.

Democracy as a Way of Life (Minjujuuijeok saenghwal), published in August 1947, focused on the defining democracy and exploring the diverse dimensions of this concept in the daily life of Koreans. The book espoused the American Declaration of Independence as an explanatory model of democracy, and focused more on individualism and liberty, rather than social issues such as colonialism, land tenure, and Korean legal rights.

There are two different interpretations of the post-1945 South Korean regime: the classical or orthodox interpretation that the new regime constituted the establishment of a liberal democracy that espoused anti-communism, and the revisionist interpretation that the US occupation of South Korea set down the cornerstone for authoritarian and oppressive regimes that subsequently stifled the indigenous Korean desire for a unified and democratic Korea (Park 2002, 123). The building of a democracy in South Korea required both institution-building and a new ideology. In Korea, the situation was more complicated because although the USAMGIK was successful in establishing some democratic institutions, it failed in providing a diverse and vibrant democracy.

Fisher's case shows the difficulties in achieving democracy in a country like Korea. Though Fisher endeavored to foster a democratic spirit in various realms, such as schools, the media, and social institutions, the fundamental problem was that though Fisher tried to introduce the concept of democracy to the Korean public, he failed to question the relationship between democracy and post-colonial issues such as national division and pro-Japanese collaboration. Thus, though he was sincere in his motives to help Korea develop democracy, his dream failed to materialize in postwar Korea due to the complicated realities facing that country.

However, with his missionary and teaching activities during the colonial period and his return to Korea as a government official in the post-colonial context, Fisher's case shows that the US military government at least with good faith tried to implant democracy in newly liberated Korea. However, Fisher's understanding of democracy was limited to the American experience and had more to do with procedural democracy than social and economic democracy. Thus, in Fisher is revealed the variety of democracy the US government tried to forge in post-colonial Korea, somewhere

between a conservative interpretation of liberal democracy and a revisionist one related to oppressive Cold War authoritarian regimes.

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