

Moon Sun-Myung - A Moon in full

The Economist
September 3, 2012



Whether the average Korean liked it or not, Moon Sun-myung was one of the country's most famous sons to venture overseas. The creator of the controversial Unification Church—known to its detractors as the cult of the “Moonies”—had hundreds of thousands of followers at his peak. His “mass blessing” ceremonies in stadiums captured the attention of the world in the 1970s and 1980s.

Having died from pneumonia-related complications at the age of 92, he leaves behind a religious empire diminished in its number of adherents, but still with impressive financial clout. And range: Moon-family businesses include one of the main suppliers of raw fish to America, a newspaper, a private university and a gun manufacturer. He passed his final days in a church-owned hospital in the South Korean county of Gapyeong, an area where the Unification Church is known for its extensive land holdings.

Born in 1920 in a village in Pyeongan province, in what is today North Korea, the young Reverend Moon had a turbulent early life. Claiming to have spoken with Jesus at the age of 15, he proceeded to build up a following among Christians in Pyongyang, a city once known as “the Jerusalem of the East” for the zeal of its believers. In 1946 he was arrested and tortured by North Korean police, and eventually sentenced to six years' hard labour.

He established his church in Seoul formally in 1954, overseeing it through years of expansion amid a general boom in Christian conversions in South Korea. He married his second wife, Han Hak-ja, in 1960. As wife of the prophet, she became known as “the true mother”, and with their fourteen children as part of the “true family”.

As his power grew, Moon pushed into Japan and the United States. His willingness to dole out political donations, and his espousal of anti-communism—nevermind that it was not strong enough to stop him doing business with North Korea—endeared him to America's Republicans. But not everyone was impressed: American authorities pursued Moon for filing false tax returns, which resulted in an 18-month prison sentence in the early 1980s.

Moon's later years saw a convergence between the Unification Church and its business interests. His children ascended to high-ranking positions in each. In this respect, their family was little different from the leadership in North Korea, or the families behind the chaebol conglomerates that dominate the South Korean economy.

Father-to-son succession is a common story among the rich mega-churches of South Korea, too. Moon's worldwide reputation is largely one of a bizarre cult leader and religious entrepreneur; but for Korea, his organisation—and indeed, his tumultuous life story—is perhaps not quite so exceptional as one might think. This might help explain why his death was only the third- or fourth-ranked story in the national press today.