

KOREA

From Hermit Kingdom to Colony

By MICHAEL J. SETH

The World Encroaches on the Hermit Kingdom

At the end of the eighteenth century, Korea was a land with more than a millennium of political unity, proud of its rigid adherence to Confucian cultural norms, and at peace with its neighbors. Under the reigns of two able kings, Yǒngjo (1724–1776) and Chǒngjo (1776–1800), Korea prospered. In the nineteenth century, however, the state entered a period when weak kings were dominated by powerful clans related to the monarch through royal marriages. Some historians see this as a sign that Korea was entering a decline after 1800. There was an uprising in the northwest in 1811–1812, a rice riot in Seoul in 1833, and some small scale peasant uprisings in the countryside, mainly aimed at local officials.

Yet, its political and social institutions appeared quite stable. The social and economic domination of the country by the hereditary *yangban* elite (the highest social class of Korea during the Chosǒn dynasty, 1392–1910), who competed for government office by taking the civil service exams, was secure. There was a steady rise in population in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, but this was matched by improvements in agricultural production. The number of famines appears to have declined after 1750. Traditional arts and letters flourished well into the nineteenth century. A number of scholars, later called the *Sirhak*, or Practical Learning faction, were actively examining political, economic, and social

issues. Among them was Tasan (1762–1836), a polymath who wrote insightfully on science, medicine, ethics, and a variety of other subjects. Other creative individuals included Kim Chǒng-hŭi (1786–1856), a master of calligraphy, who wrote important works on geology, Confucian and Buddhist doctrine, and a study of ancient inscriptions; Lady Hyegyǒng (1735–1815), author of *Records Written in Silence*, a brilliant series of memoirs about her childhood as a daughter of a prominent scholar and her marriage to a member of the royal family; and Chang Sŭng-öp (1843–1897), a poor orphan who became one of the great masters of traditional Korean painting.

No land pursued a policy of restricting contacts with the outside world more zealously than Korea under the Chosǒn dynasty, earning it the sobriquet the “Hermit Kingdom.” Koreans were forbidden to travel abroad except on diplomatic missions to China or Japan. The Chinese could trade at a couple of towns on the border and with Japanese merchants at a walled compound at Pusan. The country was closed to other outsiders. Koreans looked to China as the home of civilization, but saw it compromised under the rule of “barbarian” Manchus, while the Japanese were viewed as less than fully civilized. Korea had limited contact with the rest of the world. Scholars and officials on diplomatic missions met Jesuits and picked up a little knowledge of Western science and religion. Few Koreans, however, seemed to take the Europeans seriously as bearers of a great tradition, seeing them rather as clever barbarians. Thus Koreans, confident and proud of being a bastion of orthodox Confucian teachings, the most ardent adherents to the true Way, lived in comfortable isolation.

However, in the nineteenth century, the world around Korea was changing. From the early nineteenth century, British, French, and Russian vessels began to appear off the coasts. Koreans, through their diplomatic missions in China, kept abreast of the changes occurring in East Asia. Chosǒn officials watched



Korea, the “Hermit Kingdom.” 1904. Image source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington.



A game of East Asian oriental chess - Yun-Woong-Niel, Korean Minister of War (left) in his home, Seoul, 1904.

Image source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington.



The painting titled “Ssangma inmuldo” (the painting of a man with two horses), by Owon, or Chang Sŭng-öp. Image source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Owon>.

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in alarm as China was humiliated in the Opium War 1839–1842, as Japan was forced to open itself to Westerners after 1854, and as the Russians advanced to the Tumen River on Korea's northeast border in 1860. Another source of alarm was the emergence in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of a small number of adherents to Catholicism, known as *Sŏhak* (Western Learning). Angered by the refusal of Catholic converts to carry out the rites to their family ancestors, central to Confucian practice, and concerned about their possible links with foreign powers, the state subjected the small Christian community to waves of persecution in 1801 and 1839, when several hundred were executed.

Faced with threatening external developments, Taewŏngun, the father and regent to the young king Kojong (reigned 1864–1907) carried out a vigorous effort to strengthen the state from 1864 to his dismissal in 1873. He carried out important tax reforms and abolished most of the *sŏwŏn*, private academies that had served as institutional bases for various aristocratic factions and for critics of the court. The regent launched another major persecution of Christians in 1866, including the execution of nine French missionaries. He also vigorously resisted any attempts by outsiders to end the country's isolation policy. When the French sent seven ships on a punitive expedition to Korea in response to the massacre of Catholics, they were met by determined resistance from local defenders and forced to withdraw without accomplishing their mission. In the same year, the *General Sherman*, an American merchant ship, sailed up the Taedong River to Pyongyang to engage in trade in defiance of the Korean ban against foreign vessels. Refusing an order to leave, the ship was burned and all aboard perished. When the US sent ships to punish the Koreans in 1871 and to force them to open their ports, the Koreans fiercely fought back, inflicting enough casualties on the Americans that they decided to retreat. The Taewŏngun proudly put up stone signs proclaiming, "Western barbarians invade our land. If we do not fight, we must then appease them. To urge appeasement is to betray the nation."

The vigor of the Taewŏngun's reforms suggests that in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the Chosŏn state was far from being in an irrecoverable decline. But it was not able to cope with the unprecedented challenge of being in the center of a power struggle among China, Japan, Russia, and Britain. After the Meiji Restoration, Japan sought to open relations with Korea in 1869 by sending diplomats to Pusan. The Koreans, shocked at their Western dress and their disregard for the diplomatic forms of the East Asian world order, refused to receive them. In 1876, Japan, determined to protect its periphery by establishing a presence in Korea, sent gunboats to force the country open. The intimidated Korean king signed the Treaty of Kanghwa, in which he agreed to establish diplomatic relations with Japan and open Korean ports to Japanese merchants. The Treaty of Kanghwa ended Korea's isolation, undermined the tributary system that had framed Korean foreign relations for centuries, began the Japanese penetration into Korea that would eventually undermine its economic and political order, and brought Korea into the imperialist rivalries of the late nineteenth century.



Famous French political cartoon from the late 1890s. A pie represents "Chine" (French for China) and is being divided between caricatures of Queen Victoria of Great Britain, William II of Germany (who is squabbling with Queen Victoria over a borderland piece, whilst thrusting a knife into the pie to signify aggressive German intentions), Nicholas II of Russia, who is eyeing a particular piece, the French Marianne (who is diplomatically shown as not participating in the carving), and the Meiji Emperor of Japan, carefully contemplating which pieces to take. A stereotypical Qing official throws up his hands to try and stop them, but is powerless.

Image and caption source:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperialism_in_Asia.

Failed Reforms and Imperialist Rivalries

China, also concerned with protecting its periphery, became more involved in Korean affairs. China urged Korea to work closely with the Imperial government, while opening itself up to foreign nations. From 1876 to 1884, the Korean government, under Chinese advice, began to carry out some limited reforms, adopt-



King Kojong. Image source:
<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/Gojong-of-Korea>.

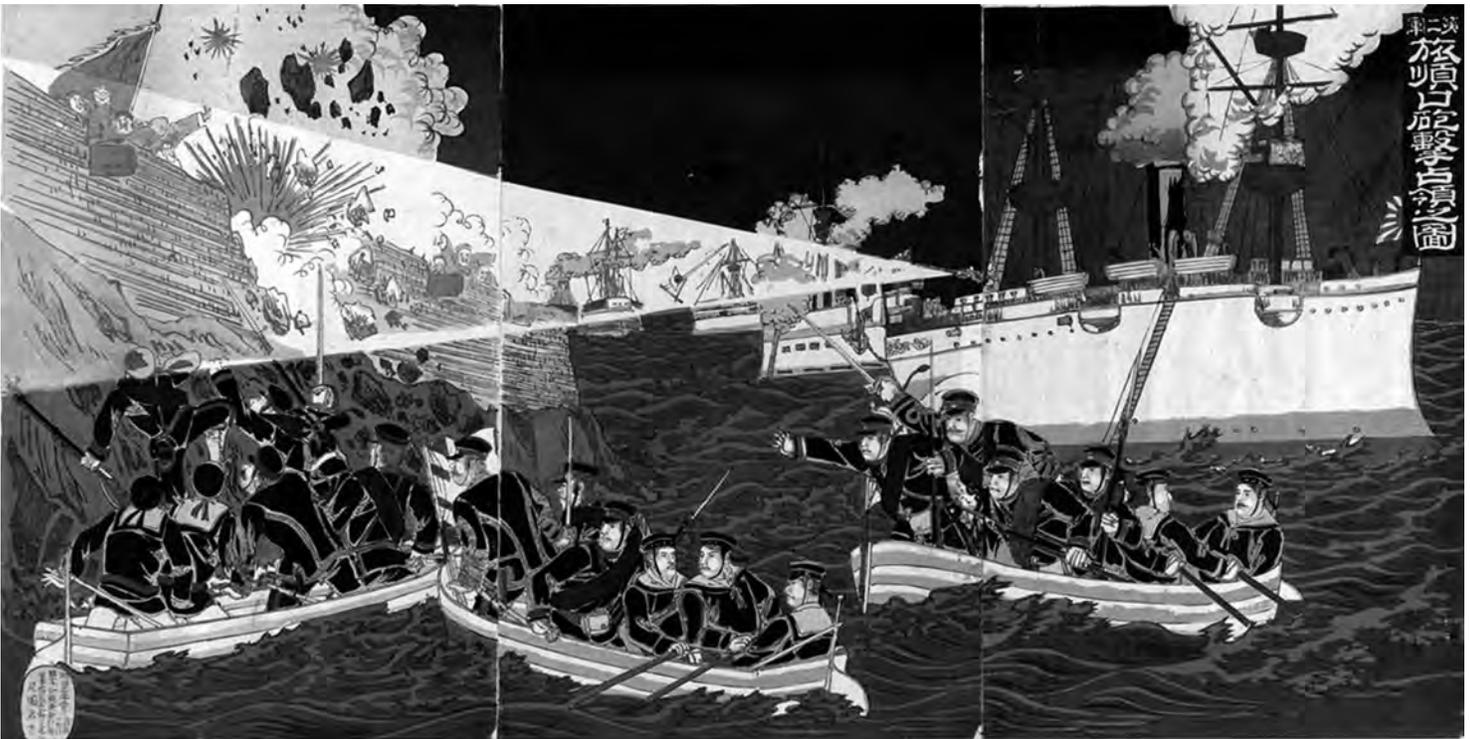
ing some of the new institutions that had been created in China, establishing diplomatic relations with the United States in 1882, and sending officials to China and Japan on fact-finding expeditions. In early 1881, Kojong set up an Office for the Management of State Affairs (*T'ongni Kimu Amun*), modeled on a similar institution created in China to deal with foreign affairs and military modernization. The king also created a Special Skills Force of eighty cadets to learn modern warfare under a Japanese army lieutenant. These modest reform efforts were interrupted in 1882, when a mutiny by troops jealous of the Special Skills Force brought about the open rivalry between China and Japan for influence in Korea. Japan, whose legation had been burned in the incident, sent troops to Korea, while China sent a much larger body of troops. Chinese troops were now stationed at various points in Seoul and began to actively interfere in the country's internal affairs.

Despite this setback, the fact-finding trips to Japan exposed a small number of Koreans to new ideas and institutions. What is remarkable is how quickly these mostly youthful members of the yangban elite were to grasp the need for radical modernization if their state were to survive. They made up a reform faction often called the Enlightenment Party (*Kaehwa-dang*). Impressed by the developments in Meiji Japan, they were impatient to emulate it. In late 1884, under the leadership of Kim Ok-kyun, the group launched a coup attempt known as the *Kapsin Chōng-byōn* (the Political Disturbance of the Year Kapsin [1884]). After murdering key officials, they proclaimed a new government with a fourteen-point reform program that called for the abolition of the yangban status, creation of a modern police and military, and a more equitable tax system that would alleviate the burden on the poor and provide more government revenue. The coup failed when Chinese troops intervened. Many of the reformers were killed, and some, including Kim Ok-kyun, fled to Japan. China and Japan then negotiated the Convention of Tianjin in 1885, when both sides agreed to withdraw forces from the country. The failed coup was a serious blow to the reform movement.

During the next ten years, from 1884 to 1894, China dominated Korean affairs with the ambitious young military commander Yuan Shikai acting as a sort of proconsul in Korea. China's main concern was to limit the influence of Japan in Korea, advance the interest of Chinese merchants, and make sure that Korea remained subservient to China. Hoping to maintain control over the country, the Chinese blocked or interfered with attempts by the Korean government to send students or diplomats abroad. Chinese policies limited Korea's contact with the outside world, hindered reform efforts, weakened the position of reformers, and in general contributed to the country's lack of preparedness for the challenges it faced. By being protected by China, Korea had its fate attached to a declining power, whose own failure to carry out necessary reforms was dramatically demonstrated in its clash with Japan in 1894. While successfully hampering Korean access to outside knowledge, the Chinese were not able to isolate Korea from international intrigue. Russia became increasingly involved with Korea during their expansion into northeast Asia, while Japan continued its political interest and commercial penetration.

The penetration of the countryside by Chinese and Japanese merchants, and the increase in taxes to pay for the political reforms, added to peasant unrest. This unrest erupted into the *Tonghak* Rebellion. The *Tonghak*, a religious sect founded in 1860, combined Confucian teaching with Daoism, Buddhism, and some Christian influence. In 1894, an attack against a local magistrate in the south swelled into a massive uprising against all corrupt officials. A panicked Korean government called on Chinese help, but the rebellion was under control by the time Chinese forces arrived. Tokyo then decided to take the opportunity to send in troops and establish a pro-reform, pro-Japanese government. Japan drove out the Chinese forces, launching the Sino-Japanese War, and backed a new government headed by Kim Hong-jip of the Enlightenment Party. China was quickly defeated and forced to sign the Treaty of Shimonoseki in April 1895. The treaty recognized Korea as an independent state, surrendering all claims as its suzerain.

Meanwhile, from July 1894 to February 1896, Korean reformers under Japanese sponsorship enacted a sweeping series of laws and regulations known as the Kabo Reform. New ministries were created to deal



Woodblock print: *The Second Army of Japan Bombarding and Occupying Port Arthur*, by Watanabe Nobukazu, Sino-Japanese War. November 1894.
Image courtesy of MIT Visualizing Cultures Web site at http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_02/visnav_ii_e.html.

with foreign affairs, home affairs, finance, justice, education, defense, agriculture, commerce, and industry. Much of the authority of the king was transferred to the new cabinet and prime minister. The judicial system was rationalized, merchant monopolies were eliminated, and a series of measures brought about significant social reforms. Slavery was abolished, social distinctions of all sorts were eliminated, and the legal status of the yangban was terminated. The radical new principle of equality under the law was enacted; all positions were opened to men of talent regardless of social background, and the civil service exams were abolished.

Japan's victories against China only strengthened its prestige, aiding those Koreans who wanted to use the Meiji reforms as a model. But, Japan's prestige suffered a blow when Russia, with the aid of Germany and France, forced Japan to give up Port Arthur and other gains from its war with China. Japan's position in Korea was further weakened when, in October 1895, Japanese thugs and some Korean collaborators broke into the palace and murdered Queen Min, then covered her body with kerosene and burnt it. This brutal and shocking affair, once it became known, led to a wave of anti-Japanese feeling. With the collapse of Japanese influence, the Kabo reformers were unable to maintain themselves in power.

The End of Sovereignty

The decade from 1895 to 1905 was marked by the rivalry between Russia and Japan for influence in Korea. On February 11, 1896, a group of pro-Russian officials removed the king from the palace and spirited him off to the Russian legation for protection. In reaction to the country's becoming a pawn of the great powers, a group of reform-minded Koreans formed the Independence Club (*Tongnip Hyöphoe*) in the spring of 1896. Its leader was Sö Chae-p'il, an American-educated physician who had participated in the Kapsin coup. He founded a newspaper *Tongnip Sinmun* (*The Independent*) that became a vehicle for the promotion of the ideas of representative government, national sovereignty, and modern reforms. The Club sponsored public debates and led a successful campaign to return the king from the Russian legation. When he did so in February 1897, he declared himself emperor, and renamed the country *Taehan Cheguk* (the Korean Empire). In a new campaign, the Independence Club demanded the government stop granting leases to foreigners. It held mass

... Japanese thugs and some Korean collaborators broke into the palace and murdered Queen Min ...



This photograph is believed to depict Queen Myongsong ("Queen Min").
Image source: The Global Korean Network, Los Angeles at http://www.gkn-la.com/history_resources/queen_min.htm.



Itō Hirobumi in Korea, 1906.
Image source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Hirobumi_Ito.jpg.



Itō Hirobumi and Crown Prince of Korea, Euimin in 1907.
Image source: *About Japan: A Teacher's Resource* at http://aboutjapan.japansociety.org/content.cfm/focusing_on_imperial_japan.

rallies and demanded that it have representatives in government. Most of all, it wanted to pressure the government to continue reforms to modernize the state. Under pressure from conservatives in the government who were concerned about the growing influence of the Club, the king ordered it dissolved. Its leaders fled the country—another setback to the reform movement.

For the next few years the Korean government drifted without taking significant efforts at self-strengthening. In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, most of the country's most energetic and talented reformers had either left the country or had withdrawn from public affairs. Some

had been killed. The government was left in the hands of a weak, vacillating king and a bureaucracy of conservative, largely incompetent officials. The reform movement was also weakened by its failure to find a suitable foreign protector and model to follow. China had failed in both of these purposes. Japan was the obvious model, but its usefulness had been undermined by its emergence as the most serious threat to the nation's sovereignty. Pro-Japanese reformers could not extricate themselves from Japan's sometimes heavy-handed and ruthless designs on the country. US missionaries had won a great deal of good will among some Koreans, but the US was too distant and different to serve as a useful model, and too indifferent to act as a protector. The same was largely true of Western European countries such as Britain or France. Then there was Russia. It was useful as a counter to Japan, but it too had imperialist designs on Korea.

Korea's entry into the world brought about major changes in society. A small class of intellectuals started publishing newspapers, forming discussion groups, and opening up new private schools with modern curricula. With the end of civil examinations, the elite were increasingly attracted to Western-style education. Young men and women were attending these new private schools or those established by Western missionaries, and going to Japan and the West for advanced schooling. A flood of new ideas about government, society, and science flowed into the country as Koreans read Western works, often in Chinese or Japanese translations. Historians and political

thinkers such as Pak Ŭn-sik and Sin Ch'ae-ho were re-examining Korea's place in the world and what it meant to be Korean. Scholars were standardizing and promoting the Korean alphabet *han'gŭl*, which was becoming a symbol of a modern, national identity. Railway construction, financed by Japanese and American companies, began in 1896; Seoul was being electrified, and Western-style buildings were changing the face of the city. Port cities such as Pusan and Inch'ŏn were taking on a cosmopolitan atmosphere. In the countryside, where the great majority of the population lived, farming was increasingly oriented toward the export of rice, soybeans, and other agriculture products for the Japanese market.

The Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905) resulted in Japan's consolidation of its control over Korea. When hostilities broke out, Japanese troops entered Seoul, as they had done at the start of the Sino-Japanese War, and compelled the Korean government to bow to Tokyo's wishes. The Korean foreign minister signed a protocol in February that in effect made Korea a protectorate of Japan. It required Korea to consult with Japan

before signing any treaties or agreements with other countries or contracts and concessions to foreigners. In effect, the Korean government had conceded control of its financial and foreign affairs to Japan. With Japan's victory in 1905, it was unchallenged in its efforts to achieve domination over Korea. The United States tacitly accepted the transfer of Korea to Japan in the Taft-Katsura Memorandum of July 1905. The US recognized Japan's right to take appropriate measures for the "guidance, control, and protection" of Korea, and, in exchange, Japan recognized America's position in the Philippines. In the same year, Britain, by renewing the Anglo-Japanese alliance it had signed three years earlier, also tacitly accepted Korea as being in Japan's sphere. The way was diplomatically prepared for Japan to take a free hand in Korea.

In November 1905, Itō Hirobumi, one of the principal architects of Meiji Japan, came to Seoul to conclude a treaty formally establishing a protectorate and to serve as the first resident-general (*tōkan*). In 1907, using a combination of pressure and trickery, he got King Kojong to abdicate and made his mentally challenged son Sunjong, Emperor. That same year the resident-general ordered the small 9,000 man Korean army disbanded. The step-by-step takeover of Korea met some resistance. Many officials resigned, refusing to cooperate with the Japanese, and a few committed suicide. Former yangban and discharged soldiers formed guerilla bands that waged a three-year resistance to Japanese rule, and as many as 17,000 may have been killed. Angry Koreans assassinated a key foreign advisor in 1908 and Itō in 1909. By 1910, however, most resistance forces had been killed or had fled to Manchuria and Siberia, and Japan had sufficiently consolidated its position to formally annex Korea on August 29, 1910. Korea, unified and independent since the seventh century, was now a Japanese colony.

Conclusion

For centuries, Korea had maintained its autonomy within the East Asian world order dominated by China. Korean kings derived their legitimacy by being recognized by the Chinese emperor, and they sent tribute missions to his court. In reality, it was an independent state with little or no outside interference in its internal affairs. The Korean governing elite were proud of being members of a great cosmopolitan civilization centered in China. They also had developed, especially after the Qing consolidation of rule in China in the seventeenth century, a belief that they were the upholders of the purest civilized norms. Their experience with the tributary system, their proud adherence to Confucian values and institutions, and their limited experience with the West did not prepare them well for the challenges of late nineteenth century imperialism. The intrusion of the West came rather suddenly, and left Korea with little time to adjust. Nonetheless, a small number of educated Koreans were quick to grasp the realities of a changing international environment and pushed for reform. Korea's geopolitical position, however, did not favor this effort. Chinese interference, Japanese expansionism, and Russian intrigue, along with the indecisive leadership of the king and the petty self-interest of many members of the elite, all made attempts to carry out reform and maintain sovereignty difficult. In the end, the greatest threat to Korea proved to be the swift rise of a dynamic, modernizing Japan determined to secure its peripheries by gaining control of the Korean peninsula. The result was the annexation of Korea by its increasingly powerful neighbor. But, for all its tragedy, this period also brought about the birth of a modern Korea. Koreans, with their long history of borrowing abroad, began a new process of adopting and adapting foreign culture. By the time of the annexation of the country by Japan in 1910, Koreans had already begun laying the foundation for a new society with a new sense of national identity. ■

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, second ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005) for a lively and opinionated history of modern Korea by a well-known scholar.

C.I. Eugene Kim and Han-kyo Kim, *Korea and the Politics of Imperialism: 1876–1910* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967) provides a detailed factual account of the international diplomacy and great power rivalries during this period.

Key-Hiuk Kim, *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980). A well analyzed account of the diplomacy and politics surrounding the opening of Korea and an introduction to the history of Korea to 1876 for the non-specialist.

Andre Schmidt, *Korea Between Empires, 1895–1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). An important, if challenging, work about the formation of Korean identity during this period.

Michael J. Seth, *A Concise History of Korea: From the Neolithic to the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).

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