Leprosy, Democracy and Citizenship in Korea under American Military Occupation, 1945 – 1948

Jane Kim
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Leper Colony’s Mayor Praised by Lerch

A leper colony has recently been brought to my attention as an outstanding example of the development of democratic principles in Korea, announced Major General Archer L. Lerch, Military Governor.

To Mayor KIM Min Ok of the Sorok Leper Colony in Cholla Namdo, General Lerch has written a letter of congratulation which states,

You now have a voice in your own affairs. You elect your own leaders and are taking more and more responsibility in handling your own problems. These are difficult times for all Korean people and such an example as your community should be held up before all of Korea as proof that self – government can work here. This is a great responsibility and you all carry it with honor.”

With its 5,716 patients, Sorokdo is now in all its probability the largest leper colony in the world. Dr. Kim Hyung Tai, the director, instituted the policy of self – government with popular election of leaders in each of the seven villages and election of the chief mayor. The present chief mayor, KIM Min Ok, is himself a leper patient. He is a well educated man, graduate of a seminary, an outstanding personality and respected by all his people. Mr. KIM Min Ok has stated many times on behalf of his people that he is thankful for the many supplies and drugs, especially chaulmoogra oil, which have been sent from the United States. He is also thankful for the newly gained liberty in the self – government at the Sorok Colony.

Self – government has meant freedom from oppression by the large staff of 350 officials who under the Japanese ruled the colony with an iron hand. There are now only 100 officials and Dr. KIM, the director, plans to cut this number in half. Sorokdo has been changed to a liberated self – governing community of lepers.
Robert Wilson’s Notebook (1946 – 1947)
Thank you!