

Early Roots of Western Medicine and a Pioneer of Social Work in Korea: Dr. Kung Sun Oh (1878–1963)

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Kung Sun Oh was born on October 4, 1878 in Gongju, South Chungcheong Province, Korea. His pen name Hae Gwan (海觀) means “to see the world in humanity” (Fig. 1).¹

Prior to the emergence of Western medicine in Korea, two Koreans had ventured off to learn the practice thereof in the US: Jaipil Soh (Philip Jaisohn in English, 1864–1951) and Jeomdong Kim (Esther Park in English, 1876–1910). Jaipil Soh studied at George Washington University School of Medicine and returned to Korea to lead independence movements against Japan. As a naturalized citizen of the US, he eventually moved back to within its borders. Dr. Esther Park completed her studies at Baltimore Women's Medical School, returning to Korea to continue her medical practice. Unfortunately, she passed away from tuberculosis at the early age of 34.¹

In 1896, seeking new knowledge from the American missionaries, Kung Sun Oh entered the Pai Chai Hak Dang, the cradle of modern learning in Korea at the time. Later, in 1897, he joined the Independence Club and was appointed secretary. After less than one year, however, the club was disbanded for activity perceived to be treasonous against the Korean government. In 1899, with a warrant now out for his arrest for his involvement in the Independence Club, Kung Sun Oh would flee to the home of Frederick W. Steadman (1871–1948), a missionary from the US. At that time, Kung Sun Oh would teach Pastor Steadman Korean and become involved in missionary

activities.^{1–3}

After resolving his arrest warrant, Kung Sun Oh resumed his studies at the Pai Chai Hak Dang, graduating in March 1900. After graduating, he continued to help his benefactor, Pastor Steadman. Before Steadman left for Japan in 1901, he introduced Kung Sun Oh to US medical missionary Alexander John A. Alexander. Dr. Alexander was newly appointed as director at *Gunsan Yasogyo Hospital*, in which Yasogyo means Christianity, at the age of 27. Born in Kentucky to a rancher-tycoon, Dr. Alexander studied at Princeton University and graduated from the Columbia University School of Medicine in New York. In November 1902, only a month into his work as hospital director, Alexander received news of his father's death. The following year, he would return home to lead the family's horse-breeding business.¹

Back in the US, Dr. Alexander continued to support the building of hospitals and schools in Korea to overcome the woeful medical state he left behind. Importantly, he continued to take a special interest in cultivating native Korean doctors. Indeed,



Fig. 1. Kung Sun Oh in 1902.

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just before returning to the US, he encouraged Kung Sun Oh, just two years younger in age, to study in the US.

In 1902, following Dr. Alexander's advice, Kung Sun Oh left Incheon for the US. Thanks to continued support from Dr. Alexander, he was able to concentrate on his studies without having to worry about his tuition. Nevertheless, he was still forced to find some way to pay for his costs of living, which brought him much suffering; he faced endemic racism common throughout society at the time.

Enrolling in the College of Liberal Arts at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, he completed courses in physics and chemistry. In 1904, he graduated from Centre College and entered Louisville College of Medicine in Kentucky. Just three years later, in 1907, he would receive his medical degree, graduating with honors (Fig. 2).¹⁻⁴ Upon this occasion, Dr. Oh became the second Korean doctor to earn their medical degree in the US, behind Dr. Jaipil Soh.

In November 1907, only six years after leaving Korea, Dr. Oh would find himself ready to depart from San Francisco to return home. In the same year, he was appointed the director of the Gunsan Yasogyo Hospital.^{1,5,6} Although Korea was slowly coming under colonial rule by the Japanese, Kung Sun Oh's return was a huge milestone, bolstering the medical community of Korea. During this period, Emperor Sunjong offered Dr. Oh a position in the palace as doctor to the imperial family, and Itō Hirobumi, Resident General of Korea, invited him to join the Japanese government's hospital.

Meanwhile, he continued to carry out medical missions to keep promises he had made with the missionaries who had helped him in difficult times.¹ Until early 1912, utilizing his position as the director of the Gunsan Yasogyo Hospital, he oversaw medical missions throughout the rural, medically-isolated areas of Gunsan, Gwangju, Mokpo, and several distant islands.

To combat illiteracy, Kung Sun Oh earnestly promoted education and sought to establish a training school for the youth

of Korea. As the principal of the Mokpo Jeongmyeong Middle School, he endorsed new, more modern forms of learning. He also sought to instill a spirit of independence through his lectures, proclaiming the ideals of liberty.

After nearly five years of conducting medical missions throughout Gunsan, Gwangju, and Mokpo, Dr. Oh was acknowledged for his outstanding achievements. In particular, The Presbyterian Board of America recognized him for being the only native Korean missionary among the many medical missionaries throughout the country, as well as for his sincerity, unlike others who had studied in US, and his strong, volunteering spirit. Also, unlike other medical missionaries, he was renowned for focusing on both education and medical treatment.

On May 12, 1913, Dr. Kung Sun Oh was selected by the mission board of the US Southern Presbyterian Church to be dispatched to Severance Medical School as an assistant professor. On their 20th school anniversary, Severance would welcome its first Korean professor. At the medical school, until his retirement in 1942, Kung Sun Oh would serve 30 years as professor, the first Korean Superintendent⁵ at a medical school, Vice-Dean, and Dean: a cornerstone for a burgeoning medical institution.

Severance Medical School and its affiliated hospital, formally known as the *Kwanghyewon* and later renamed to *Chejungwon*, meaning "House of Universal Helpfulness," were started by Horace Newton Allen. Dr. Allen was one of the first and most prominent medical missionaries to Korea; he was sent from the US Northern Presbyterian Church. The second and third heads of the hospital were John W. Heron and Charles C. Vinton. With medical education within the school not progressing as desired, the North American Presbyterian Mission authorized Oliver R. Avison, a professor from the University of Toronto, to be the hospital's fourth director, giving him operating rights on July 16, 1893.

Under the excellent leadership of Dr. Avison, the poorly managed institutions would implement, in earnest, new changes to bolster their capabilities. Within six years after coming to Korea, he received a donation from Louis H. Severance, an American businessman and philanthropist from Cleveland, Ohio, with which to build a new hospital. Upon its completion, Chejungwon changed its name to Severance Hospital on September 1904. Dr. Avison continued to nurture the growth of Severance Medical School for over 40 years, until he passed his position on to Kung Sun Oh in 1934 (Fig. 3).^{7,8}

Initially, only American professors were privileged to lecture at the medical school. However, students were unable to keep up with the classes because of their inability to communicate in English. Korean professors were desperately needed. Recognizing this situation, Dr. Avison remembered Kung Sun Oh, with whom he had built a relationship at the Pai Chai Hak Dang. Committed to improving his staff, Avison tried to invite Dr. Oh to join the faculty as a professor; however, as Dr. Oh was from a different Christian denomination, he was initially pre-



Fig. 2. Graduation picture including Kung Sun Oh (fourth line from the bottom, first from the left) of Hospital College of Medicine, Louisville, Kentucky.

vented from doing so. Finally, after receiving consent from the affiliated denominations, Dr. Avison was able to welcome Dr. Oh to the teaching staff of Severance Medical School. As a professor in dermatology, Dr. Oh provided supplementary teaching in Korean to students from all departments who had trouble understanding, including internal medicine and surgery. As well, due to a shortage of faculty members in the basic sciences, he would also come to teach courses in anatomy, physiology, pathology, pharmacology, and more (Fig. 4).

In 1915, after annexing Korea, Japan repressed and restricted the rights of private schools, and mandated that professors possess degrees from the Japanese Ministry of Education. Under this regulation, Kung Sun Oh would again find himself traveling abroad to study. In 1916, he enrolled in Tokyo Imperial University for a year, studying dermatology and urology under Professor Ikuzo Toyama. Altogether, however, Dr. Oh's time abroad would afford him a wealth of experience. After graduating from Louisville College of Medicine, he studied Derma-

tology under Dr. John Edwin Hays (1858–1930) as an intern. His time in Japan under Prof. Toyama further bolstered his understanding of dermatology. With the support of Dr. Avison, Dr. Oh was able to obtain further training in dermatology from February to August of 1930 at University of Vienna, where he was able to familiarize himself with the latest developments in medical science (Fig. 5).³

After completing his studies in Japan, Dr. Kung Sun Oh returned home and back to work at Severance Medical School where he established the college's Department of Dermatology and Urology in May 1917: he would serve as Department Chair (Fig. 6).

The newly created department would be Korea's first Department of Dermatology and Urology, and for 18 years, until 1934, Dr. Oh would seek to further development of dermatological science in Korea.⁵ In particular, he was instrumental in establishing an Infectious Diseases ward within Severance Hospital to isolate and accommodate patients stricken with cholera, which was rampant throughout Korea, in 1919; the project was approved by Dean Avison and finally completed in 1926.

In October, 1930, Kung Sun Oh was appointed as Vice Dean of Severance Union Medical College, which was renamed from Severance Medical School, in 1921 (Fig. 7).



Fig. 3. Faculty and graduating class of 1921. Present in this photo are Louie H. Severance, Dr. Oliver R. Avison, and Kung Sun Oh (second line from the top, fourth from the left).



Fig. 4. Anatomy lecture by Kung Sun Oh in 1917 (first from the right among those standing).



Fig. 5. Kung Sun Oh at the University of Vienna in 1930 (eighth from the right).

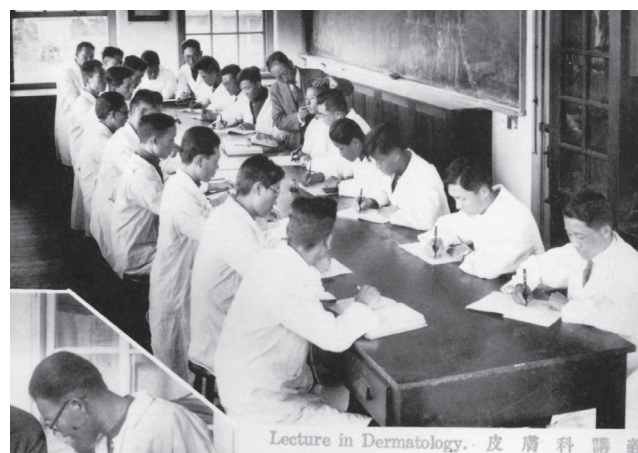


Fig. 6. Lecture in dermatology by Kung Sun Oh in 1929 introducing lupus vulgaris, which is written on the blackboard.

By April 1934, Kung Sun Oh would be chosen by Dr. Avison to succeed him and become the first Korean Dean of Severance Union Medical College. The decision received staunch objections from the faculty. Nevertheless, Dean Avison firmly believed that Koreans should be responsible for teaching other Koreans. Above all, Dr. Avison held Dr. Oh in high regard for his strengths as a Christian, an educator, and an operative for social welfare. The other two candidates for the position included then Vice-Dean James D. Van Buskirk, who had supported Dean Avison since 1917, and Avison's own son, Douglas B. Avison, who had followed in his father's footsteps as a missionary and a professor at Severance Union Medical College. In opposition to the decision, Van Buskirk would return home.

Officially and unofficially, Kung Sun Oh would serve as Dean for nearly 9 years, during which time he contributed greatly to school's development (Fig. 8).

Meeting Dr. Avison's expectations, he strengthened basic medical training and facilities, significantly increased the appointment of Korean professors, protected Severance Union Medical College from forced closure by Japan, and extended academic interests for graduate students.¹⁻⁴ Further, he ensured



Fig. 7. Kung Sun Oh as Vice Dean of Severance Union Medical College in 1933.



Fig. 8. Kung Sun Oh as Dean of Severance Union Medical College in 1936.

that graduates from Severance Union Medical College would be qualified by the Japanese Ministry of Education to work in medical fields in neighboring countries, such as Taiwan, Manchuria, and Japan. As well, utilizing his political prowess, Dean Oh protected the college and hospital from coming under Japanese control: he also refused to change his name to one in Japanese in defiance of Japan's name-changing system for Korean citizens, demonstrating his strong will. In the late 1940s, still under Japanese colonial rule, Americans were forcefully deported back to their home country, leaving Korean professors to run both the school and Severance Hospital. This helped entrench Western medicine within Korean society. In 1942, Dean Oh enacted an age limit for retirement to the position of professorship and resigned, continuing on in support as an Honorary Dean.¹

In 1919, Dr. Oh donated a portion of his own private wealth to establish Korea's first orphanage, which was named Gyeongseong Orphanage: he would do the same in 1931 to establish the Gyeongseong Nursing Home for the elderly. The project originated the day before Christmas in 1918, when he brought seven children under his care who were hungry and shivering in the cold (Fig. 9). After his retirement, he continued to oversee the care of more than 2400 orphans as director of the orphanage until his passing. He organized the children into family units so that they could feel love and companionship. For this,



Fig. 9. Kung Sun Oh with orphans in 1919 (first line from the top, right).



Fig. 10. Present day photo of the *Anyang Nice Christian Family* orphanage.



Fig. 11. Kung Sun Oh received the Sopa Prize (inlet) from the Korean Children's Association for his many contributions for child welfare in 1962. In the photograph, Dr. Oh is surrounded by orphans and receiving congratulations. Sopa is the pen name of Jeong-Hwan Bang (1899–1931), a pioneer of Korean juvenile literature and a children's rights activist; he helped establish Children's Day in Korea.

the children gave him the nickname “Leader of the Beggars.”

Despite offers from the Korean government to take office as a minister, he devoted the rest of his life to social work.¹ The orphanage operates to this day under the name *Anyang Nice Christian Family* (Fig. 10).¹

In accordance with his belief in Christianity, Kung Sun Oh dedicated his life to medical practice, education, and social service. In 1949, he received an award from the Korean government commemorating him on his dedication to social service. In 1955, he received another commemorative award in social service from the Minister of Health and Social Affairs, as well as a commemorative award in medical education from the Korean Medical Association. In 1962, he was honored with a public commendation and the Sopa Award by the Korean Children's Association (Fig. 11). Three months after his death, he was awarded the Order of Merit for National Foundation, reserved for those important to the modern founding of the Republic of Korea, on May 18, 1963. Additionally, for his contributions to Korean society, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate in Natural Sciences from Centre College, his alma mater, and an Honorary Doctorate in Law from Louisville University.¹⁻⁴

To honor the outstanding achievements of Dr. Kung Sun Oh and to extol his virtue among younger students, the Department of Dermatology at Yonsei University College of Medicine (renamed from Severance Medical College in 1954) has organized and hosted the Kung Sun Oh Memorial Lectures since 1977. The organizing committee annually invites world-renowned scholars in dermatology, and held the 38th Annual Kung Sun Oh Memorial Lectures in 2015 (Fig. 12).⁴ From a historical standpoint, it is quite interesting that, to this day, Japan memorializes Prof. Toyama as the nation's first dermatologist with commemorative academic lectures,^{3,4} while Korea also commemorates its first dermatologist with the Kung Sun Oh



Fig. 12. The 38th Kung Sun Oh Memorial Lecture held in 2015. This year's invited guest was Dr. Ervin H. Epstein Jr. (first row, fourth from the left). The photo was taken with Dr. Oh's family members; former President of Kung Sun Oh Memorial Foundation, Prof. Sunnack Lee (first row, third from the left); and President of the Kung Sun Oh Memorial Foundation, Prof. Dongsik Bang (first from the right among those standing).

Memorial Lectures.

Since 1979, the Kung Sun Oh Memorial Foundation has been organized by the President and CEO of Yonsei University Healthy System, Dean of Yonsei University College of Medicine, President of the Korean Dermatological Association, Chair of the Department of Dermatology at Yonsei University College of Medicine, President of the Alumni Association of Yonsei University College of Medicine, President of the Alumni Association for the Department of Dermatology at Yonsei University College of Medicine, and family representatives of Dr. Kung Sun Oh. The association is involved in producing biographies, statues (dedicated at the 100th anniversary of Yonsei University in 1985), and the Kung Sun Oh Memorial Lectures. They also award medals annually to students with outstanding academic achievements in dermatology, as well as commemorative awards to senior professors who have contributed significantly to the development of dermatology in Korea.

Dr. Kung Sun Oh was a great pioneer of medicine in Korea. Should we not consider Jaipil Soh, who was a naturalized citizen of the US, Dr. Oh would be Korea's first medical doctor. Moreover, he would also be the first Korean Dean of Severance Medical School, present day Yonsei University College of Medicine; the first dermatologist in Korea; and the first to establish a department of dermatology, an orphanage, and a nursing home in Korea.

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