

Robert Oh, *Gap and Eul: Korean Patron-Client Dynamics in Church Planting in Cambodia*, Regnum Studies in Missions (Oxford: Regnum, 2020). vi + 120 pp. \$17.00 paperback, \$14.99 Kindle.

Robert (Bob) Oh is a Korean American mission mobilizer who spent twenty years planting Korean American churches in Southern California in the United States and many years working in Christian leadership development and discipleship in Cambodia. This book is a published version of the PhD dissertation he wrote for Middlesex University (Oxford Centre for Mission Studies), UK.

I personally had several conversations with Bob in Cambodia while he was doing this research. In the beginning, he was focused on the issue of aid dependency in missions, which continues to be a critical issue in Cambodia. As his research progressed, he adjusted his focus to patronage (e.g., patron-client social systems), which he asserts “governs most relationships in Global South cultures” (2). Missionaries and development workers from western countries tend to view patronage negatively as an unequal, exploitative economic relationship. Oh argues that this persistent view of patron-client relationships as a “social evil” or a “social ill, which has to be eradicated” (13) causes a lot of misunderstanding on the part of missionaries and national workers alike. This book offers “an alternative reading of aid dependency as a relational concept, rather than an economic one” (3).

Gap and Eul presents Oh’s research and findings in answer to this question: “How does the patron-client dynamic between Korean missionaries and Cambodian church planters offer an alternative understanding of aid dependency within the discourse of mission studies?” (3) He does this by first discussing the literature on patron-client relationships and aid dependency with specific reference to Cambodia and Korean missions (chapters two and three). These two chapters provide some of the most beneficial discussions of the book. Oh argues for a more balanced view of patronage: “Theoretically, a patron-client relationship is a fair exchange of power and labour, and it becomes a problem for those who are engaged in patron-client relationships only when power is exploited against the weaker partner” (14). He offers the Korean terms *gap* and *eul* (literally “first” and “second”) as alternative terms to help reframe the discussion. *Gap* and *eul* denote one person’s

relationship to another person in a given social situation. A person can be a *gap* in one relationship and *eul* in another (11-13). When a *gap* behaves toward a *eul* in an exploitative way, they are referred to as *gapjil*, which literally means “doing the *Gap*” (13).

Chapters four, five, and six present an extended case study of a Korean missionary referred to as Pastor Ted and the students in his church planting school, referred to as Cambodia Bible College (CBC). Each of these chapters examines a stage in the evolution of their relationships from 1998 to 2015. The three relational stages between Pastor Ted and the CBC pastors can be summarized as father to children, sponsor to clients, and partner to partner. The first stage was characterized by “relational dependency,” in which Pastor Ted provided for the physical needs of the students, made major life decisions for them, and directed their church planting efforts (59). The second stage highlighted Pastor Ted’s role as a First Order Broker between the primary patrons of his ministry (churches in Singapore and Korea) and the CBC church planters (74). At this stage, Pastor Ted was both *gap* to the church planters and *eul* to the primary patrons. Some of Pastor Ted’s actions and policies in this stage became a “problematic *Gap-jil* mode” as he dominated the decision-making process regarding the ministries of CBC church planters (83). Finally, the third stage represents Pastor Ted’s movement toward a patron partner role in the context of his desire for “relationship solidarity” and the “Cambodian pastors’ desiring and requesting more structural equality” (97). In other words, despite their financial dependence on Pastor Ted, some CBC pastors wanted “to have equal voices in making decisions, setting goals for themselves and seeking autonomy” (97).

While *Gap and Eul* does make a solid contribution to the discussion of aid dependency in missions, readers need to be aware of two “gaps.” First, the experiences presented in this book represent a specific case study that does not correspond to all other ministries in Cambodia. Missions in Cambodia is an extremely diverse enterprise. Some missions exemplify trans-national denominations and norms, while others prioritize the indigenous church principles of establishing self-governing, self-financing, and self-propagating Cambodian churches and national church structures (e.g., the Assemblies of God). Both sets of ideals have experienced degrees of fruitfulness in Cambodia, especially

when they actively seek to contextualize their approaches and do not actively work to dismantle Cambodia's patronage system.

Second, *Gap and Eul* lacks a substantive discussion of indigenous church principles, which were formulated specifically to mitigate against dependency in missions. Assemblies of God missionary leaders like Morris Williams and Melvin Hodges addressed dependency and partnership in their books *Partnership in Mission* (1986) and *The Indigenous Church* (1976), respectively. These two books were standard texts for missionary training in the US for many years, but they actually capture the missiology that has driven Assemblies of God missions around the world from early in the twentieth century to the present time. While Oh does make an honest, often painful assessment of Korean missionary practices in Cambodia, he does not take a serious look at how those practices differ from the indigenous church principles of the western missionaries who worked to establish the modern church in Korea. Instead, he focuses on literature that views the indigenous church principles espoused by western missionaries as a form of depersonalized, task-oriented, manipulation under the guise of "partnership" (8, 98). While *Gap and Eul* does contribute to the discussion on dependency, readers interested in how to form healthy partnerships in missions should consider reading viewpoints like those of Williams and Hodges as well.

Gap and Eul wrestles with the issue of aid dependency in missions in a way that successfully shifts the framing of the discussion from economic dependency to patron-client social dynamics, taking into account both the negative and positive aspects of patronage. Readers who are looking for a set of principles for avoiding aid dependency in missions will not find easy answers in this book. Readers who will benefit from *Gap and Eul* include those who want to better understand Korean missions, those who are interested in patron-client social dynamics in Cambodia, and those who want to think about patron-client relationships through an anthropological lens rather than an economic one.

Bob Oh has a YouTube channel where you can find more of his material in English and Korean: Dr Bob Oh TV. The channel includes a half-hour book talk about this publication: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICn_22eh7r0 (English Version).

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