HANNAH KIM

Death in Philadelphia, 1958

The Murder of In-Ho Oh and the Politics of Cold War America

ABSTRACT In 1958, In-Ho Oh, a foreign student from South Korea, was beaten to death in West Philadelphia by a group of black youths. The brutal murder shocked people all over the nation who wrote hundreds of letters to the newspapers and the mayor about the incident. Some letter writers focused on the implications of the murder for Cold War diplomacy, while some believed there were moral lessons to be learned from the generous actions of Oh's family. Yet other letter writers focused on race and juvenile delinquency and constructed an idealized "model" minority in the Korean student, contrasting him to the young suspects. The death of In-Ho Oh came to have different meanings to different groups and challenged America's self-perception about racial equality and exceptionalism. KEYWORDS In-Ho Oh, Cold War, Korea, Presbyterian, foreign missions, juvenile delinquency

The Philadelphia Inquirer, in its retrospective of the year 1958, singled out the murder of In-Ho Oh as the city's most vicious and shocking slaying of the year.[1] The incident occurred around nine o'clock on a Friday evening, April 25. Oh, a Korean graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania, quietly slipped out of the West Philadelphia apartment he shared with his uncle and aunt to mail a letter home to his family in Pusan, South Korea. He walked down the street to the mailbox at the corner of 36th and Hamilton. Unbeknownst to him, a group of young black men had just been refused admittance to a dance at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church. The angry youths met up with another group heading to the dance and were able to convince this second group that they too would not be admitted to the dance, either for inappropriate attire or lack of the sixty-five cent admission fee. One of the young men allegedly said to the others that he wasn't "going to do all this

1. "1958: Year of Space Race, Cold War Crises," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 29, 1958, Folder 5, Box 1966, Office of Alumni Affairs, University Archives and Records Center, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (hereinafter UPUARC).

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walking for nothing; let's get some money."[2] That's when the eleven young men came upon the lone man at the mailbox.

The youths set upon Oh, perhaps hoping he had money they could use to get into the dance or maybe just wanting someone upon whom to take out their anger and disappointment. They hit and kicked him with their fists, hard-toed shoes, and other objects. Neighbors heard the scuffle and called the police, who arrived quickly, but not quickly enough for the twenty-six-year-old foreign student. He was alive but his injuries were severe. According to authorities, Oh was severely beaten and his face was almost unrecognizable. A bloody broken bottle lay near his body. He died in the ambulance on the way to the hospital only six blocks away. Within twenty-four hours, the police rounded up nine suspects; two others were brought in the day after that. It was not hard to find the eleven young men. They were local youths, eight of them living within a seven-block radius of each other. Two of them were brothers. The young men ranged in age from fifteen to nineteen and almost all had prior juvenile arrest records.

The major Philadelphia newspapers ran dramatic headlines, such as "Nine Young Thugs Seized in Brutal Murder of Penn Graduate Student," and "Citizens Blast Korean Slayers."[3] Editors pontificated on the prevalence of juvenile delinquency in the city, reflecting residents' preoccupation with urban crime. Nationally syndicated newspapers and journals reported on the story as well, making the local incident a national story. *Time* magazine somewhat sensationalized the murder with an article entitled "Hands Dripping Blood," while *Newsweek* mournfully chimed in with "Murder: Stranger from Afar." The populace read avidly as local police made arrests and the gruesome details of the murder became public.[4]

Philadelphia's mayor, Richardson Dilworth, seemed particularly affected by the murder and was invited to speak at the small, private funeral held four days after Oh's death. The "iron-hard ex-marine" wept openly as he choked out, "It is a horrible thing that this could happen in our city" (fig. 1).[5] His tears moved people like a man from Baltimore who told Dilworth, "Your

2. "Oh Jury Hears Codefendent," *Evening Bulletin*, November 10 1958, File, "Oh, In-Ho-Trial," Newspaper Clipping Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries, Philadelphia (hereinafter TUL).

3. *Philadelphia Inquirer,* April 27, 1958; *Philadelphia Tribune*, April 29, 1958.

4. "Hands Dripping Blood," *Time,* May 12, 1958, 22–23; "Murder: Stranger from Afar," *Newsweek,* May 12, 1958, 35–36.

5. "Murder: Stranger from Afar."

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FIGURE 1. Mayor Richardson Dilworth (to the far right) attempts to regain his composure after the funeral service for In-Ho Oh. *Source*: *Evening Bulletin*, April 29, 1958, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries.

tears represent those of the entire nation."[6] At the request of Oh's parents that he be interred in the United States, the Philadelphia Presbytery held a second funeral service for Oh and buried him at one of the historic churches in Philadelphia.[7] Oh's gravestone, easily recognizable as the newest stone in the cemetery, reads, "to turn sorrow into Christian purpose."

The murder stirred people to write to the mayor and local newspapers as citizens, both local and nationwide, tried to make sense of the violent act. Hundreds of letters written about the incident are stored in the records of Mayor Dilworth at the Philadelphia City Archives. These letters give us an unprecedented look at what everyday people were thinking about Korea and Koreans, Cold War politics, and juvenile delinquency. Although most letter

6. Frank D. Seorti to Mayor Richardson Dilworth, May 9, 1958, File "Korean Incident," Box A4400, Administration of Richardson Dilworth (hereinafter Dilworth Papers), Philadelphia City Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (hereinafter PCA).

7. Old Pine Street [Weekly Bulletins], May 18, 1958, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (hereinafter PHS).

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writers did not identify their race or ethnicity, it is a fair assumption by the language used in the letters that most writers were white Americans. Of a sampling of one hundred and eighty-nine letters, only five identified their race explicitly—all were African Americans. The other letters did not do so explicitly, but most used coded language when referring to the suspects, such as "those hoodlums," "delinquents," "savages," or "animals," and referred to Africans Americans and the black community in the third person ("they," "coloreds," "the Negro race," or worse).[8] While it is conceivable that some of those letter writers could have been African American, it seems unlikely given the way in which those letter writers tried to distance themselves from the race of the attackers and considering those few who did identify themselves as African Americans felt compelled to do so in order to explain their perspective as someone from the same race as the attackers.

The letters make clear that writers realized the implications of a Korean foreign exchange student being brutally killed in the United States. Although few may have met or known Koreans, the letter writers certainly understood that the Korean peninsula was a key battleground on which the Cold War was being fought. Letter writers used the language and rhetoric of the Cold War to bemoan the misfortune that this student, who was studying politics and government, would never return to Korea to impart knowledge about U.S. democracy and government.

But the letters reveal that the incident sparked two other strands of discussion that were also part of Cold War culture. For some letter writers, the forgiving and generous actions of Oh's family in Korea became a model of true Christian behavior. These attributes were transferred to Oh himself, whose life, for the most part, remains shrouded in mystery. Oh became a constructed entity, created by his family, the public, Philadelphia's political leaders, and the city's Presbyterian ministers, who interpreted his memory and legacy for their own purposes. Along with his family, it was the Philadelphia Presbytery that had the biggest hand in helping to shape Philadelphians' understanding of Oh as a devout Christian. Although Oh did not have a connection to the white Presbyterian community of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Presbytery shaped the In-Ho Oh story into a Cold War lesson

8. Of 189 letters, 133 (70 percent) listed their address as Philadelphia. Most of these addresses were residences, but others were places of business. There were 30 (16 percent) from the immediate suburbs of Philadelphia (Bucks, Montgomery, Chester, Delaware, and Camden counties), 23 (12 percent) from beyond the Philadelphia metropolitan area, and 3 that were anonymous.

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of Christian values and morality, which could be used to address not only domestic social ills, but also the threat of communism.

For other letter writers, the murder of In-Ho Oh highlighted tense race relations in the Cold War era. As African Americans were fighting for more civil rights and social and economic services, letter writers revealed resentment and hostility at the changing racial makeup and power structure in the city.[9] Many white commentators on the murder expressed their fears and anger about a perceived increase in youth crime, especially black juvenile delinquency.[10] They sympathized with this student from Korea and constructed Oh as an exemplar of a "model minority" at a time when that term had not yet entered the popular lexicon. As they envisioned him, Oh lived a life that contrasted markedly with the lives of the eleven suspects, who appeared to embody chronic problems in Philadelphia's black community. For their part, leaders of the black community and members of the black press saw in the murder of Oh both a horrible crime and an opportunity to expose the systemic economic and social problems in Philadelphia that were at the root of this crime. For them, it was important for black voices to be heard amid the vitriolic din shaping public discussions of the crime and to drive home the point that the United States was not the social, economic, and political paradise implied in Cold War rhetoric.

The murder clearly came to represent many things to different groups, and these multiple perspectives serve as a window into how various peoples experienced the Cold War. For some, Oh's story was a tragedy because so many individuals, including journalists and religious leaders, represented him as a stranger in this land, someone who was here as a visitor to learn about American institutions and American politics. Public discussions of the murder of a Korean guest, who came to the United States as a student, challenged participants' perceptions of America's role in the world and belied the perception of the United States as a country of racial and social harmony. The race of the attackers mattered in how commentators framed the event within a context of Cold War race relations. For others, the drama of Oh's life and death and his family's response to their son's senseless murder became a moral

9. See Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

10. "Juvenile delinquency" was a term that expressed adults' fears about a new youth culture emerging in the postwar years and uncontrollable youth "gangs." See James Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America's Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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lesson about Christian behavior. In an era where religion was used as a tool to combat communism and where both liberal and conservative churches lamented a perceived assault on spirituality, the Philadelphia Presbytery appropriated In-Ho Oh's story as an exemplar of how strong religious values could bolster declining spirituality. For his contemporary audience, an idealized Oh became a better American than his killers, a model of true Christian behavior, and a reminder of why South Korea deserved American support. For us today, his story becomes a singular moment when we can closely examine how Americans understood and lived the Cold War.

THE SETTING: PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA, USA, 1958

In 1958, despite general postwar prosperity, the country was in the midst of a recession characterized by declining production and rising unemployment in the manufacturing sector.[11] Trends in Philadelphia served as a prime example of the unemployment problems facing the country. Between World War I and World War II, the availability of factory jobs led to the rapid increase in black migration from the South, such that the percentage of Philadelphians who were African American rose from 7.4 percent in 1920 to 18.2 percent in 1950.[12] However, after World War II, manufacturing began to dwindle in the city. In the twenty-year span between 1955 and 1975, Philadelphia lost three out of four industrial jobs.[13] The change in Philadelphia's demographics, loss of factory jobs, and an active black community pushing for fair employment and civil rights left many whites feeling resentful that African Americans were gaining access to "their" jobs and "their" neighborhoods.

Hence, in its economy and racial makeup, Philadelphia of the 1950s was a city in transition. City politics were also in flux. Ineffective economic policies and corruption that had been hallmarks of Philadelphia politics came under attack in the late 1940s. A coalition of public interest groups dedicated to urban reform took control of City Hall and finally ousted the Republican machine that had been entrenched for almost a century. Dilworth, the Democratic mayor elected in 1956, had a tough task in front of him. The city suffered from economic and social decline; and black liberals, who had been part of the reform coalition, demanded change. African American

11. Sylvia Porter, "Profile of the Jobless American," *Philadelphia Daily News*, April 28, 1958, 14.

12. Carolyn Adams, David Bartelt, et al, *Philadelphia: Neighborhoods, Division, and Conflict in a Postindustrial City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 9.

13. *Ibid.*, 81.

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leaders complained that police and politicians did not enforce anti-discrimination legislation and that the city government needed to be restructured in order for African Americans to receive any type of justice and equality.[14] Thus, with recession and hardship particularly affecting lower-class communities in Philadelphia, it is no wonder that Oh's murder came to have many different meanings.

THE COLD WAR PERSPECTIVE: AMERICANS AS HOST

Most Philadelphians' knowledge and understanding of Korea derived from the Korean War, as one of the early battlegrounds of the Cold War. Few would encounter Koreans or Korean Americans on city streets because their numbers, even when bolstered by an influx of Korean War brides and adoptees, were very small. But the "loss" of China in 1949, combined with the Korean War and the growing conflict in French Indochina, heightened the importance of Asia in the Cold War, and political leaders pressed for a U.S. presence in that region against Soviet and Chinese communism.

Hence, given the importance of Asia in the global war against communism, Korean students like Oh represented the hope for closer relations between the United States and South Korea. Oh's brutal death symbolically threatened that hope. Oh had come to the University of Pennsylvania to study political science and government, the ideal subjects to expose foreigners to American democracy, morals, and beliefs. Instead of returning to Korea to impart what he learned, Oh died, explained one newspaper, "as brutal a death as any inflicted on his friends who died fighting the Communists in Korea."[15] The irony was lost on few. As the editor of *The Philadelphia Bulletin* wrote, "The Russians have a perfect piece of propaganda to sell in Korea and to hold up to the world."[16]

Readers would have understood the potential danger that the editor from *The Philadelphia Bulletin* was warning about, because they understood that the fight against communism was as much an ideological battle as it was a military engagement with boots on the ground. Americans were being educated to believe in the geopolitical importance of faraway places such as

14. Countryman, *Up South*, 49–52.

15. Ray McBridee, "Penn Student Savagely Beaten to Death," *Philadelphia Daily News*, April 26, 1958, 3.

16. John C. Calpin, "City Stirred by Negro Crime Wave," *The Sunday Bulletin*, May 4, 1958, 7, File "Korean Incident," Box A4400, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

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South Korea.[17] Articles in the popular press helped train Americans to think internationally and to redefine "we" in a more global sense. Instead of thinking of Asians as "other," Americans were being taught to accept and love the Asian as a potential brother and fellow soldier against communism. Literary scholar Christina Klein argues that, with support from conservative institutions such as the *Reader's Digest,* the U.S. government embarked on an active campaign to market a new concept of imagined community that included a multi-racial vision of the postwar world. Klein describes this "global imaginary of integration" as a collectively produced model of sentimental education in which Americans could create bonds with the peoples of Asia and Africa.[18] For politicians, this global imaginary had important practical applications. The government needed to convince Americans that the country's military, economic, and political involvement in Asia and other places around the globe was both necessary and desirable. With this new global imaginary, Americans could see the interdependence between the United States and non-western nations, both politically and economically.

While there were efforts to educate Americans about other peoples, these efforts paled in comparison to endeavors that brought foreign students to the United States to learn about American institutions and democracy. Although such educational exchanges had been going on since the beginning of the century, Cold War strategy transformed foreign students from "prospective agents of U.S. influence in the world" into vital foreign policy instruments, "critical actors in the global politics of the Cold War and decolonization," in the words of historian Paul Kramer.[19] As Kramer notes, Asia and the Pacific were a particular focus of foreign policy elites in the early years of the Cold War. Foreign exchange programs seemed to appeal to the internationally minded elites of American society, such as members of the Korea Society, which sponsored many educational exchanges.[20]

17. *The Reader's Digest,* for example, ran stories such as, "The Sunday After Korea," (July 1951), "The Truth about Korea," (July 1953), and "Lest We Forget—Korea," (September 1958). The *Saturday Review of Literature* published more high-brow articles such as, "A Policy for the West in Asia" (August 4, 1951).

18. Christina Klein, *Cold War Orientalism: Asia in the Middlebrow Imagination, 1945–1961* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 23.

19. Paul A. Kramer, "Is the World Our Campus?: International Students and U.S. Global Power in the Long Twentieth Century," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 5 (November 2009): 781, 783.

20. "Korea Society, Inc.—Its Aims and Purposes," January 14, 1960, Folder "Korea Society," Box 12, YMCA of Philadelphia, TUL.

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For their part, Koreans seemed to take the idea of study abroad in the United States to heart. In the 1956–57 school year, the year Oh came to the United States for his studies, Koreans represented the third largest foreign student group in the United States after Canadians and Chinese. According to the Institute of International Education, 2,307 Korean students were enrolled in American institutions of higher learning, making one out of every twenty foreign students Korean.[21] Korean students seemed well aware of the political purposes for American foreign exchange programs. In one article, a Korean student praised exchange programs as a way for Koreans to more "easily breath[e], see, touch, and examine the results of a truly democratic society."[22]

For Americans who had a more global perspective, the idea of bringing foreign students to the United States was very attractive and melded with a particular understanding of the Cold War. As an alternative to fearing and hating communists, this method embodied positive social action. It required citizen participation as the gracious host—a model of the good American citizen for foreigners to both admire and emulate.

The murder of Oh brought this latter role, the gracious host, into an uncomfortable light. Newspapers asked whether Philadelphia, and indeed the nation, had been an unwelcoming host to this student who looked at the United States as the "land that held out so much hope?"[23] Letters to the mayor reflected this sentiment. "Not only Philadelphia, but all of us Americans are indicted when such acts of atrocity are committed," wrote one woman from Wisconsin.[24] The national news made much of the mayor's surprising show of emotion at Oh's funeral. Indeed, the mayor's sensitivity seemed to heighten the sense of shame that such a terrible event could happen in the United States, especially in light of the common perception that Oh had come to the country to learn from Americans.

In their descriptions of Oh, and despite a dearth of concrete information about his life and aspirations, journalists painted a sympathetic portrait of the young man as the ideal foreign exchange student. He purportedly suffered from and fought against tyranny. Oh's family left Korea in the early 1900s

21. Arthur Ferraru, "Korean Students in the United States," *School and Society*, February 1, 1958, 60–61.

22. Hong Chun Kim, "From a Grateful Korean Student," *The Delta Kappa Gamma Bulletin* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1956): 60.

23. Seymour Shubin, "Memorial to a Murder," *The American Weekly* (June 11, 1961), File "Oh, In-Ho—Comments," Newspaper Clipping Collection, TUL.

24. Eleanor Oltman to Mayor Richardson Dilworth, May 12, 1958, File "Korean Incident," Box A4400, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

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because of the Japanese occupation, and he was born in exile in Manchuria. He fought against North Korean Communists during the Korean War by working as a translator for the U.S. army. Oh was reportedly a devout Christian; his father was an elder in the Presbyterian Church and his uncle an ordained minister. He came to the United States to complete his undergraduate degree at Eastern Baptist College, and then continued his graduate studies in political science at one of America's most prestigious universities. Newspapers reported that the young man planned to return to Korea to enter a life of public service as a Christian statesman. Even though little was known about Oh's future plans or career goals, through the public's construction, he became the exact type of person whom foreign policy strategists wanted to recruit and train in American universities, with subsequent hopes of sending him back to his home country as part of a transnational bridge between the two countries.

In writing to the mayor and to newspapers, correspondents emphasized the tragedy that this vision would not be realized, all while constructing an idealized version of Oh. Letters resonated with regret that Oh would not return to Korea as the leader they assumed he inevitably would have become after years of studying in the United States. One minister wrote to the newspaper that "It is impossible to imagine what effect a Christian in the politics of such a nation might have for God—both for his people and in the relationship between his country and ours."[25] Others juxtaposed the hope that In-Ho Oh represented with the shame of his alleged assaulters. One person wrote to the mayor, "this young man had a wonderful future ahead of him; he might have become a great beacon to the future generation. To have him struck down by cowards was horrid, brutal, useless."[26] In the letter-writers' imaginations, Oh embodied hope, not only for Korea's future, but for the future of a global community united against communism.

In order to continue his legacy, many people contributed to scholarships for foreign exchange students in Oh's name. Ten days after Oh's death, Mayor Dilworth set up a scholarship fund for students from South Korea to study at the University of Pennsylvania. Newspapers reported the names of individuals and donors that contributed to the fund, which reached an impressive $12,000 in a few short months—enough to sustain two graduate students at the University of Pennsylvania (after the university waived the

25. Rev. Charles A. Waugaman to Editor, *Evening Bulletin*, n.d., File "Korean Incident," Box A4400, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

26. Anonymous to Mayor Richardson Dilworth, May 3, 1958, File "Korean Incident," Box A4402, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

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tuition for the two students) and to give a substantial gift of $3,000 to Philadelphia's International House, a center for foreign students.[27] Donors continued to contribute to the In-Ho Oh Memorial Scholarship Fund for years to come. Eastern Baptist College, where Oh had received an undergraduate degree, dedicated one room in its library to him and established a scholarship for a Korean student. The first recipient was Oh's cousin, Julie Oh, who came from Korea the following year to pursue a degree in English literature. Another person set up a scholarship for a Korean man or woman to study at a private school. The newspaper merely reported that the generous donor was expressing his sorrow over the death of the young Korean.[28]

Other organizations and individuals responded with different charitable endeavors. Various schools and Oh's neighborhood association donated money for milk to be sent to Korea. The Philadelphia Care Committee received contributions for food packages to be sent to Korea in Oh's memory. The Philadelphia chapter of the United Presbyterian Men started an orphans' project in Oh's name and continued an annual support fund for Korean orphans for many years. In these charity efforts, Korea was the only obvious connection to Oh since, by all accounts, he had never known severe hunger and was not an orphan. Instead, they reflected popular conceptions of war-torn Korea built through media reports and charity drives to aid Korean orphans and hungry people.

The desire to contribute money to bring more Koreans to the United States or to send charitable contributions to Korea in Oh's name reveals something about the suppositions most donors had about Korea. While those donating money undoubtedly experienced regret that Oh would not be able to return home and embark on the career for which he was purportedly training, that regret was tinged with a patriarchal overtone where Koreans were always the students and recipients of charity and Americans the teachers and providers of aid. No other memorial forms gained any traction. No one proposed that a juvenile recreation center be built in Oh's name nor funding for one of the many programs that was suggested in letter after letter as a way to combat juvenile delinquency. Most telling was that nobody suggested using funds to send American students to Korea to truly fulfill the "exchange" part of foreign exchange. Such programs did exist—for example, the People to

27. Memo from Donald T. Sheehan to Gaylord Harnwell, Folder "In Ho Oh Korean Fellowship," Box 4, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences UPB 7.76, UPUARC.

28. "Scholarship Set in Oh Memory," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 29, 1958, Folder "In Ho Oh," Box 4, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences UPB 7.76, UPUARC.

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People cultural exchange program and the Fulbright program. However, these memorials would not meld with what most Americans believed to be the United States' role in its relationship with Korea and what they presumed to be Oh's goals for his studies in the United States.

The Oh family took a different approach to memorialization. Initially, the family in Korea raised money to be used for the educational and moral guidance of the eleven suspects. After asking the president of the University of Pennsylvania and then the American Red Cross to manage the fund, the family directed their relatives in Philadelphia to use the money to establish the In-Ho Oh Community Improvement Memorial Award, which bestowed an award to a community service organization that provided quality programs for boys in the neighborhood where Oh was killed. The first recipient of this award was Boy Scout Troop 112 in West Philadelphia (see fig. 2). The family wanted their funds to be given to a group that helped fight juvenile delinquency, not to a Korean student studying in the United States. For the Ohs, this award was a more fitting memorial to their slain relative. Oh's uncle, Ki-Hang Oh, who lived in Philadelphia later founded the In-Ho Oh Memorial Center with the goal of helping foreign students adjust to life in America and provide the Korean community with a cultural center. The In-Ho Oh Memorial Korea Center was later incorporated in 1964 and continued to operate in the West Philadelphia community until the uncle's death in 2006.

Regardless of the family's priorities, it was Oh's supposed intense desire to study in the United States that became, for letter writers and other commentators, the focal point of this tragic story. *Newsweek* reported, "The dream of every Korean boy is that one day he will go to the United States to study there." With Oh's death, "It was not merely part of the Korean dream that died on the streets of Philadelphia. It was part of the American dream."[29] The *Herald Tribune* mournfully wrote, "He came to the promised land of America, to seek guidance and education here."[30] By stressing Oh's hopes for studying in America, or at least their construction of his desires, journalists essentially highlighted America's hope for Oh—that he would learn life lessons about freedom and democracy from time spent in the United States living amongst Americans.

This dynamic between the United States as teacher and Korea as student punctuated the power relationship between the two countries. Americans

29. "Murder: Stranger from Afar," 35.

30. "An Epistle from the Koreans," *Herald Tribune* May 5, 1958, Dilworth Papers, File "Magazine: Correspondences," Box A4391, PCA.

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FIGURE 2. Boy Scout Troop 112 of West Philadelphia received the first In-Ho Oh Community Improvement Award, an award established by Oh's family. *Source*: *Evening Bulletin*, April 26, 1961, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries.

clearly perceived their country as more powerful, more civilized, and more democratically advanced than the other. Korea had everything to learn and the United States everything to teach. The Korean War highlighted this relationship, since most viewed the conflict as a rescue mission, with the United States coming to the aid of a helpless South Korea. This was also the justification for leaving thousands of troops in Korea to help monitor the demilitarized zone and be an ever-present deterrent against further communist aggression in the Korean peninsula.

Journalists' physical descriptions of Oh emphasized this power relationship. Oh was quiet, slight, "small, even by Korean standards," and bespectacled (fig. 3). Perhaps this description was a way to underscore Oh's defenselessness

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FIGURE 3. Photo of In-Ho Oh printed in many newspapers and journals. *Source*: Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries.

against the "savagery" of the gang of youths, but newspapers deliberately portrayed him in the stereotypical manner of the bookish, effeminate Oriental. Newspapers also portrayed his family as poor, perhaps to make Oh's story—of a poverty-stricken young man studying in a rich and powerful country—more dramatic. Representing the family in that fashion had the effect of elevating readers' sense of shame because Oh's family, despite their poverty, could raise money to help the jailed suspects. Newspapers wrote with wonder that this poor Korean family was saving their meager earnings to help the very youths who had killed their son. In reality, the family was far from poor. In-Ho Oh's father owned a textile factory in Pusan, one uncle owned a factory in Seoul, and another was the dean of the local university in Pusan. Both his siblings and his cousins were highly educated. Clearly, this was a family of some means, a fact the family did not try conceal. Indeed, when the news of the murder first broke, the *Philadelphia Daily News* wrote that Oh was a "member of a politically powerful Korean family." But references to the Oh family's middle- or upper-class status were short-lived. Not two weeks later, the same newspaper dropped "politically powerful" and instead characterized the family as individuals scraping together money "from their meager

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earnings" to help pay for the educational guidance of the suspects.[31] While by American standards the Oh family may not have been politically powerful or notably rich, the pitiable description of Oh created an image of a tragic Korean murder victim. If Oh was diminutive both physically and economically, then he could serve as an illustrative metaphor of the power relationship between the United States and Korea, with one being superior to the other.

Many of the actors in this tragedy understood the political implications of Oh's death. They were well aware of how the international press, friendly and not so friendly, could spin the story of Oh's murder and the potential embarrassment for the United States.[32] In a letter to Mayor Dilworth that contained the subtlest hint of criticism, the Korean ambassador to the United States wrote that the incident would "not help in the proper understanding of your country."[33] Others who had any official capacity in the aftermath of Oh's death were cognizant of the public attention to the incident. Letters from government officials, family members, and institutional representatives that crisscrossed the ocean were carbon copied to respective government agencies in the United States and the Republic of Korea.

Thus, commentators on both sides of the Pacific understood that the murder of Oh had important implications for the United States' foreign relations and its relationship with Cold War allies. They recognized that the Cold War was not just fought with guns; it was also fought through ideas, culture, and quality of life. The murder threatened the carefully crafted image that the United States was selling, not only abroad but within the country as well. The incident highlighted American society's ugly layers of racism, crime, poverty, and urban blight. Yet, Americans still believed they had a mission to educate foreigners, especially those from non-western nations, on the topics of freedom and democracy. The United States would continue being the

31. See Ray McBride, "Penn Student Savagely Beaten to Death," *Philadelphia Daily News,* April 26, 1958, 3; and Samuel Kim, "Slain Student's Dad Asks Global War on Delinquency," *Philadelphia Daily News,* May 12, 1958, 3.

32. Historian Mary Dudziak points out that the State Department and government officials were concerned about how racial incidents in the United States were described in the international press. Ellen Wu also writes that the State Department had an active public relations campaign in Asia to refute allegations of racism and prejudice against Asian Americans. Mary Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America Series (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ellen D. Wu, "'America's Chinese': Anti-Communism, Citizenship, and Cultural Diplomacy during the Cold War," *Pacific Historical Review* 77, no. 3 (August 2008): 391–422.

33. Dr. You Chan Yang to Mayor Richardson Dilworth, May 1, 1958, File "General-Korean Incident," Box A-4402, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

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benevolent host to other people who wanted to learn from what Americans believed to be their superior government and society. In their reactions to the murder, private citizens and institutions exhibited a continuing commitment to the strategy of molding others in the image of the United States. Their reactions also demonstrated that, although many Americans wanted to participate in a gentler form of Cold War warfare through educational and cultural exchanges, the power dynamics between the United States and other nations remained unchanged, with the United States acting as big brother and other nations, such as Korea, as little brother.

RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE: MORAL LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

Because of the Korean War, which had ended a short five years earlier, and the political climate of the 1950s, it makes sense that Americans would view the murder of Oh within the context of Cold War diplomacy. But the murder became more than a foreign relations ordeal that challenged the United States' image abroad. Many commentators viewed Oh's story through a religious lens, combining Cold War rhetoric with the language of Christian values and arguing that, in combating communism spiritually as well as geopolitically, Koreans demonstrated superior virtue that Americans would do well to emulate. In letters and articles, they downplayed the power relationship between the United States and Korea and instead underscored the idea that Americans had much to learn from the piety of Korean Christians, as exemplified by the dignified and generous actions of Oh's family. The actions of Oh's family and by extension Oh himself, were viewed as a model of true Christian behavior, which served to highlight the perceived decline of moral and religious values in the United States, a dangerous prospect in the war against communism.

This religious interpretation of the event evolved quickly, inspired by articles on Oh and his family. Early on, the press began to describe Oh and, indeed, his entire family as devout Christians, information based on interviews with the family. Most of the news journals, including *Newsweek, The Reporter,* and the *New York Times* explicitly noted in their articles that Oh was Christian, specifically Presbyterian. Hence, the Presbytery of Philadelphia, a consortium of pastors serving churches in Philadelphia and the surrounding counties, also engaged in this active construction of Oh as a pious Christian and a devout Presbyterian. It was important for the Presbytery, which took on the duty of burying Oh's body, to stake a claim to the story and to put forth their own interpretation of his life and tragic death.

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Of their own accord, the Presbytery of Philadelphia took responsibility for Oh's burial, even though neither the mayor, officials of the University of Pennsylvania, nor family members asked the Presbytery to assume this burden. To the surprise of the mayor and the president of the university, the moderator of the Philadelphia Presbytery, James L. Grazier, pastor of Central Presbyterian Church in Norristown, sent them a letter and simultaneously cabled the parents expressing the Presbytery's desire to bury Oh and to choose an appropriate burial site. Until that time, the mayor's office had been making arrangements for Oh's body to be sent back to Korea. It seems that the Reverend Edward Brubaker of the Tabernacle Church, which was adjacent to the University of Pennsylvania, responded to an article in the newspaper that had reported the parents' request that a piece of land be set aside for their son in the "homeland of Christians." It is likely that this minister had known or met Oh since the church had a connection with a Korean student bible club, comprised of Korean graduate students in the Philadelphia area. The minister probably contacted the leaders of the Philadelphia Presbytery about the parents' request as reported in the article.[34] Taking that request to heart, the pastors who constituted the Philadelphia Presbytery and Grazier, their moderator, made a significant symbolic decision: Oh would be buried at Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church, "the only Presbyterian edifice in Philadelphia preserved from [the] colonial period," as Grazier told Oh's family, a church whose adjoining cemetery contained the graves of colonial-era church luminaries, including Jared Ingersoll, a signer of the U.S. Constitution.[35]

Considering the long history of Presbyterian missionary work in Korea, the choice of this particular burial site seemed designed to drive home points about Oh's specific religious affiliation and the Presbyterian Church's interest in symbolically embracing the young man. His grandfather, by family account a respected and well-known personage, had converted to Christianity long before Oh's birth, and his family was very active in the Presbyterian Church. Many members of Oh's family had studied in the United States. Although Oh did not come to the States on a scholarship from the Presbyterian Church, his story struck a familiar chord with Presbyterian leaders. Oh's family were, in essence, the ideal converts that Presbyterian missionaries had been recruiting as models for their mission in Korea. To have one of their

34. Memo from Donald T. Sheehan to Henry Herbert, May 8, 1958, Folder "In Ho Oh," Box 4, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences UPB 7.76, UPUARC.

35. James L. Grazier to Ki Byung Oh and Shin Hyun Oh, Pusan, South Korea, copy of cablegram, May 1958, File "General: Korean Incident," Box A4402, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

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"flock" killed while studying in the States undoubtedly caused consternation among Presbyterian leaders, regardless of whether they personally knew him. Hence they felt they had the right and responsibility to step forward to organize Oh's burial and second funeral service.

In marked contrast to the first, smaller service that took place at an African American owned and operated funeral home not far from Oh's residence, the second service at Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church was a much larger affair. Newspapers reported that 400 people attended the service while another 150 stood outside.[36] Four Presbyterian ministers, including James Grazier, the moderator of the Philadelphia Presbytery, a Korean minister, the minister of Old Pine, and Reverend Brubaker from the church adjacent to the University of Pennsylvania, led Oh's burial service. The burial itself in the cemetery adjoining Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church was highly unusual. As with many old church graveyards in Philadelphia, the cemetery had severely limited space. The Presbytery had long ago decided that only people of note, such as head pastors, would be buried at Old Pine. Indeed, the last burial had taken place almost fifty years earlier. Hence, in his communications with Oh's parents, Grazier emphasized the honor bestowed on their son by the decision to bury him in that historical and symbolic location.[37]

The Philadelphia Presbytery's concern, however, went beyond assuming physical and symbolic control of Oh's burial. The leaders of the Presbytery brought a different perspective to the murder. Rather than focusing on the international political implications of Oh's death, they focused more inwardly and essentially asked what lessons Americans could learn from these Koreans, as exemplified by Oh and his family. As one church leader at Old Pine wrote, "It seems apparent to Christians that our Lord has used [In-]Ho Oh to manifest to the world the ties of Love which arise in Christ, and . . . bind men into a fellowship of mutual love and understanding across the world."[38] Another Christian magazine quoted a famous lecturer who called Oh "the first martyr among missionaries from Korea to heathen America."[39] The Stated Clerk of the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly,

36. "400 Attend Burial of Oh in 'Old Pine' Churchyard, *Evening Bulletin*, May 12, 1958, Newspaper Clipping Collection, TUL.

37. James L. Grazierto Ki Byung Oh and Shin Hyun Oh, Pusan, South Korea, copy of cablegram, May 1958, File "General: Korean Incident," Box A4402, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

38. "Old Pine Street" [weekly bulletin], May 18, 1958, PHS.

39. John R. Adair, "The Real Story of In Ho Oh," *Power*, April 19, 1959, 2, Folder "In Ho Oh," Box 4, Graduate School of Arts and Sciences UPB 7.76, UPUARC.

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Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, cabled Oh's parents from the assembly's headquarters in Philadelphia, writing, "We are humbled by the Christian spirit you have demonstrated."[40] Gaylord Harnwell, the president of the University of Pennsylvania, wrote to Oh's parents that their words had given Americans a "lesson in Christian understanding."[41] Rather than emphasizing America's role as teacher and "big brother," sentiments such as these hypothesized that the United States could learn moral lessons from the life and death of Oh and the actions of his parents.

In their response to his death, Oh's parents and relatives had exhibited just the sort of spirit and offered just the sort of lesson that local leaders applauded. Not only did his parents and relatives agree to permit Oh to be buried in Philadelphia, a decision that meant they must mourn the young man from afar, but they set up a fund for the "religious, educational, vocational, and social guidance" of the young men who were accused of murdering him, to be used upon their release. In their letter to Harnwell and Dilworth, Oh's parents expressed their hope that the monies they raised would be used "to turn sorrow into Christian purpose."[42] The letter was read to congregations across the country, and many people thought the phrase "to turn sorrow into Christian purpose" so moving that they often repeated it in newspaper articles and letters to Mayor Dilworth.[43] The Philadelphia Presbytery placed the words on Oh's tombstone when the stone was dedicated the following year (fig. 4).

The national organization, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, was likewise moved by the event and produced a short 35-minute documentary film about In-Ho Oh and the problems of juvenile delinquency. *An Epistle from the Koreans*, a biblical reference to the spread of Christianity to foreign lands, contained a re-enactment of the murder, interviews, and footage of the family in Korea.[44] With so many sectors of American society weighing in on the causes of and solutions to juvenile delinquency, Presbyterian leaders put forward their own solution to delinquency, one based on compassion and a "Christian handling of social problems." *Life* magazine reported that the

40. Dr. Eugene Carson Blake to Ki Byung Oh and Shin Hyun Oh, quoted in "The Second Mile," *The Christian Century*, May 28, 1958, 635.

41. Gaylord Harnwell to Ki Byung Oh, May 9, 1958, Dilworth Papers, File "General: Korean Incident," Box A4402, PCA.

42. Ki Byung Oh and Shin Hyun Oh to Gaylord Harnwell and Mayor Richardson Dilworth, May 2, 1958, Papers, File "General: Korean Incident," Box A4402, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

43. John R. Fry, "With Honesty Comes Truth," *Presbyterian Life*, July 1, 1960, 35.

44. Dorothy S. Byrd, "Church Film on Delinquency Has Oh Case as Background," *Evening Bulletin*, May 6, 1959, Folder 5, Box 1966, Office of Alumni Affairs, UPUARC.

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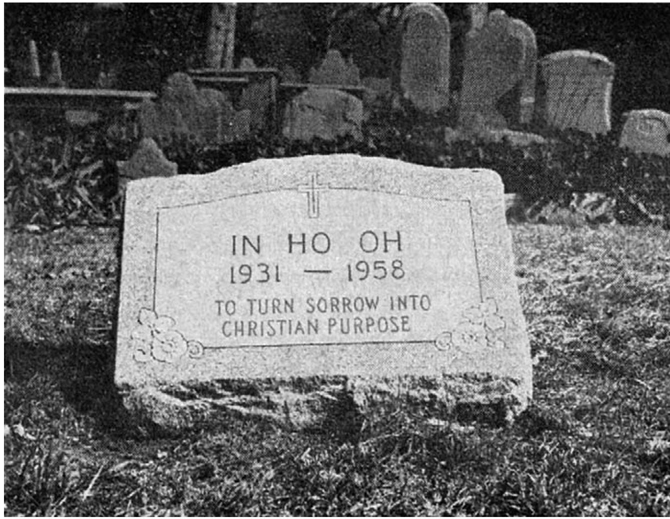

FIGURE 4. The inscription on In-Ho Oh's gravestone reads, "To Turn Sorrow into Christian Purpose." *Source*: *Presbyterian Life*, July 1, 1960.

movie played in five thousand churches in its first year and noted that "one pebble of Christian forgiveness is sending its ripples still."[45] The producers of the movie urged people to watch it, saying, "the whole Church needs to know about In Ho Oh, about his parents in Korea, and what the Church has and has not done . . . about this matter of public, corporate, church-wide guilt for the crime of eleven boys."[46] Not only did the United Presbyterian Church in the USA put forth the idea that Oh and his family could somehow lend new insight into the issues of juvenile crime, it also suggested that the church or the country held a collective guilt for the actions of the eleven suspects.

The United Presbyterian Church in the USA's interest in the story of In-Ho Oh reflected trends amongst mainline Protestant churches. While evangelical foreign missions were increasing exponentially, mainline denominations were beginning to lessen their broad commitment to foreign mission work in favor of more specific social services such as education and medical care, both domestically and abroad.[47] This led to some criticism of these

45. "The Spirit Is at Work," *Life,* March 30, 1961, Box 1967, Office of Alumni Affairs, UPUARC.

46. Fry, "With Honesty Comes Truth," 35.

47. Grant Wacker, "Pearl S. Buck and the Waning of the Missionary Impulse," *Church History* 72, no. 4 (December 2003): 867.

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denominations, especially by evangelicals, that they were "soft" on communism. Mainline churches, on the other hand, claimed to be just as anti-communist as evangelicals and Catholics but not to the point of supporting McCarthyism or committing themselves to global evangelism.[48] Instead, many of these churches were interested in bolstering America's defenses against communism by ameliorating the treatment of African Americans and supporting civil rights.[49] Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, the Stated Clerk of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA and president of the liberal National Council of Churches, had a history of activism and was famously photographed linking arms with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. during the March on Washington. Mainline churches were also concerned with a perceived decline in spirituality and Christian values among Americans. A 1951 *Time* magazine article, which had a cover photo of the president of the National Council of Churches, warned Americans of an assault on Christian values and an impending crisis.[50] Hence, leaders of the United Presbyterian Church in the USA focused on urging Americans to apply the values expressed by Oh's parents of Christian charity and forgiveness to the social ills affecting their own country.

Picking up on themes elaborated by Oh's family, local Presbyterian ministers, and the Presbyterian-sponsored movie, individuals who wrote to Mayor Dilworth and news outlets intimated that Americans had something to learn from foreigners. One woman from New York wrote that Oh might have been the first missionary from Korea to the United States.[51] A *Newsweek* reader wrote, "Maybe it would be a good move to invite Christian missionaries from Korea to America to reteach her [America] the Christianity she herself once professed."[52] While these people may not have truly believed their suggestions could happen, they did propose a surprising role reversal if Koreans came to the United States as teachers and Americans became the students. The story of In-Ho Oh and of his parents' forgiving attitude brought a new element to the image of Koreans, namely their piety

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48. See Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

49. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People,* 2nd edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 962.

50. "The Church and the Churches," *Time*, March 26, 1951, 68–75.

51. Mrs. M. Borneman to Mayor Richardson Dilworth, May 4, 1958, File "Korean Incident," Box A4400, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

52. Mrs. H.C. Ruhl to Editor, *Newsweek*, June 2, 1958, "Oh, In-Ho," UPUARC.

and devotion to God, and led some to express the idea that Americans could acquire lessons in morality from Koreans.[53]

The trope of Christian martyrs and heroes was popular during the Cold War and one with which most Americans would have been familiar. Movies such as *Quo Vadis* (1951) and books such as *The Silver Chalice* (1952) were consumed widely. Catholic and evangelical periodicals and newsletters were rife with stories of Christian martyrs. One scholar writes that "scarcely an issue of any Catholic periodical for the general reader appears without major articles on the persecution of the faith under godless Marxist oppressors."[54] Because of the history of Presbyterian and Methodist mission work in Korea and China, members of these denominations would have been exposed to church publications and other journals that profiled Asian Christian martyrs.[55] Even government agencies such as the U.S. Information Agency (USIA) and the Voice of America relayed stories of Christians fighting persecution in communist countries. Such stories helped frame how Americans understood the story of In-Ho Oh.

For many letter writers, Oh represented the redeemed Oriental, idealized because of his victimhood. Although he may not have become white or even American, Oh became less "other," as people found they could keenly feel the tragedy that had befallen him and embrace his martyrdom. Presbyterian church leaders and others who espoused a religious interpretation of Oh's death would have Americans do more than embrace the Asian as an ally against communism. They would have Americans accept Oh as one of their own, positing that Americans could learn a lesson in Christian values from his life and death. Although Oh's voice was silent on his own religious convictions, in death, he became a martyr and a symbol, even a modern-day St. Paul writing an "epistle" to anyone who saw the film. For both laypeople and Presbyterian pastors, his story became a means to articulate their growing concern for the

53. Scholars argue that certain groups and institutions, such as missionaries and church organizations, helped liberalize attitudes and images of Asians over the course of the twentieth century. See Henry Yu, *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Klein, *Cold War Orientalism;* and Madeline Y. Hsu and Ellen D. Wu, "'Smoke and Mirrors': Conditional Inclusion, Model Minorities, and the Pre-1965 Dismantling of Asian Exclusion," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 34, no. 4 (Summer 2015): 43–65.

54. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace,* 30.

55. See for example, "Japanese Arrest of Korean Christians," *Missionary Review of the World*, July 1912, 505–12 (referring to the Korean Conspiracy Case), "Japanese Persecution of Christians in Korea," *Literary Digest*, August, 16, 1919, 32–33 (referring to the 1919 independence movement), and "Korea Lengthens Roll of Christian Martyrs," *Christian Century*, November 29, 1950, 1412 (referring to North Korea).

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perceived decline in Americans' religious values, as well as their belief that missionary work in Korea had saved it from heathenism. Perhaps the story of Oh might even inspire others onto an older path that an earlier generation of Americans had followed into missionary work.

LOCAL PERSPECTIVE: CONSTRUCTING THE MODEL MINORITY

At the same time that commentators on the Oh case remade the Korean exchange student and his family into models of Christian living, many constructed the young suspects as embodiments of a plague of juvenile delinquency that seemed to be spreading across the country. Using words like "piety," "compassion," and "dignified" to describe Oh and his family, writers maligned the suspects in articles and letters with terms such as "savages," barbarism," and "jungle." The local press immediately assumed that the suspects were part of a gang and ran dramatic headlines, such as "Gang Murders Korean Student in West Phila."[56] Juxtaposing depictions of the suspects and representations of Oh was deliberate. Commentators employed an idealized Oh to cast the African American suspects in an unfavorable light, thereby reinforcing prejudicial stereotypes of the African American community. These stereotypes fed into white resentment and hostility against African American attempts in the postwar era to actively mobilize and demand civil rights.

Some letter writers did not even mention Oh or referred to him only indirectly. Still, as commentators imagined him, Oh was always present in the letters as the antithesis of the assailants. The race of the perpetrators mattered to white letter-writers because the eleven young men came to represent their anxieties and resentments about juvenile delinquency, socio-economic status, and political power in the Cold War era. The ethnicity of the victim mattered because Oh melded perfectly with constructions of Koreans as the good Asians. Oh made an ideal figure for Americans to empathize with—he was Christian, seemingly loved American-style democracy because of his political science studies at the University of Pennsylvania, and demonstrated his assimilation of American cultural values. But through his martyrdom, Oh became more than the good Asian or good Oriental. By virtue of being the victim of a crime perpetrated by another minority group, the Korean student transcended his status as a foreigner and became transformed into a member of the good minority or "model minority." Although the term itself was not

56. *Evening Bulletin*, April 26, 1958, 1.

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popularly used until after a 1966 *New York Times* article, scholars have noted the development of the myth of the model minority long before 1966, particularly in the immediate post–World War II era.[57] The strength and appeal of the model minority myth rested on the subtext that Asian Americans were "not black"; In-Ho Oh's case highlighted this tension perfectly as the defendants were African American and the victim Asian.

In contrast to Oh, the eleven African American attackers were deemed the "bad minority" group members, who stood for all of the problems letter writers saw in the African American community, including poor parenting skills, the absence of civic-mindedness, a poor work ethic, and weak morals. Letter writers believed that these deficiencies prevented African Americans from achieving success and the country from being a model of social and economic harmony. Letter writers deliberately juxtaposed and contrasted, whether directly or indirectly, the idealized Oh and his supposed qualities with the African American defendants and their purported defects. As they did, they held Oh up as a model citizen and even a better American than his attackers.

Employing a stereotype of Asian filial piety and strong family structure, commentators found the roots of juvenile delinquency in a presumed lack of good parenting among African American families. Few writers were subtle in hinting that African Americans could learn a lesson in family values from Asians, reinforcing such stereotypes as Japanese Americans being able to economically recover from the hardships of wartime internment because of strong family units.[58] Letter writers speculated that the eleven young suspects must have come from broken homes, had lax moral guidance, and generally lacked role models in their lives. While letter writers may not have specifically addressed these problems in racial terms, their comments reflected common stereotypes of African American family life and the writers' own assumptions about the dynamics of black families. In their admiration of Oh's parents and his purported Christian upbringing, they set an idealized Asian American figure against the presumed realities of the eleven young men's upbringing.

Letter writers also weighed a supposed lack of community and civic mindedness in the young men's neighborhoods against Oh's stated desire to return to Korea to help his country as a Christian statesman. One person angrily

57. See Madeline Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); and Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

58. Wu, *The Color of Success,* 171.

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wrote, "The Korean student would have been some good to the world while those who killed him were nothing but hoodlums and murderers."[59] As Oh came to embody civic virtue, the young suspects and by extension the black community were portrayed as unpatriotic. In essence, criminal acts in certain communities indicated a lack of devotion to country. Hence, many letter writers suggested forming neighborhood organizations that would help indoctrinate the public on patriotism and citizenship or community groups that would help monitor local youth and families. These letters implicitly criticized black neighborhoods by suggesting that greater community involvement and civic virtue could have prevented this tragedy.

African American community leaders and journalists readily understood that proposals for combating juvenile delinquency were a commentary, not simply on the crime or the eleven suspects, but on the black community as a whole. They sought to rebut such collective judgments while condemning the murder, highlighting existing efforts to curb juvenile crime, pleading for additional community resources, and castigating the emotionalism and hysteria that accompanied the public reaction to the murder.[60] In an editorial, "Who Killed the Korean," editors of the local African American newspaper, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, criticized the "conditions which destroyed the souls of the murderers" and, to be sure the readers knew what they referred to, specifically condemned northerners who had been silent and continued to be silent on the fight to end segregation in the South.[61]

The *Tribune* resisted attempts to dichotomize the murder as one involving a "good" and "bad" minority. The *Tribune* attempted to bring a human, personal element to the story by interviewing the parents and family members of the eleven young men. As if the reporters knew the stereotypes contained in letters to the mayor, writers for the *Tribune* commented on the clean, modest houses of the suspects. Of the eight families that were interviewed, four suspects lived in two-parent households. Three others lived with their mothers and siblings; the fourth, with an aunt and grandfather. The *Tribune* noted the parents' employment status or jobs held by the young men. The family members were distraught and in disbelief that their sons could be part of

59. Charles Janke to Mayor Richardson Dilworth, April 29, 1958, File "Korean Incident," Box A4402, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

60. "Should Uproot, Destroy Causes of Delinquency," *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 10, 1958, 4.

61. "Who Killed the Korean?" *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 6, 1958, 4.

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such a heinous crime. They almost all blamed gangs and bemoaned that they were not aware of their sons' friends.[62]

While the mainstream press chose to list by name all of the suspects' prior arrests and school records, the African American newspaper tried to bring a compassionate perspective. *Tribune* patrons read how Lonnie Collins, age eighteen, lived in a "hospital-like" clean house, had a job until recently laid off, and was polite and respectful; but the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Evening Bulletin* audiences read how Collins had been arrested as a member of a gang that was responsible for fifty highway robberies, in which most victims had been beaten with brass knuckles. The articles did not state whether Collins had been part of these robberies or assaults but noted that he had served probation twice, once for aggravated assault and battery and again for robberies. Collins later testified against the other suspects and was the only defendant in the eleven trials to be acquitted. Alphonso Borum, age nineteen and the oldest of the suspects, had just been released from reformatory school and had been convicted of statutory rape, assault with intent to ravish, and indent assault. Edward McCloud, seventeen, had been sent to juvenile detention at the House of Corrections and had been arrested multiple times for burglary, assault and battery, and disorderly conduct. The other nine suspects had various records ranging from larceny to breaking curfew. The *Inquirer* and *Bulletin* painted a picture of eleven young men who were hardened criminals or well on their way to a life of crime, especially when their arrest records and schools records were listed one after the other without note of whether they had been convicted of these crimes or the circumstances behind them. For example, *Bulletin* and *Inquirer* readers only learned that James Wright, seventeen, had a police record of "four arrests for minor offenses," but they would not have known what he had been arrested for: mischief and breaking curfew—a far cry from first or second-degree murder. *Tribune* readers, on the other hand, could well believe his mother's words that he had never been in trouble before. Those readers received a different perspective of his home life, which consisted of a large, neatly furnished dwelling, adorned with religious pictures, where he lived with his mother and four younger brothers. His school record, which the *Inquirer* printed, mentioned poor attendance but fair behavior—in itself, nothing terrible to note except when taken collectively with some of the other young men who had multiple suspensions, truancy,

62. "Parents of Killer Suspects Tell Their Story to Tribune" *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 3, 1958, 1–2.

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and poor academic records. By the time *Inquirer* and *Bulletin* readers got to the records of Leonard Johnson, fifteen, did they note that he had no known arrests but had only been picked up and questioned by police for reasons unknown? *Tribune* readers on the other hand learned that Johnson lived in a very nice house, had been raised in the Lutheran church and had always been well behaved. These newspapers were not reporting falsely, but they were presenting a particular perspective for their white or black audience.[63]

While major Philadelphia newspapers highlighted the suspects' police records, the *Tribune* chose to emphasize their ages—only three of them were legally adults, four were seventeen years old, two were sixteen, and two were fifteen. The *Tribune* also brought to the public's attention that "in the midst of the hullabaloo concerning the brutal murder," the Oh family hired a prominent African American funeral home to handle the body for the first, smaller service.[64] When set next to articles entitled, "The Difference Race Makes in Treatment of Crime Stories" and criticisms of the public for condemning the young men without trying to understand the circumstances of their descent into crime, the *Tribune* was making a statement that the grieving family did not extend blame to the black community, as evidenced by the very personal decision of asking a black mortician to handle the body of their slain relative. Indeed, the family in many interviews never criticized the suspects' families or the African American community.

The efforts of Philadelphia's black newspaper were in vain. In response to the public outcry over the murder, within five days of the event, the district attorney announced that the city would try all eleven suspects as adults and seek the death penalty for all. He later relented and announced that he would not seek the death penalty for the two youngest suspects; and two of the suspects, Edward and Harry McCloud, agreed to testify for the prosecution and so were not charged with first-degree murder. Clearly, black residents' fears that the intense publicity would unleash a wave of hostility and violence against the eleven youths and, by extension, other black teenagers, were not unfounded. In contrast to letters written to the mayor and local white papers,

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63. Ibid.; "Gang Murders Korean Student in West Phila.," *Evening Bulletin*, April 26, 1958, 1–2; "9 Boys Seized in Killing of Korean Penn Student," *Evening Bulletin,* April 27, 1958, 1–2; "9 Young Gangsters Held in Street Murder of Student at U. of P.," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* April 27, 1958, 1, 6; "Records of Youths Held in Slaying," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 28, 1958, 34; "D.A. to Ask Top Penalty for Gang," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 4, 1958, Folder "In-Ho Oh, Misc.," Newspaper Clipping Collection, TUL.

64. "Race Mortician Directed Rites for In-Ho Oh," *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 3, 1958, 2.

letters to the editors of the *Tribune* expressed concern that the suspects would be convicted before they were tried and condemned the public and the mayor for setting the "stage for a lynch atmosphere."[65] The decision to try the young men as adults and to seek the death penalty for a case that might, had the defendants been white, have brought charges of manslaughter, seemed to confirm to black Philadelphians their sense that the justice system did not treat their young men fairly. In a deliberate gesture, Cecil B. Moore, a well-known attorney and the future president of the Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP, offered his services to the first defendant in a very public trial. With many local newspapers, officials, and citizens calling for harsh punishments, black activists like Moore, along with the editors of the *Tribune*, wanted to ensure that the suspects were tried fairly.

Alphonso Borum, one of the oldest suspects and the alleged instigator of the murder, was the first to be tried. He was convicted and sentenced to death. The jury only took five hours and fifteen minutes to decide his fate. In each subsequent case, either the defendants pled guilty to avoid a trial or trial juries deliberated with extraordinary speed. It took one jury only forty minutes to convict Harold Johnson, aged nineteen by the time of his trial, of first-degree murder, even though there was no clear evidence that he had struck Oh. In his recollections of the trial, Johnson's defense attorney recalled that his client had been convicted before the trial even began.[66] Borum and Johnson both appealed their cases and won because of impropriety with evidence at their trials. Borum's sentence was reduced to ten to twenty years in jail and Johnson's was also reduced. Leonard Johnson, sixteen, and Douglas Clark, sixteen, were not so lucky when their court-appointed lawyers convinced them to plead guilty to first-degree murder. Both were given life sentences. Six others were found guilty of second-degree murder and served various prison terms from five to twenty years, except for the McCloud brothers, who testified for the prosecution and were paroled. Only one of the eleven suspects, Collins, was acquitted of the charges. The African American assistant district attorney who prosecuted the cases claimed this was the largest murder trial in Philadelphia history. It took him two years to bring about ten convictions and one acquittal. Unfortunately for historians, letters to the mayor fell silent as the trials and retrials stretched on for years; but reports of the trials were carried in

65. "Slayers of In-Ho Oh Are Convicted Before Trial," *Philadelphia Tribune*, May 24, 1958, 4.

66. Paul Leo McSorley, "A Memoir: The In-Ho Oh Matter," November 1998, http://mcsorley.org/jottings/a-memoir-the-in-oh-ho-matter/ (accessed September 9, 2016).

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Philadelphia's major newspapers, indicating some public interest in seeing the story of In-Ho Oh carried through to its end.[67]

The murder had clearly struck a raw nerve among Philadelphians, and their letters to the mayor reflected fears about their neighborhoods and their economic and political status. White letter writers labored under the perception that they were losing power and privilege at the hands of patrician politicians, such as Dilworth, and their supposed black allies. At a time in Philadelphia's history when African Americans were more politicized and represented a powerful voting contingent and a fast-growing demographic, the letters of Philadelphians, especially white Philadelphians, reveal their innermost feelings about race and race relations in the Cold War era. Through their own words, we see how letter writers established a dichotomy between African Americans as delinquents and criminals and a Korean as a victim and Christian martyr. Their interpretation of the murder caused Oh to transcend "other," allowing them to embrace him as one of their own, and his death became a parable of white Philadelphia's fears.

Less than six months after Oh's death, another University of Pennsylvania graduate student from Asia, Manmatha Kumar Das from India, was almost beaten to death with a steel bar. He suffered a fractured skull, and newspapers were quick to compare this latest incident to the murder of Oh, commenting, "Philadelphia is thus shamed in the eyes of the world by two assaults upon visitors who, as Asian students, were especially welcome guests."[68] Das told newspapers that the story of In-Ho Oh flashed through his mind as he was being attacked, and he thought he would surely suffer the same fate.[69] Luckily, he survived his injuries, and his story faded into anonymity.

The story of the Indian student did not resonate with Philadelphians and the rest of the nation as Oh's story did. The tragedy of In-Ho Oh originated from two sources that made him stand out in the eyes of Americans. First, because he was Korean, Americans understood him in the context of the Korean War and the global war against communism. They recognized the international ramifications of a Korean student being

67. Information on the trials came from Folder "In-Ho Oh Trial," Newspaper Clipping Collection, TUL.

68. "Death on the Doorstep," October 20, 1958, Folder "Manmatha Kumar Das," Newspaper Clipping Collection, TUL.

69. William J. Storm, "Beaten Student Worries Over Family in India," October 20, 1958, Folder "Manmatha Kumar Das," Newspaper Clipping Collection, TUL.

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brutally killed in the United States, ostensibly while studying the American political system. Second, his Christian devotion, carefully constructed by the media and his family, was another important factor in generating sympathy. The American public was willing to accept Oh's spirituality and projected his family's actions onto him so that Oh became a Christian martyr. These two factors combined to create a tragic figure that people used for different purposes.

For some Philadelphians, the murder elicited a barrage of emotions, including fear, anger, and frustration. It exacerbated their fears for their own safety and the well being of their family members. "My elderly mother lives in that area," "I work by Graduate Hospital," and "My son will be attending Penn next year," were common statements in the press. The murder reflected citizens' anger at what they perceived to be an ineffective and unresponsive city government. Specifically, they perceived weak politicians, apathetic policemen, and a coddling juvenile justice system, all of which combined in their minds to disillusion them about their local officials. The loss of jobs and the economic recession only served to heighten their frustration at a changing social climate that they did not understand. The murder brought to the surface resentments and hostilities against those who did not "belong" in Philadelphia and led to accusations of special privileges and assumptions of guilt.

Many were also aware that the murder of a foreign student in one of America's most famous cities, the birthplace of freedom, damaged the United States' image abroad. The murder could damage America's carefully forged foreign relations, especially in Asia. More importantly, the murder highlighted America's own racial troubles for the world, belying the notion that the United States was a paradise of equality and brotherhood. The same issues that were fueling the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War led to clashes in the City of Brotherly Love.[70]

Mayor Dilworth tried to respond with evenhandedness and calmness. He firmly rejected the proposals for harsher punishments, such as flogging, and did not bother replying to the most racist and violent letters. A few weeks after the incident, the mayor formed a committee of local organizations to investigate the causes and solutions of juvenile delinquency. It is obvious from the letters written to the mayor that, despite harsh criticism from some, many citizens respected him and had confidence that he could handle the problems facing their city with the same energy that had swept him into office as

70. See Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*.

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FIGURE 5. In-Ho Oh's parents visit his grave. *Source*: *Evening Bulletin*, July 18, 1971, Special Collections Research Center, Temple University Libraries.

a reform candidate years earlier. As one citizen wrote, "Ten years ago you attacked entrenched wrong with great vigour. We followed you. Will you not lead us now?"[71]

The many-faceted meanings that religious figures, political leaders, local residents, and other Americans placed on In-Ho Oh's life and tragic death were possible because almost no one knew very much about Oh himself. To some, his murder was a testament to worsening race relations and became a rallying cry for reforming the juvenile justice system. To others, it called into question America's Cold War–shaped role as the ideal world leader. It gave pause to Americans' belief in their superiority and, at least temporarily, chipped away at the power hierarchy between the United States and Korea as some Americans acknowledged they had something to learn from other peoples. Still others saw it as the tragedy of a life cut short, a life that, they believed, Oh would have lived as an exemplary Christian, an apostle of

71. J. Monk to Mayor Richardson Dilworth, May 5, 1958, File "Juvenile Telecast," Box A4400, Dilworth Papers, PCA.

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American-style democracy in Korea, an ideal exchange student who raised himself up from poverty, or a model of Asian American assimilation. However they interpreted Oh's life story, his death reinforced Americans' commitment to foreign exchange programs, undermining those who believed that admitting foreign students into the United States would lower immigration bars and open American academic institutions to possible communists and agitators. Instead, Oh seemed to show that, not only should the United States welcome foreign students into the country, but foreigners like him could be welcome additions to American society. His death became part of the conversation among those who sought to expand the boundaries of who could become American, a conversation that helped produce the 1965 Hart-Celler Act which finally eliminated the highy discriminatory National Origins Formula of the Immigration Act of 1924.

It was not until 1971 that Oh's parents were able to visit the grave of their slain son. They arrived to find the gates of Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church locked. A neighbor, moved by their plight, came over with a chisel and hammer and forced the gate open. After waiting thirteen years, In-Ho Oh's parents had one final obstacle to overcome before they were able to place flowers by their son's grave and gaze sadly at the words they had crafted, now inscribed on his tombstone: "To Turn Sorrow into Christian Purpose" (fig. 5).[72]

NOTE

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72. Lauren Katzowitz, "Parents of Slain Korean Student Visit His Grave," July 18, 1971, Folder "In-Ho Oh, Misc.," Newspaper Clipping Collection, TUL.

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