

A Missiological Analysis of the “Love Sonata” Project in Japan

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Japan is known as the “graveyard of missionaries” because of the tremendous challenges Christian missionaries face there. Interestingly, Christianity on the Korean peninsula, which is so geographically close and even culturally similar, has experienced rapid growth during the past century. This stark contrast has piqued both interest and concern among missiologists and missionaries. The Korean Church has made great effort to support the Japanese Church by sending missionaries and resources;¹ however, the result has not been very successful. Japanese Christians still make up only 0.24 percent of the total population and the average attendance per local church does not exceed 34 persons.²

In 2007, the Reverend Yong-Jo Ha, Senior Pastor of Onnuri Community Church in Seoul, launched a new mission approach called “Japan: Love Sonata.”³ Love Sonata is a multi-phased evangelistic outreach project that consists of church revival seminars for Christian leaders, evangelism outreach efforts, and other follow-up programs. In 2007 and 2008, Love Sonata rallies were held in 10 major Japanese cities.⁴ With the total number of participants at 45,289, it is estimated that 1,564 made a decision to follow Christ through these meetings. In these terms Love Sonata was hugely successful. However, even more significant than numbers was the influence and impact that the programs had on the

1. Today more than 500 Korean missionaries are serving in Japan. David Cho Yonggi, for example, the pastor of the largest church in the world, tried to evangelize Japanese. Since 1971, he has been steadily working to reach 10 million Japanese through church planting and media ministries.

2. This number refers to those who attend Protestant Churches on Sundays. The ratio of the registered Protestant Christian is 0.43%. Christian population including Catholic is about 1%. (Church Information Service, <http://www.church-info.org/html/churchmap.html>; (accessed August 15, 2008).

3. Rev. Dr. Ha Yongjo also concurrently serves as the President of Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology in Seoul.

4. Okinawa, Fukuoka, Osaka, Tokyo, Sapporo, and Sendai programs were held in 2007; Hiroshima, Yokohama, Aomori were held in October 2008; and Nagasaki program was held in November 2008.

Japanese Church. This paper will examine the impact of the Love Sonata movement from a missiological point of view.

Positive Factors Contributing to the Success of Love Sonata

This section examines the sociological factors that contributed to the success of the Love Sonata movement.

The Rising Interest in Korean Pop Culture

Recently, the Japanese media and entertainment industry have been flooded with an unprecedented interest in Korean pop culture. This movement, called *Kanryu*, (which means “Korean Stream”) began with the influx of Korean dramas, celebrities, art and culture, products and tourism.⁵ One of the most popular Korean imports was a drama called “Winter Sonata.” A second drama was called “Changum no Chikai,” which was a story of a female nutritionist who overcomes the hardships of life.

The demographic group that makes up the majority of those who are attracted to Korean cultures are the “*Dankai* Generation” or the baby boomers who were born after World War II. This generation is characterized by a strong devotion to the restoration and development of society in the aftermath of the war. Because of the war they suffered much and were unable to enjoy life through pleasures such as romance and liberty. In the coming years, as Japan developed into a wealthy nation, the *Dankai* Generation longed for these experiences that they had missed. Current Japanese pop culture is dominated by post-modernism and the *Dankai* felt cut off from culture. The Korean love stories and dramas, however, filled the void that the Japanese dramas could not. The romance tales and the success stories of overcoming the hardships of life resonate strongly with the *Dankai*, who needed to feel hope and healing.⁶

As an experienced pastor, Ha saw Japan’s hunger and need for love in the midst of material abundance. In his own words, “Japan has everything except Jesus Christ. We should bring the true Love that the

5. Some Korean TV dramas achieved more than 20% rating.

6. Other possible reasons for *Kanryu* boom are: (1) by this time the historical fact became obvious to Japanese; (2) the relationship between two nations was improving through cultural exchange, tourism, sports events and so forth; (3) the reported incident that a Korean man died in the railway accident in order to save a drunken Japanese in Tokyo in 2001.

Japanese actually need.”⁷ Thus, Love Sonata was born—an evangelistic movement packaged in *Kanryu* to capture the interest and hearts of the Japanese people and win them for Christ.

Cultural Contextualization

Love Sonata is all about cultural contextualization. It uses culture as a tool or a medium to communicate the Gospel to the world. The program is rich with cultural performances such as classical music, Korean traditional music, choral pieces, Gospel music, ballet, and hip-hop. Korean celebrities share their testimonies and open the door for the Gospel.

Because of the conservative nature of the Japanese Church, culture becomes an important tool in evangelism. Ha explains the importance of cultural contextualization by comparing it to water in a cup:

The Gospel is the water and culture is the cup. Without a cup, people cannot drink. The shape of the cups may differ, but the water is the same. We have to use culture as the cup to hold the Gospel so that people can drink the water (Gospel).⁸

He also explains the challenges of contextualization:

The Church is a ship and culture is the sea. The ship sails the seas and is on the waters. However, if the water comes into the ship, it will sink. We need to understand that the Church is in culture but if the secular culture comes into the Church, the Church will sink.⁹

Proper contextualization is indispensable in missions because the gospel message must be communicated in a form that can be understood by indigenous people. Otherwise, the church’s missional endeavors can produce no fruit. Contextualization, however, is fraught with the danger of syncretism. Mary Terry points out:

Healthy contextualization should strike a balance between the need to communicate effectively and relevantly within a given culture and the

7. Sermon in the promotion video for “Love Sonata” presented at Onnuri Community Church, January 2007.

8. Yong-Jo Ha on “Church and Culture” in a lecture given at the Revival Seminar at Love Sonata Sapporo, October 31, 2007.

9. Ha, “Church and Culture.”

need to maintain the integrity for the gospel itself so that the message received is both meaningful and convincing.¹⁰

Love Sonata was careful to avoid these pitfalls and used culture in order to present the Gospel without compromising biblical values. Performances were fun and performers shared their testimony to show how their lives were changed by faith in Christ.

A Wholistic Approach to Evangelism

Love Sonata, as the name implies, focuses on the love of God. The program is designed to pour out love and care to the Japanese people. For example, Korean ushers guide guests from the subway station right to the seats in the hall. Another group of ushers hand out gift packages at the entrance of the halls. Still others welcome the visitors with greetings and a blessing song. All these ushers are well trained and prepared in advance.

In addition, the cultural performances of music and art are designed to move the hearts of the audience so that they are prepared to hear the message of love. The program finale is especially dramatic and carefully planned using colorful paper planes, balloons, handkerchiefs, flower crowns and penlight—again to pour out the love of God upon the Japanese people.

The pouring out of emotions and hearts being moved are an especially difficult since, in Japanese culture, emotions are second to reason. In fact, emotion is regarded as a weakness.¹¹ Hence, it is no surprise to see that the Japanese Church does not encourage the emotional expression of faith, often avoiding or even stopping emotional release. This lack of affection in the Japanese Church often results in spiritual dryness and boredom. The placement of reason over emotion also produces an intellectual atmosphere and often alienates the common people.

In Japanese custom, people are expected to be reserved and unexpressive in their regular life. Interestingly, during festivals and holidays, emotions of joy and excitement are celebrated and expressed freely. This shows us that emotions are important to the Japanese and that affec-

10. John Mark Terry et al., eds., *Missiology: An Introduction to the Foundations, History, and Strategies of World Missions* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998).

11. The typical saying regarding this characteristic is observed in a Japanese proverb, “*Bushi wa kuwanedo takayoji*,” which means, “Soldier never shows his hunger by putting toothpick in mouth when they do not have anything to eat.” Showing hunger is an honest expression of a person’s need. But it is regarded as a lack of emotional control in Japan.

tionate release is healthy for Japanese Christianity because Christian experience is not just intellectual but also emotional.

Paul Hiebert points out the importance of the wholistic nature of human beings in terms of cognition, affection and evaluation. People must be able to process experiences on these three levels so that it does not remain shallow. In the same way, the conversion experience must be cognitive, emotive, and evaluative in order to minimize apostasy and/or nominalism.¹²

Local Church Involvement

Crusade or campaign evangelism has often been criticized because of the lack of involvement from the local churches. Even if the crusade itself is successful, if the local churches do not participate and cooperate, it becomes a one-time event and there is no harvest. There needs to be follow-up programs for these new converts to grow deeper in their faith. In the past, new believers were left unconnected to the local churches and the new lives born during the crusades were lost. The Love Sonata program includes preparatory and follow-up programs.¹³ Prior to the events, the local pastors are invited to preparatory meetings so that pastors in the Korean and Japanese Church can cooperate. From the planning stages, the local churches are consulted and their ideas and suggestions are reflected in the programming.

Initially, because Love Sonata was started by Onnuri Community Church, a Korean church, many Japanese churches were suspicious of their motives and were hesitant to cooperate. Some were cautious about their involvement because of their commitment to their denomination and were concerned about denominational approval. However, as Love Sonata was launched, its reputation spread all over Japan. Slowly, Japanese churches understood the intention of Onnuri Church and gradually accepted, approved, and eventually welcomed Love Sonata. In the end, a total number of 1,217 local Japanese churches cooperated in the Love Sonata movement. Christians from these local churches served as ushers and choir members, and prayed with the volunteers from Onnuri Church.

A Multi-Dimensional Project

Mass evangelism is a strategy that has been used all over the world; however, in spite of the high number of the converts reported

12. Paul Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), 45-48.

13. Concrete programs will be discussed in the next section.

at these meetings, local church membership does not reflect the same numbers.¹⁴

Love Sonata took into account the disadvantages of mass evangelism and implemented a multi-phased methodology. The main event was supplemented by various smaller events like the Ezra Meetings (a praise and worship event for the youth) and a Church Revival seminar for believers. In these seminars, pastors and members of Onnuri Church introduced effective strategies and tools for various ministries such as QT (Quiet Time); One-to-One Discipleship; Target Evangelism; and the CEO Forum, a network of Christian and non-Christian leaders in society. In the days following the main event, Onnuri also offered various ministry support programs such as Father's School, Mother's School, God's Family Ministries, Shining Glory, and Open Service (seeker-oriented service), among others.

Additionally, all these programs were supported by two major mass media ministries: the Christian Global Network Television (CGNTV) and the Duranno Publishing Company. CGNTV allowed people to participate in the events both on television and online and Duranno provided Korean Christian literature in Japanese translations for the use of the local churches.

The follow-up programs were a necessary and effective complement to the main mass evangelism event and the importance of the smaller more intimate meetings is contrasted with mass evangelism:

In countries where Christians are trying to arrest the process of secularization, intensive weekend seminars on basic faith questions with no more than 60 participants are proving efficacious. European pastors report that whereas big evangelistic campaigns produce [few] lasting converts, these intensive seminars usually result in at least 10 percent of participants staying the course.¹⁵

It is also worth mentioned that during Love Sonata, more than 200 outreach teams from Onnuri Church visited the local churches in Japan to lead worship services, cultural programs, praise and worship, and other forms of fellowship and small groups.

Love Incarnated

The greatest strength of Love Sonata is love. As mentioned, the program was designed to pour out God's love to the Japanese par-

14. Leith Anderson and Edith L. Blumhofer et al., "Just as We Are," *Christianity Today*. Available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/11.54.html> (accessed August 15, 2008).

15. Anderson and Blumhofer et al., "Just as We Are."

ticipants and to that end alone, Korean volunteers served behind the scenes, planning and strategizing to demonstrate the sacrificial love of God. Over 9,000 Korean Christians came to Japan just to serve the Japanese churches at the expense of their own time, money, family, work, and other responsibilities. This generous and selfless display of love overwhelmed the Japanese people. Though many sermons speak about love, many do not exercise love. Love Sonata, however, was special because it truly poured out the gracious love of God through Korean Christians.

Negative Factors Hindering the Project

Although Love Sonata greatly impacted the Japanese Church, the preparatory work was not an easy task—especially for a Korean Church attempting to execute a nationwide event in Japan. This section deals with the difficulties faced in the execution of the project.

Criticism of Mass Evangelism

Mass evangelism has faced criticism, particularly by the Japanese Church. The Tokyo Crusade held in 1961 with Bob Pias from World Vision was rejected by many churches. According to Hiraoka, the reason for the negative reaction towards this crusade was simple limited knowledge about mass evangelism. He writes,

Mass evangelism like this [Tokyo Crusade] is merely an emotional and fanatic campaign utilizing mob psychology. . . . [I]t is a stranger invading Japanese Christendom. Japanese churches have been working hard to nurture and disciple the converts through bible study¹⁶

He continues, “There are Japanese ways to do evangelism in Japan. We are doing our ways; nobody should disturb what Japanese churches have been trying.”¹⁷ This resistance from the local Japanese churches is related to a fear of comparison. In mass evangelism, everything is on such a large scale and there are more human resources and prominent speakers. The local pastor cannot provide the same scale of excitement and there is a fear of losing church members after such an explosive event.

16. Hiroshi Hiraoka, “What is Evangelicalism?,” an unpublished seminar report. Available at <http://geocities.jp/hirapyan/fukuinhatohananika.htm> (accessed August 10, 2007).

17. Hiraoka, “What is Evangelicalism?”

The Speed of the Program

The vision for Love Sonata was first announced on November 1, 2006 and the first *Love Sonata* in Okinawa was scheduled for March, 2007. The four months of preparation for an event of this scale is unthinkable for the Japanese. When we consider that the project was planned and directed from abroad and required the cooperation of Japanese churches—which was unprecedented—logically, four months is not enough time. The Japanese are also known for their attention to detail in planning. They take time to plan in great detail and once the plan is made, they do not like to change. For the Billy Graham Crusade in 1967, the preparation committee began in 1964, and the preparation for Nihon Dendo Kaigi [Japan Evangelism Conference of 1974] began in 1970. Moreover, other nationwide conferences have taken at least two years of preparation before the actual event.¹⁸ Compared to these time lines of preparation, four months is *incredibly* short. In light of this, many Japanese churches doubted the success of the event and so refused to cooperate.

Lack of Understanding Due to the Cultural Differences

Korean and Japanese people have a very different attitude towards change. Koreans are flexible and open to change. In contrast, the Japanese, who like to think through until the final conclusion, do not like change. To the Koreans, the Japanese people seem inflexible and obstinate whereas to the Japanese, the Koreans lack consistency and responsibility. In the initial stages of Love Sonata, there were several changes even after the information had been announced to the public. Since the changes were not announced ahead of time, several Japanese people who had come from far away for the original program were disappointed. Furthermore, the changes had not been reported to the Japanese Christian media which caused further frustration. However, through this incident both sides learned about the different attitudes toward change and learned to improve and understand each other in future interactions and preparation.

Knowing about these cultural differences are important for communication and Lingenfelter lists six categories of contrast between non-westerners and westerners: (1) task oriented versus time oriented; (2) person oriented versus task oriented; (3) holistic thinking versus dichotomous thinking; (4) status oriented versus achievement oriented; (5) non-crisis oriented versus crisis oriented; and (6) closed to vulner-

18. Available at <http://jea.dtdns.net/history> (accessed October 10, 2008).

ability versus open to vulnerability.¹⁹ Korea and Japan, most likely due to geographic location, similar cultural roots in Chinese culture, as well as the post-modern environment, have similar values in terms of task orientedness, holistic thinking, status orientedness, and closeness to vulnerability. However, the Japanese approach crises with more intensity and would rather prevent them through preparation. This is possibly due to the frequency of unpredictable natural disasters such as typhoons and earthquakes.²⁰ This attitude toward change is one of the major differences between Korea and Japan.

The Effect of Love Sonata on the Japanese Church

Love Sonata made an impact on the Japanese Church in several ways and this section will briefly explore the positive changes.

Zeal for Evangelism

According to the statistics on church ministry and evangelism, almost half of the Japanese churches did not have any increase in attendance for the past five years and 47.4 percent of the ministers and church leaders felt that their churches were stagnant.²¹ People felt that the causes of stagnation were: (1) weakened faith of the individual believer, (2) lack of good leadership, (3) social factors such as the decrease of the number of children and the increase of the “working poor” class,²² (4) the conservative nature of the church and its inability to adapt to social change, (5) lack of cooperation among the denominations, (6) the increasing average in the church and society, (7) low spirituality and (8) cultural distance between the church and society.²³

19. Sherwood G. Lingenfelter and Marvin K. Mayers. *Ministering Cross-culturally: Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

20. Tetsuzo Watsuji developed his Japanology based on his understanding that culture is shaped by the natural environment in his book *Fudo* [The Climate] in 1935.

21. *Kurisuchan Shinbun* issue of 17 December 2007 (48.4% of the respondents expressed that they felt their churches are stagnant, and 47.4% of the respondents' churches did not have numerical increase in the church membership).

22. “Working Poor” is a social term that indicates the class of the temporary workers who do not have official employment. Their workload is as heavy as regular employee, but their payment is minimum without privilege that regular workers received. Their income is often referred to as the minimum income beyond the poverty line in the society.

23. “Gendai Nippon no Kyokai no Jitsujo wo shiru [Knowing the Reality

The Love Sonata movement challenged several of these points. Church revival seminars along with follow-up programs were designed to encourage the faith of individual believers and challenge church leadership to step up to the plate. The new styles of worship and evangelism that were introduced by Love Sonata presented new possibilities to the conservative Japanese churches. In addition, the cooperative nature of the Love Sonata project helped bridge the gap between denominations and church leaders. Finally, the culturally contextualized gospel-centered program showed everyone how relevant Christ is to life regardless of age, background and culture.

Japanese Christians, ministers, and believers alike, had often been discouraged by the aggressive and even antagonistic attitude of the Korean Church. However, Love Sonata brought a new attitude and sincere love to Japan, and diligent service of the Korean Christians won over the Japanese. They were challenged to become more enthusiastic about evangelism and active in their churches. When the people heard that Pastor Yong-Jo Ha had undergone six liver operations in addition to the weekly dialysis treatments and was still leading this project on behalf of the Japanese people, the ministers and church leaders throughout Japan were both moved and challenged.

Moreover, the sheer success of Love Sonata brought new hope and life to Japanese Christians. When the Japanese Church saw the overwhelming response to the gospel invitation, they realized that evangelism in Japan was more than possible.

Breaking Down Denominational Walls

Protestant churches in Japan are divided into three groups: liberal (or ecumenical), evangelical, and charismatic (or revivalist).²⁴ In the past, these groups had not associated with one another and even accused each other of heresy. This division was also seen among local churches, theological institutions, Christian media, and even at inter-denominational meetings.

Love Sonata, however, was a platform where church leaders could interact and cooperate. In 2007, Onnuri Church held a conference (Onnuri Ministry Celebration or OMC) and invited pastors from these three groups for an on-stage, live panel discussion. This sort of public show of unity and fellowship was impossible before the Love Sonata project. The walls of division had crumbled and they instead grew into

of Today's Japan],” *Kurisuchan Shinbun* issue of 29 June 2008.

24. Liberal churches are often associated with Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan often called “Kyodan,” and the charismatic churches are associated with the Revival Denomination.

a "Christian Forum" where leaders of each locality, non-believers and believers, were invited for networking and evangelism.²⁵

Reconciliation between Korean and Japanese Churches

Under Japanese colonization, Korean Christians were severely persecuted for resisting the government imposed emperor worship, which had been instituted as a means of control. Kyongbae Min writes,

Japan planned to root out any Christian influence, and fabricated the notorious "Conspiracy of 105 Christians." At first, 600 Christians were arrested in the northern district of Korea where Christians were active and powerful. The Church suffered as the representative of Korean people and the whole nation of Korea knew about it.²⁶

More than 3,000 Christians were arrested. Fifty were martyred in jail. Seminaries and Christian schools were closed down and several churches were destroyed.²⁷ Korean citizens were deprived of their property, identity, nation, education, and lives.

Japanese churches who had participated in the political invasion and colonization of Korea tried to restore the damage in various ways but never to the satisfaction of the Korean people.²⁸ Because of this

25. The Aomori Love Sonata held in September 2008 invited the Mayor of Aomori City and Governor of Aomori Prefecture with approximately 100 leaders in the area.

26. Kyongbae Min, "Kankoku no Kirisutokyo [Christianity in Korea]," in *Aziakirisutokyooshi* [Asia Christian History], ed. Go Rimei et al. (Tokyo: Kyobunkan, 1995), 123-148.

27. Min, "Christianity in Korea," 123-148.

28. Nihon Kirisuto Kyodan writes, "It was indeed on this very occasion that we freshly realized yet again the mistakes we committed in the name of the Kyodan at the time of our formation and during the following war years. We, therefore seek the mercy of our Lord and the forgiveness of our neighbors. In those years, the government of our country, out of the imperatives of waging war, demanded as a matter of national policy that religious bodies be consolidated and cooperate with the war effort. From the opening of Christian mission early in the Meiji Era (1868-1912), most Japanese Protestants had long desired to dissolve the various denominations and to establish a single evangelical church in Japan. Therefore, the church leaders of the time, taking advantage of this demand by the government, entered into church union, whereby the Kyodan was formed. When we recognized that the Providence of God and the Lord of History was at work in the formation and continued existence of the Kyodan despite our weakness and failings, we not only feel a deep sense of profound gratitude, but with fear, and we painfully realize our responsibility." <http://kohara.ac/church/kyodan/schuldbekanntnis.html> (accessed October 13, 2008).

difficult history, reconciliation was thought to be impossible without a formal apology and compensation.

At a Love Sonata meeting, however, Pastor Yong-Jo Ha apologized to the Japanese people for the Korean's bitter hatred against the Japanese. It shocked the Japanese audience who were used to hearing the demands and accusations from Korean people. This unexpected apology from the victim to the offender was as absurd and radical as the forgiveness of Jesus Christ toward those who had crucified him on the cross. Ha confessed, "We are sorry for hating you without reason." The Japanese know that Koreans have more than enough reason to hate them but the apology was both sincere and full of love that the entire audience was touched. Many broke down in tears. Love Sonata had brought reconciliation to the long history of hatred between Korea and Japan. Love Sonata serves as a new paradigm for mass evangelism, church cooperation, cultural contextualization and reconciliation. In a world that grows increasingly smaller, the Church must continue to evangelize and learn to work together as we work towards peace on earth and reconciliation between God and man.