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The Multiple Role of Korean Missionaries in the Making of Transnational Belonging

Hui-yeon Kim ^{1,2}

¹ Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO), 65 rue des Grands Moulins, 75013 Paris, France; hui-yeon.kim@inalco.fr

² Institut Français de Recherches sur l'Asie de l'Est (IFRAE), 2 rue de Lille, 75007 Paris, France

Abstract: For decades, Korean denominations have sent missionaries around the world. While trying to convert people, notably in Southeast Asia, they are currently involved in humanitarian works but also in organizing labor migration and helping migrants during their stay in South Korea. A close study of missionaries' work reveals the logic underlying the construction of religious transnational networks. Korean missionaries interlace different kinds of ties with various populations of Southeast Asia and adapt their spiritual and material offerings to different situations. This analysis based on multiple fieldwork assessments in Southeast Asia and in South Korea places emphasis on their specific role as transnational actors and on how they use and promote transnational belonging among marginalized populations.

Keywords: Korean missionaries; Korean Protestantism; migration; transnational network; transnational actor; transnational belonging



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1. Introduction and Methods

Korean Protestant missionaries work around the world and participate in different flows of migration. They are migrants themselves and they often target migrants, displaced people or minorities. For example, they run shelters for North Korean defectors at the border between China and North Korea in the Yanbian region (Han 2013), and they are sent to countries where Korean minorities exist, for example, in Kazakhstan. Where Korean migrants have settled, they lead Korean ethnic churches composed of migrants and expatriates (Min 1992; Morris et al. 2007). In addition to their Christian mission, they participate in the extension of South Korea's soft power by proposing Protestant churches as sites of Korean culture (Yim 2016).

Transnational networks woven by Korean missionaries can be defined as any relationship which, by deliberate will or by destination, is constructed in the global space beyond the national state framework and which is realized while escaping at least partially the control or the mediating action of the states (Badie and Smouts 1995). They form part of transnational networks but with different roles, depending on what they are actually doing in different places and contexts. Their contribution of missionaries is indeed to create a symbolical space to which people from different nationalities can belong, while trying to meet their needs, whether material or spiritual. They play an important role to maintain this network and fuel this transnational belonging of different people in different countries

Compared to the historical expansion of major religions as propelled by imperialist nations, the current transnationalization process is functioning in the opposite manner: from South to North, from East to West, from peripheries to metropolitan centers, and from subaltern cultures to hegemonic religions (Csordas 2009, pp. 5–6). These religious movements operate through polycentric transnational networks. Human migrations play an essential role in these complex processes of the transnationalization of religions. Different dynamics of human mobility are implicated throughout these processes. Migrants play a

major role in weaving different links at different scales. During their migration, they forge and cultivate multiple and overlapping social relationships that connect their host societies with their home country. They build social networks that cross geographical, cultural, and political boundaries. Thus, the study of these moving populations permits the analysis of complex processes of transnationalization (Basch et al. 1994).

Scholars such as Sophie Bava (2018), Afé Adogame (2013), and Guerrie Ter Haar (2008) examined in particular the dynamism of religious belief in the context of immigration. Migrants carry with them the religion they practiced in their country of origin. They continue their worship in a new country by reproducing patterns linked to the context and practices of their own country, even if their religion is subject to constant changes and appropriations. They reinvent, revitalize, and elaborate their religious doctrine and practice during their mobility and in the host society (Brown and Yeoh 2018). Religious groups also contribute to create ethno-national communities that gather their compatriots. Religious institutions thus offer a social space where nationals can meet their peers and obtain practical information about the receiving country. This is also a way for migrants to preserve the link to their country of origin and reinforce their attachment to their nation. Migrants thus deal with their national, local-national, and transnational identities, and, in this context, religious leaders play an interesting role at the intersection of religion and migration.

In this paper, I will explore Korean Protestant missionaries' various work in different countries of Southeast Asia such as Cambodia, Malaysia, and South Korea. Most Korean missionaries are sent to foreign countries. However, some pastors are missionaries in their own country. They work with and for immigrants in South Korea. I argue that studying these missionaries reveals the logic underlying the construction of transnational networks, as these religious leaders play a significant role in the organization of labor migration.

Understanding the logic of the construction of transnational networks demands a global view of the mobilities of different actors. The analysis of this paper is based on data obtained during fieldwork conducted in the country of origin of labor migrants and in the receiving country among future, current, and former migrants. The examination of migrant mobilities and transnational phenomenon requires a multi-sited ethnographic research (Marcus 1995). My analysis is based on ethnographical fieldwork conducted in Indonesia, Philippines (2012), Malaysia (2012, 2015), Cambodia (2012, 2019), and South Korea (2016 to 2019, in the summer). During my fieldwork period, I attended every Sunday worship celebrated by Korean missionaries in these countries with the local population and short-term missions held in Cambodia (08/2012) and in Malaysia (07/2012). In total, 39 in-depth interviews were conducted with 27 migrants, 12 missionaries, and 11 Korean Protestants. The movements of these religious leaders in Southeast Asia and in South Korea are planned and controlled by Korean Protestant denominations to create and build networks beyond states' borders. This fieldwork examines the different kinds of work performed by missionaries and focuses on interactions between Korean protestants and Southeast Asian migrants in various situations. The analysis of the missionaries' work reveals their specific role as transnational actors who promote a sense of transnational belonging among marginalized populations.

2. Findings

2.1. *Between Missionary and Humanitarian Work*

According to the Korea Research Institute for Missions (KRIM) and the Korea World Missions Association (KWMA), 22,259 Korean missionaries were working in 168 countries in 2020.¹ Since the 1990s, South Korea has sent thousands of missionaries to other countries, and, in 2000, it ranked as the second largest missionary country in the world in terms of its number of overseas missionaries, trailing only the United States.² The term missionary, called *Sônkyosa* in Korean, needs to be clarified. It designates generally ordained pastors sent abroad by an individual church or a Christian denomination to evangelize people.

Korean Protestant churches distinguish evangelization target groups (Winter and Hawthorne 1999) according to their proximity to Christianity. They have come to differentiate three types of missions in taking into account cultural and geographical proximities. The main distinction is the closeness to “Korean culture”. The first category of missions concerns Koreans living abroad. The second one gathers people sharing a “similar culture” with Koreans, such as North Korean defectors and Korean minorities living in Japan or in China. The third kind of missions aims to convert people and preach the gospel in foreign cultures in Africa, Latin America or Southeast Asia. However, the vision of missionary work seems to have changed recently, as the Korea Research Institute for Missions and the Korea World Missions Association has excluded overseas ministries working for Koreans from their statistics since 2020. Henceforth, only those working for non-Koreans belong to the category of missionary. In total, 25.8% of missionaries were sent to Southeast Asia in 2020, 18% in Northeast Asia, and 9.3% in North America. Asia has for decades been the privileged destination for Korean missionaries. The concept of missionary is no longer limited to overseas activities. Missionaries in South Korea appeared in fourth position in 2020 (7.4%). They are missionary pastors staying in the country temporarily and pastors who are assigned within their own country and who are responsible for ministering to foreign residents. Korean Protestant churches thus adapt the nature of their mission and focus on proselytizing to foreigners.

Korean missionaries, *Sônkyosa*, whether they are abroad or in Korea, do not necessarily earn a fixed salary for their religious work. Their financial resources originate mainly from donations from the faithful or the offerings of their church members if they lead a community in their country of residence. Many of them have another activity to earn a living or to hide their evangelization work. In the Philippines, missionary Yi³ is officially sent as the head of the Angeles office of the Non-Governmental Organization Good People.⁴ He is the pastor of the Full Gospel Church of Angeles and distributes materials and money coming from Korean donors to Filipino children. He is paid by the NGO Good People, and at the same time, he is responsible for connecting Filipino children with church members of the Yoido Full Gospel Church of Seoul.⁵ These Korean protestants become the godparents of these children by sending them money or school materials every month. This sponsorship, which was previously reserved for the children of local church members, has been open to all the children of missions since 2012.

As a humanitarian NGO worker, the missionary goes to schools to distribute items purchased with grants he receives from Seoul. This position facilitates the conversion of children who may later come to the Church with their parents. Conducting humanitarian work among local people and trying to convert them is a common strategy of missionaries. Their main job as missionaries is to help disadvantaged people. Caring for children is indeed one of the activities often undertaken by Korean missionaries in Southeast Asia. The Full Gospel Church of Medan,⁶ for example, takes care of the children of their church members for two hours a day, free of charge. By taking in children who cannot afford to go to school, missionary of this church, Pastor Kim,⁷ can approach local people more easily. Establishing these schools also helps legitimize the church’s existence under the banner of a kindergarten, an existence that can be problematic in Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia.

Koreans are certainly not the only ones who deploy this strategy. However, at the same time, in deviation from the discourses of Western missionaries, they seek to combine this aid with a gospel of modernization as experienced and approved by South Korea. Korean Protestants distinguish themselves from other pastors by using the history of their own country. They try to embody the “success story” of South Korea. This country overcame a civil war and desperate poverty to achieve rapid economic development and a genuine democratic transition. They cash in on this “secular” success to support and legitimize their religious mission. They described South Korea as historically close to the countries of Southeast Asia and, consequently, as representing a viable model of development which Southeast Asian countries can emulate. It seems to have a special impact in a

country like Cambodia, which is sending more and more labor migrants to South Korea.⁸ Korean missionaries there propose a sort of Asian model of development (Kim 2018). The same strategy is used in African countries such as Uganda and Tanzania to incite the local population to adopt a so-called Korean model in terms of evangelical and economic development (Han 2011). This “success story” is presented as typically Protestant. They emphasize the material and symbolic aid brought by American missionaries to Koreans. They explicitly evoke the beneficial action of American pastors after the Korean War. They would like to play the same role in Southeast Asia by transferring their knowhow to other countries in development.

Protestantism is thus used to spread more or less disguised messages that are favorable to South Korea. Korean missionaries cultivate a positive image of Korea and use this national pride to increase their legitimacy. These churches succeed in winning over the local population in these countries because they invoke an idealized image of South Korea and the real economic success of this country. Korean missionaries use South Korea as a national branding tool and they also participate in the creation of this notion in these countries. They are part of material and symbolic exchanges that go beyond the scope of a theological study of religious practices. Using and mediating this religious soft power, Korean Protestants claim to offer access to a form of “Asian modernity” to the most disadvantaged local populations. Thus, they cultivate the hopes of immigration among their local church members, notably in Southeast Asia.

2.2. Missionary Work without Conversion?

However, in many countries where missionaries work, this religious discourse of modernization does not meet the needs of the faithful. It mostly concerns the poorest countries, or deprived populations in these countries. For example, many Korean missionaries live in Malaysia, a Muslim country in which proselytizing is strictly limited and where their discourse does not seem well adapted to most Malaysians. This country was richer than South Korea until 1990, and Malaysians do not especially seek to work in South Korea. Therefore, in this country, Korean missionaries develop other strategies to mark their religious and social role. In Malaysia, any attempt to convert the ethnic Malay population is prohibited by law, but missionary work is tolerated if it concerns Tamil and Pakistani migrants and the indigenous people, the Orang Asli, who represent the most deprived communities in Malaysia. The five missionaries I have followed in Malaysia work alongside different populations, but never with and within the ethnic Malay community. Most of their missionary works concern the Orang Asli. These indigenous people, living in the forest, are called *sakai*, which means slave in Malay (Mohd Adnan 2012; Endicott 2016). They are considered an underdeveloped population that needs help, protection, and assistance (Nicholas 2002). They constitute a perfect target for proselytizing by Korean missionaries seeking to convert “unreached people”.

For example, Mr I.⁹ has worked with the Orang Asli¹⁰ in their villages since 1991, first as a volunteer missionary before becoming an official member of the Korea Evangelical Holiness Church.¹¹ He has come to know the forest areas where the Orang Asli live thanks to the previous work of a Tamil missionary.

He explains the way he approaches them as follows:

“On arrival in a village, I first go to see the chief and present myself to him as a Korean missionary. It is easy to know if it has been some time since they have not hunted and caught wild boars. Then I tell him, “You probably think that you are unlucky in your hunting of wild boars, but it is not a matter of ‘luckiness’. It is God who decides”. One week later, I go back to the village with one or two wild boars that I have bought with money sent by Koreans. I give them to the village people and propose to return in one week. The next time, I bring some meat and other food products. While doing so, I become familiar with the chief and the village people. To build a church, the chief should obtain a 70% yes vote

from the village people. I easily succeed in having that approval, and that is how I have built 35 churches in different Orang Asli villages.”¹²

Mr I. lives in Penang and visits these Orang Asli churches three times a year to bring them rice, snacks, clothes, and medicines. At the village, I have visited with him, there was what missionaries call a “church building”.¹³ It did not have any religious signage. Inside this wooden building, there were some coloring works done by children describing Bible stories on the wall, a drum and a guitar. This place was used as a church but also as a school and a meeting space. People were just asked not to drink and smoke in the “church”. Attending this church seemed not to change their way of life and did not imply a radical disjuncture from their past behavior. These Orang Asli people seem to have just accepted the material aid offered by Korean missionaries, but their conversion to Protestantism is difficult to assess. Even if there is no religious sign outside the church, Mr. I. affirms that this new church building marks the presence of Protestantism, and, thus, “Muslims do not come to convert people”.

Korean missionaries claim that their work consists of assisting this indigenous population, who “believe in something anyway. It is not difficult to make them switch their belief to [the Christian] God”. A missionary recognizes that most of the local population converted by Koreans in Malaysia are Orang Aslis, especially because “evangelization by bringing medicines and different goods in the name of a modernity still works for them”. Therefore, for example, an Evangelical center for Orang Aslis¹⁴ was established by the Korea Evangelical Holiness Church in 2013.

For Korean churches, working in a Muslim country is also a way to play on their own image, as it allows Korean Protestants in Seoul to believe that they are trying to convert Muslims. In fact, they are dealing with non-Muslim populations. Nonetheless, missionaries, while helping them, play on their marginality to organize short-term missions for Koreans.¹⁵

In Korea, most Protestant churches organize short-term missions, called *tankisônkyo*. These experiences are aimed at lay people, who ‘become missionaries’ for some days or weeks in another country. In the framework of short-term missions, lay people convey material aid sent by Korean churches and sometimes deliver free services to the local population, depending on the profession of participants. They are supposed to work alongside permanent missionaries sent to those countries by different denominations. Settled missionaries, such as Mr. I., organize the stay of participants in short-term missions. Orang Asli villages provide an ideal place to welcome Korean Protestants. When I first visited an Orang Asli village in 2012, three short-term mission teams had been planned for the summer, and all of them would pass by this place deep in the jungle. University students were about to paint the church building and repair some houses. High school students were scheduled to stay with villagers for at least three days. Participants in these short-term missions would live in an Orang Asli village for six days, sleeping in a building without a roof. Missionaries use the existence of this indigenous population to stimulate Korean Protestants’ faith. This experience of what they called a “primitive” life makes Koreans aware of their privileged situation, and at the same time, these “opulent” Koreans are presented as the embodiment of a successful model, a Protestant way of modernization. Missionaries like Mr. Won¹⁶ explain to Orang Aslis how life in Korea has changed dramatically since they came to believe in God.

In Malaysia, the indigenous populations are not the only target of Korean missionaries. Some of them work amongst Myanmar refugees.¹⁷ Mr. Won speaks English quite well; he works in a refugee center and teaches English to people from Myanmar. According to him, some of them want to learn Korean as well, because they are interested in going there to work. However, speaking English is more urgent for them to immigrate to another city. He designates himself as a “collaborator of missionaries” because he assists other missionaries in their work. Missionary Pak¹⁸ has established a learning center for Myanmar children in Kuala Lumpur with the support of the UNHCR. These kids do not have the opportunity to go to school, as they are merely in transit in Malaysia, before being sent to other countries.

He works with volunteers to teach them English. This center gathers around 60 children. The religious part of its courses is limited to the coloring of Biblical images.

Similar to Mr. Won, Mrs. Pak came to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as the associate pastor of a Korean Protestant church after completing her studies in theology. She had not felt comfortable in her work under the direction of the male chief pastor, who was not, according to her, seriously involved in spiritual work. Consequently, she quit her job at this church and began to work with refugees. Since then, she has worked for Myanmar refugee children at her learning center and has brought food to refugees scattered across twenty-four camps. She acts as an intermediary for Korean humanitarian associations and non-governmental organizations such as *Korea Food for the Hungry International and the Myanmar refugees*.¹⁹ She considers herself an independent missionary. Even if she was ordained by the Korean Presbyterian church, she does not work with Korean missionaries. She works with a Pakistani pastor that she met in a church. She collaborates with him and celebrates Sunday worship with international church members who are Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Chinese.

Even if Malaysia is not considered as fertile ground for Christian missions because of the prohibition of proselytization towards Muslims, it appears to be one of the most attractive destinations for Korean missionaries. It is considered an “unreached land” and Korean missionaries can work alongside the populations forsaken by the government, similar to Orang Aslis or Myanmar refugees. They collaborate with foreign colleagues, considered to be people with a lower social status in the Malaysian society, such as Indian and Pakistani pastors.

However, their stated objective of conversion is not necessarily accomplished. In the Malaysian case, but also in other countries in East-Asia, the number of church members that Korean missionaries gather is not important. The networks they weave between these countries and South Korea seem to be valuable “in themselves”. Organizations in Korea, such as the Holiness church denomination and the Full Gospel Church of Yoido, consider that developing strong networks of circulation is a benefit in itself, regardless of their potential for gaining actual converts. These tenuous links have symbolical and institutional meanings that go beyond spiritual beliefs but are genuinely part of this religious transnationalization.

2.3. Beyond the Spiritual Network

The presence and work of Korean missionaries alongside non-Koreans in Malaysia has an important meaning for Protestant churches. Protestant denominations in Korea officially declare that they are able to send missionaries even to Muslim countries. The same kind of argument is used concerning the missionaries in European countries or in North America (Kim 2017). Even though they gather Korean expatriates, their mother churches claim that they are sending missionaries to countries with a historically strong Christian tradition. Therefore, Korean missionaries in Malaysia contribute symbolically to the construction of an international network of Korean Protestant churches and participate in the diffusion of a discourse on their international influence. Korean Protestantism can be seen and considered by Korean nationals as a universal religion with an evangelical message that is addressed to the whole world.

However, this religion seems to attract local followers only in countries that are less economically developed than South Korea. The economic development of South Korea is a sort of guarantee of success for Korean Protestant churches abroad. Conversely, the worldwide network they construct legitimizes their label as international churches in South Korea and fosters their attractiveness abroad. Korean missionaries are at the center of different flows, and not just religious ones, to foster the internationalization of their church or, at the very least, present their church as an international church. They interact with the local populations of different countries in Southeast Asia and connect them to Korean church members in organizing short-term missions. They also connect local populations in Southeast Asia to the Korean labor market. For example, they help channel the migration

flow from Cambodia to South Korea. During my field work in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, several members of the Full Gospel Church of Phnom Penh, such as Smay and Narak, said that they had decided to go to work in South Korea to see their missionary's home country.

"I did not know much about South Korea, but I could see in the movies and drama that it was a really developed country. Our pastor told us about his country, which was as poor as Cambodia, but became a rich country. I was wondering how and why our pastor would leave such a nice country to come to work in Cambodia and I wanted to go see where he is from."²⁰

Missionary Cho²¹ of Phnom Penh also helped them learn Korean and pass a mandatory Korean language test to apply for to immigration to South Korea. For example, Narak worked as interpreter for Korean missionaries and decided to go to work in their country. As they were already familiar with Korean Protestants, upon their arrival in South Korea, they searched for Protestant churches to celebrate Sunday worship and meet their compatriots while attending services celebrated in their own language, for example, at the Onnuri Community Church.²²

Missionaries assigned to work for migrants in Korea such as Ms. Chang²³ welcome them in foreign communities inside the church. The Cambodian worship community of Onnuri was first created to convert Cambodian migrant workers in Korea. They propose activities such as free Korean classes, and they offer a place where Cambodians can gather on Saturdays and Sundays; they have thus attracted around thirty members.²⁴ Korean missionaries encourage migrants to preserve their ties with their country of origin. During Sunday worship, Ms. Chang constantly asks Cambodian members to pray for their family and for things happening in Cambodia. She emphasizes the importance of what these workers will be able to accomplish upon their return to their home country, thanks to the spiritual capital and the skills acquired through this Korean Protestant church.

Migrants are considered part of the same religious community as the Korean members. However, there is still a clear distinction between Koreans and non-Koreans and also between migrants from different nations within these churches. Korean Missionaries do not encourage Cambodian church members to settle in South Korea, and they even cultivate national differences by integrating national communities within the churches by offering them their own services in their own language. Labor migrants are temporary workers, working on a contract that allows them to stay up to four years and ten months at most. In the meanwhile, they are integrated into the Korean economic market as employees of Korean enterprises, but even in their workplace, they do not interact with Koreans except their supervisors, who are not always courteous to them. For example, Sonith²⁵ complains about his boss, who continuously insults him, and he says that his only real and pleasant contacts with Koreans are within the church. Korean missionaries reterritorialize these deterritorialized migrants and insist on the links of migrants with their own country without encouraging their inclusion in South Korean society. This corresponds to the government's decision not to establish a genuine policy of integration for unskilled labor migrants and to exclude them from its so-called multicultural policy²⁶.

However, these churches do not seek to exclude migrant workers from Korean society. Korean missionaries create an alternative place to which foreign workers belong. Even if they live on the margins of Korean society, they belong to a spiritual world that extends past the political frontier. "I am grateful for missionary Chang and other Koreans I met at the church for being so nice to us", said Hem,²⁷ who has suffered at work. Missionary Cho tries to maintain her connections to former church members. She goes to Cambodia once a year on short-term missions, but she has also lived there several months to learn Khmer. Each time she meets former members of the church in Korea, she asks them to become the "Protestant leaders of their country".

Former migrants maintain ties with Korean missionaries. This relationship makes them member of an international network constituted by Korean Protestant churches. They can appropriate their resources and feel relatively empowered compared to their previous

social status in their home country. Through missionaries, they can cultivate strategic links to obtain spiritual as well as social and economic support. Some of the former migrants such as Sok²⁸ have set up a business with Korean Protestants they met during their stay in Korea. The missionaries' work goes beyond the religious field. In different contexts, they weave ties between actors at different scales and link religious, economic, and social networks across borders.

3. Discussion

Missionaries are religious migrants in search of potential converts. They cross national frontiers, but they remain within their spiritual world of "Christian citizenship" (Longkumer 2018). Korean missionaries are also spiritual migrants without a specific status in the receiving country. They stay on the margins of the host society, often exercising other economic activities. This lack of social status facilitates their contacts with marginalized local social groups, such as the Orang Aslis in Malaysia. They are not considered a danger for the host society, and this inferior position does not bother them. Their spiritual mission of extending Protestantism goes beyond social positions and national borders. This transnational aspect makes them feel affiliated with a more global spiritual world, namely, the Korean Protestant network. What matters the most to the missionaries sent by Korean denominations all around the world are their religious and national allegiances.

Even if missionaries put forward the universalism of religion, all of their practices are closely related to South Korea. Korean missionaries belong to a broad and powerful supranational movement which is eminently Korean. They convey their faith, regardless of their nationality, this alternative and "transnational belonging" (Levitt 2003). They experience for themselves what it means to work in a transnational context. As religious migrants, they recreate an alternative space that goes beyond national borders. The link created by this transnational belonging can be material as, for example, the case of Orang Asli in Malaysia, who benefit from the aid they receive from Korean Protestants. Korean missionaries also propose a spiritual belonging to a better world through their transnational network. They strive to embody the economic success of South Korea and to convey this gospel of modernization to the populations of developing countries, especially in Southeast Asia. In South Korea, Korean missionaries insist at the same time on the transnational links of their church and on the necessary reterritorialization of migrants. They are able to cultivate their national identity within the church while benefiting from the specific sense of international belonging provided by its international network. Thus, Cambodian migrants in South Korea can maintain strong ties to their country of origin while being connected, through the church, to a wider world. Korean missionaries thus promote a sense of transnational belonging to different populations in Southeast Asia and in South Korea. The international space in which they are involved is currently marked by an increase of flows of tangible and intangible resources. These movements create and are structured by multiple links that are not always well-controlled and organized by national states. Korean missionary work is thus fully part of an ongoing process of transnationalization in the Asian context, forming links between economic opportunities in South Korea and development needs in Southeast Asia.

Korean missionaries deal with different population through the transnational network they create. Those who belong to this network do not have necessarily an attachment to the same nation. For South-East Asians, these specific links provide an access to South Korea. The secular success of this country, and the economic opportunities offered in South-East Asia, are at the center of this transnationalization. For Cambodian migrant workers in South Korea, this transnational network also allows actors to affirm a "long-distance" nationalism (Bava and Capone 2010) and not to lock themselves into the borders of the receiving country.

Korean Protestant churches do not really seek to transcend their ethno-national identity. However, they offer physical and symbolic belongings to people who do not necessarily share their Korean identity. This transnationalization of Protestantism is thus not synony-

mous with homogenization and delocalization of forms of religiosity. On the contrary, this results in forms of local indigenization that go hand in hand with the reterritorialization of religious identity, reference to concrete and symbolic places, and attachment to certain features of ethno-national identity, as in the case of Cambodian workers in Korea.

For Koreans, this is certainly a strategy of these missionaries to build a transnational image of their church by transcending the borders of their nation and their ethno-national or geographical anchorage and by claiming the universal characteristic of their religion. However, their action cannot be reduced to just a strategy of mission. South Korean missionaries are able to establish material or symbolic links between different nationalities and between these foreigners and Korean Protestants of the peninsula. They cultivate a transnational belonging through Protestantism that somehow allow adherents to cover their concerns, whether it be lack of materials, financial difficulties, or the impasse of integration in South Korea.

Their work aims at spreading Protestant messages with a universal vocation, but ultimately their mode of expansion is flexible, and the transnational imaginary they convey can be adapted to local audiences in different countries according to their needs. Transnational belonging is not only reserved to those who physically move. It ideally integrates people confined to the local by their limited resources into a global community of solidarity, as in the case of the indigenous people of Malaysia and the disadvantaged people of other Southeast Asian countries. The long-term efficiency of this external aid is, at the least, questionable, but these transnational links do exist and are used and appropriated at a transnational level. In that sense, missionaries are key transnational actors.

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Notes

¹ Available online: https://krim.org/2020-korean-mission-statistics/#gugje_seongyosa, accessed on 7 January 2022. Statistics for Korean protestant missionaries used in this article are based on those published by the Korea Research Institute for Mission.

² The evolution of the number of Korean missionaries sent abroad is as follows: 1645 (1990), 8103 (2000), 19,373 (2011). Source: KRIM.

³ In this paper, pseudonyms are used to designate all the interviewees quoted in this article to guarantee their anonymity. Korean words are converted using McCune-Reischauer Romanization, but I kept the romanization of the proper name, if one commonly used, as well as that of institutions (e.g., Pastor Yo, etc.).

⁴ A non-governmental organization established by Yonggi Cho in 1999 with the support of business church members.

⁵ A Pentecostal church established by Yonggi Cho in 1958 in Seoul. This church was once qualified as the largest congregation in the world by Los Angeles Times in 1980. It is currently a megachurch with one million church members, according to the church.

⁶ Established in 2011 by Pastor Kim.

⁷ A female pastor in her sixties who arrived in Medan, Indonesia, in 2004 after being ordained in South Korea. Interviewed on 15 July 2012.

⁸ Cambodians are the most numerous, unskilled temporary workers arriving each year in Korea with an E9 visa, along with Nepalese, numbering 7773 in 2019. Sources: Korean Statistical Information Service.

⁹ A 60 year-old male living in Penang since 1990. After theological studies in South Korea, he worked as an assistant pastor in Malaysia.

¹⁰ Local aboriginals living in the Malay Peninsula. To know more about them, see [Endicott \(2016\)](#).

- 11 The Holiness Churches is a Protestant denomination that originated from the United States. The Korean Evangelical Holiness Church was established in Korea in 1910.
- 12 Mr. I. was interviewed on 19 July 2012 in Penang.
- 13 The missionaries did not tell me the name of this place. They drove me about three hours from Penang to arrive at a lake in the middle of a forest. The missionaries shouted to call village people and three kids came to pick us up in a long boat (fieldwork conducted on 20 July 2012).
- 14 Called in Korean *Orangasli wonchumin Sônkyoheo*. This seems be about a local area where missionaries of the country can gather regularly.
- 15 This concerns a practice initiated by Americans that Korean churches have adapted. To know more about the origin of the short-term mission, see (Priest 2010).
- 16 Mr. W., 37 years old, has lived in Penang since 2005. After his studies in theology, he lived several years in the Philippines to learn English and to know more about Southeast Asia, where he began working as a missionary and found a job in a Korean Protestant church in Penang as an assistant pastor.
- 17 They are mainly Rohingya people who left Myanmar because of the ethnic cleansing campaign against them.
- 18 Ms D., around 60 years old. She was a plastic art teacher in Seoul before coming to Malaysia.
- 19 The official translation of the *Kia taech'aek ponpu*.
- 20 Semay, Phnom Penh Full Gospel Church member, converted to Protestantism in 2017 and was interviewed on 19 May 2019 in Phnom Penh.
- 21 Male pastor sent as a missionary by the Full Gospel Church of Yoido. Approximately sixty years old, he has lived in Cambodia since 1994.
- 22 Onnuri Community Church is a Presbyterian church, founded in 1985 in Seoul. The Onnuri M Center was established in 2005 by this church in the city of Ansan, in Kyŏnggi Province in the south-west of Seoul. In 2020, this mission center welcomed Nepalese, Russian, Mongolian, Burmese, Vietnamese, Sri Lankan, Arab, Uzbek, Indonesian, Chinese, Cambodian, and Filipino communities. Other foreign communities exist in other Onnuri M Centers situated in other cities such as Kimp'o, P'yŏngt'aek, Hwasŏng, and Namyangju.
- 23 58-year-old female assigned to Onnuri M Center in 2016 as a missionary of the Cambodian community.
- 24 The number of other communities' members varies between twenty and forty.
- 25 24-year-old male. He worked in South Korea from 2017 to 2020.
- 26 Multicultural policy in Korea is mainly a family and demographic policy and aims to support the marriage of migrant women in Korea and their children. To know more about multiculturalism in Korea, see (Lee 2015; Han 2007).
- 27 29-year-old, single male. He went to work in Korea twice and converted to Protestantism at the Onnuri Center during his second stay. Interview conducted on 16 May 2019 in Phnom Penh.
- 28 30-year-old male, married with three children. Since his return to Phnom Penh, after three years of work in Korea, he keeps in touch with missionary Chang of the Onnuri Center. Interviewed in Phnom Penh on 18 May 2019.

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