

**Caught in Geopolitical Crossfire:
The Tragic End of the “Hermit Kingdom”**

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"In the dynamic world of international relations in which the struggle for power among the great is the basic reality, the ultimate fate of the small buffer state is precarious at best."¹

-Nicholas J. Spykman, 1938

As the nineteenth century progressed, various colonial Western nations from Europe and North America began to take increasing interest in opening diplomatic and trade relations with the culturally distinct countries of East Asia. Throughout this time period the West rapidly moved through Asia, beginning their pattern of exploitative colonization in the predominant Asian force of Qing China before moving further to Meiji Japan, and soon futilely attempting to open the “Hermit Kingdom” of Joseon². Amidst the scramble for control in the Eastern region of the Asian continent, Joseon soon found itself a target to the imperial powers of the world in consequence of its critical geographical location and lack of sufficient defense against the advanced military technology of modernized foreign nations. Overlooked and dismissed by the world, Joseon had suffered innumerable tragic losses by the turn of the twentieth century in sovereignty, life, dignity as an empire, and, finally, its centuries old kingdom and culture.

¹Rodger Baker, Jan. 16, 2018 “Korea’s Place in History” (Online)
<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/koreas-place-history>, cited in Nicholas J. Spykman 1938, “Geography and Foreign Policy, II”

² Also referred to as “Korea” or “Corea”

The Joseon Dynasty

The Joseon Dynasty, preceded by the Koryo Dynasty, came into existence in 1392 with the establishment of the Yi family, lasting over 500 years until its fall in 1910³. After Buddhism became unpopular with the Koreans, the government of Joseon began following a system based on Neo-Confucianism which lasted unwaveringly until circa the mid 19th century⁴.

Neo-Confucianism was a secular, bureaucratic structure which created inheritable classes among the people; at the top being the king and royalty, followed by the *Yangban* class of aristocrats, then *Chungin* officials and merchants, going to *Sangmin* commoners, and slaves and other lowborns as *Chonmin*.

Positioned on the far eastern side of Asia⁵, Joseon rarely held relations with states other than those which surrounded it: Qing China, Meiji Japan, and occasionally Russia. Joseon was separated from Japan through what was known as the East Sea, modern day Sea of Japan, and shared most of its land border with China to the north. From circa the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1392-1644) to the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), Joseon remained a generally peaceful tributary state to modern-day China⁶, where much of Korea's culture had been introduced since ancient times. Because Joseon's international defense capabilities were comparatively weak, it often looked to China for military assistance in both domestic and foreign conflicts, particularly those involving neighboring Japan.

³ Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Chosŏn Dynasty." Encyclopædia Britannica. February 06, 2014 (online)

⁴ Unmentioned. "Choson or Joseon Dynasty." Tonghak Rebellion KoreanHistory.info. (Online)

⁵ See Appendix I

⁶ Rolph, Daniel. "The Other Korean War: A Little Known Conflict in American History." Historical Society of Pennsylvania. August 29, 2013. (Online)

As stated by Frederick Arthur McKenzie, “Unhappily it [Joseon] was placed as a buffer between two states, China, ready to absorb it, and Japan, keen to conquer its people as a preliminary to triumph over China.”⁷ For much of the duration of the Joseon Dynasty, Korea and Japan held a relatively hostile relationship as a result of several attempted invasions by Japan as well as the innumerable occasions which the Japanese used Korea unpermittedly as a buffer to the main continent. Joseon has often been referred to as a “dagger pointed at Japan’s side,”⁸ which relates to the geopolitical standing of Korea that posed a threat to Japan, not by Joseon itself, but by landpowers deeper in the continent who were capable of stomping over Korea to reach Japan. Throughout its history, Joseon usually maintained this buffer-state political style, sacrificing pieces of its sovereignty to more powerful nations in exchange for protection against other forces.

Colonizing the East

In the early nineteenth century China found itself facing a drastic increase of Opium addicts as the British commercially sold the illegal drug throughout China. Intending to put a stop to the smuggling, the Chinese government arrested nearly two-thousand drug dealers and had all Opium-carrying crates and ships destroyed, abruptly cutting off profit for British traders. Angered by this, Great Britain demanded compensation, though China only reopened trade for goods other than Opium, thus sparking the First Opium War. The war concluded in 1842 with a treaty which allowed England to set their own terms in regards of trade, though the Second Opium War raged twelve years later when the Chinese antagonized England by removing the

⁷ F.A McKenzie. “Korea’s Fight for Freedom.” (print)

⁸ “A New Look on the Annexation of Korea.” Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact. (print)

flag of Britain from one of their trade ships. The fate of China grew uncertain as France and the United States joined the war on the grounds that China had committed violent acts against them. Furthermore, China faced additional domestic trouble when the Taiping Rebellion of peasants arose⁹. As China lay wrecked after the extensive conflicts, imperialist Western powers seized the opportunity to establish a secure presence in China, claiming land and drawing trade agreements and treaties¹⁰.

In 1853 a fleet of United States ships steamed up to the shores of Japan, demanding that their trade ports be opened or face the destruction from the technologically advanced weapons aboard the ships. Once Japan obliged, a new era of modernization was sparked in Japan and eventually led the previously isolated country to adapt an imperialistic government style. It seemed that Japan had quickly recognized the imperial aspirations of the predatory Western powers and chose to become a globally recognized empire as well rather than be absorbed and divided by the West in a similar fashion to the demise of China¹¹.

Making and Breaking the “Hermit Kingdom”

The first prominent encounter of Americans in Korea was in the autumn of 1866. Although Joseon had uncompromisingly denied foreign entrance, a small group of western tradesmen attempted to follow an ambition of establishing trade with Joseon for their own personal profit. Aboard the *General Sherman*, a small group of Americans and Englishmen with fifteen Chinese and Malaysian crewman sailed from China into the Taedong River carrying

⁹ Sebastien Roblin. “The Opium Wars: The Bloody Conflicts That Destroyed Imperial China.” The National Interest (web).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ “Modernization in Japan.” CDA’s World History Wiki

various trade items such as cotton and glass¹². Ignorant of Korea's policies and restrictions, the ship, bound for the city of Pyongyang, eventually encountered hostility in the country and further miscommunications led to the burning of the *General Sherman* and the killing of the travelers, though the incident remained unreported to the rest of the world, raising suspicion against Joseon.

Several years later, the mystery was revisited in the Shinmiyangyo Incident. In 1871, the United States sent a fleet of ships to Joseon in an attempt at establishing trade agreements as well as to inquire about the disappearance of the *General Sherman*¹³. A fleet of five naval ships carrying over 1,200 men sailed toward the city of Hanyang, though they were stopped at the banks of Ganghwa Island to consult with two envoys representing Joseon. Information was misconstrued, though, and the Americans mistakenly began to continue sailing forward, later falling into an ambush. The fleet was able to escape by returning back to sea, and it wasn't long before they demanded an apology, threatening of a counterattack. When it became clear that a satisfiable apology would not be released, the ships steamed back up to the Ganghwa Island where three forts had attacked them. Because the American weapons significantly outdated those which Joseon possessed, the fleet hastily found themselves triumphant and returned to China after releasing their prisoners to avoid further conflict which could obstruct trade. Because of this event, the Korean people grew distasteful of Western foreigners and were even less keen toward opening diplomatic relations with them.

¹² Niderost, Eric. "The General Sherman Incident & the Shinmiyangyo Korean Expedition." Warfare History Network. September 12, 2018. (web)

¹³ Niderost, Eric. "The General Sherman Incident & the Shinmiyangyo Korean Expedition." Warfare History Network. September 12, 2018. (web)

Imperial Japan

As the Empire of Japan rose to the recognition of the West, it soon began to set sights upon the geographically critical Joseon kingdom. Recognizing that China was too economically and militarily unfit due to its conflicts with the West to act as a protectorate of Joseon, Japan grew anxious that the defenseless nation would fall victim to a colonizing Western country, which would subsequently jeopardize the sovereignty of Japan itself¹⁴. As stated by Japanese political scholar Fukuzawa Yukichi during this period, “Western advances into Asia are like a rapidly spreading conflagration. To protect the house that is our nation from fire, we must do more than build it with stone blocks. If our neighbors have wooden houses, they will not escape the flames.” This fundamental tactical mindset was common amongst the Japanese politicians and officials, who concluded that Korea’s geopolitical factors were far too dangerous to leave the small state alone.

In attempt to save Korea from the “flames” of the Western powers, Japan implored Joseon reform its government to one which better corresponded with those of the dominant West, however this exhortation was rejected by China. As a result, the First Sino-Japanese War began in 1894, continuing until Japan’s victory in 1895. Under the terms of the Treaty of Shimonoseki, Japan obtained Taiwan and the equivalent of 400 million yen. Western nations also gained from China through the Triple Intervention of 1895; Russia, the Liaodong Peninsula; Germany, Jiaozhou Bay; Great Britain, Weihaiwei in Shandong Province and Kowloon; and France, Guangzhou Bay.¹⁵

¹⁴ “A new look at the Annexation of Korea.” Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact. (print)

¹⁵ Ibid.

When Russia acquired leaseholds in Masan, Korea to establish military ports, Japan found that this would have posed a great threat to the Japanese, who hastily turned to the Anglo-Japanese Alliance drawn in 1901 to seek military aid and legal assurance in waging war against Russia. After this was granted, the fighting began in 1902 and ended in 1904 with Japan triumphant. “Once the Japanese learned that might makes right, they sought to ensure the security of Japan by rushing headlong into two fateful wars--one with China and one with Russia,”¹⁶ as stated in *A New Look at the Annexation of Korea*.

Domestic Instability

As the successor of King Cheoljong, royal relative, young Yi Meongbok, was made the next king of Joseon in 1864. Because Yi was only twelve years old at the time, his father, known as the Daewongun, and the queen held regency over the kingdom in Yi’s place. In 1865 Gojong was wed at age fifteen to Min Jayoung, a bride selected by Daewongun and Queen Sinjeong¹⁷ under their detrimental assumptions of her naive and docile characteristics. Unsuspectedly, though, Queen Min turned out to be a keen and intelligent political figure who would quickly displace Daewongun and the former queen as regents before becoming an incredible influence on her husband while he ruled independently, and even rising to be a substantial figure in Korean international affairs. Gojong was the last king of the Joseon Dynasty and reigned during much of the period which Korea teetered over bad diplomacy until its annexation in 1910, creating a legacy as an infamously weak-willed king¹⁸.

¹⁶ “A new look at the Annexation of Korea.” Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact. (print)

¹⁷ Szczepanski, Kallie. "Biography of Queen Min, Korean Empress." Thoughtco. March 08, 2019. (web)

¹⁸ Unknown. "The Legacy of Joseon: Korea's Last Dynasty." Unframed. (web)

As Joseon's diplomats struggled against Japan and the West to regain control over the reigns of the country internationally, there was also plenty of unrest domestically. The governing court had divided itself into opposing groups: pro-Japanese, pro-Chinese, and pro-Russian¹⁹. Because of these political quarrels, Queen Min was murdered by the Japanese in 1895 in consequence of her role as an anti-Japanese figure, and King Gojong was also forced to escape to the Russian Legation²⁰ to avoid a fate similar to that of his wife. This was also a period in which low-class Koreans began to rebel against the government, striving to achieve better living conditions through what is known as the Tonghak Rebellion. Commoners also struggled with the inappropriate and cruel behavior of the conceited Japanese infiltrating their towns under the protection of the Ganghwa Treaty²¹.

Loss of Interest of the West

On a few occasions, Joseon pleaded the powers of the West for assistance in regaining its sovereignty, though the opinion of the Westerners grew sour toward the people of Joseon which was largely influenced by the proclamations of a handful of people who had visited the peninsula. In her recounting of her visits to Joseon, British writer Isabella Bird states, "I thought [Seoul]²² the foulest city on earth till I saw Peking, and it smells the most odious, till I encountered those of Shao-shing [Shaoxing]. For a great city and a capital its meanness is indescribable." Charles Dallet, a French Catholic missionary also degrades Joseon in his book, *Introduction to Korea*, "There is nothing national about scholarship in Korea. The books that one

¹⁹ Szczepanski, Kallie. "Biography of Queen Min, Korean Empress." Thoughtco. March 08, 2019. (web)

²⁰ Unknown. "Korea 1800-1900 A.D." The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History. (web)

²¹ See Appendix III

²² Modern day capital city of South Korea

reads are Chinese books; the language one studies is not Korean, but Chinese. The history one studies is not the history of Korea, but that of China. The philosophical systems that attract followers are Chinese. Diplomas for the imperial examinations are awarded not to the most knowledgeable or capable candidates, but to those who have the most wealth or the most powerful protectors. Koreans have demonstrated virtually no progress in scientific disciplines, but their knowledge of matters industrial is even less advanced. In Korea, there has been no progress whatsoever in the practical arts for centuries.”²³

Annexation

In the year of 1910, following the Russo-Japanese War, Japan annexed Joseon, quickly colonizing and establishing dominance within the state. Following Joseon’s annexation, Prime Minister of Korea Lee Wan-Yong delivered a speech in which he explains, “Given the Korean race’s current level of competence, there is absolutely no possibility of Korea’s preserving its dignity as an independent nation. Our nation’s ruin is inevitable. Only annexation can save us from that fate, and there is no nation more suitable than Japan as an annexation partner.

Europeans and Americans view Koreans as pigs or dogs, but the Japanese are different. I find it annoying that they attempt to impose their moral code on us and have a tendency to nag, but they [the Japanese] do this because they view us as their peers. Japan is the only nation that can guide Korea and enable us to participate in the civilization of all mankind. There is no other way for the Korean race to escape from the pigsty and enjoy the prosperity to which, as human beings,

²³ “A new look at the Annexation of Korea.” Society for the Dissemination of Historical Fact. (print)

we are entitled.”²⁴ After the annexation of Korea, Lee Wan-Yong was deemed one of five Eulsa traitors for essentially paving the way for the demise of Joseon.

By the time Korea was annexed, Japan had been flexing its recent major vanquishments to demonstrate their undeniable power to the other political giants of the world, promulgating itself to be of equal strength to the likes of Great Britain and China. Japan was also industrializing at incredible speed, integrating western technology and ideas which became very apparent within the nation. When Korea became a colony of Japan, the Japanese wasted no time in modernizing it as well. Joseon remained colonized by Japan for thirty five years, until the Japanese defeat in World War II. The Korean people were also later subject to unforgiveable brutality as the Japanese attempted to eradicate Korean culture from the peninsula²⁵.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, Joseon found the future of its state to be continuously unstable as the West moved through Asia. Because it was a mere tributary of China with little political influence internationally, Joseon struggled to establish its strengthful independence in diplomatic relations and was often at the mercy of the giants laying sovereign claim to the peninsula. While Joseon became increasingly entangled in unfavorable political situations, western influence began to take insuperable hold throughout all of East Asia, becoming the mainspring of the tragic end of the kingdom.

²⁴ Ibid.

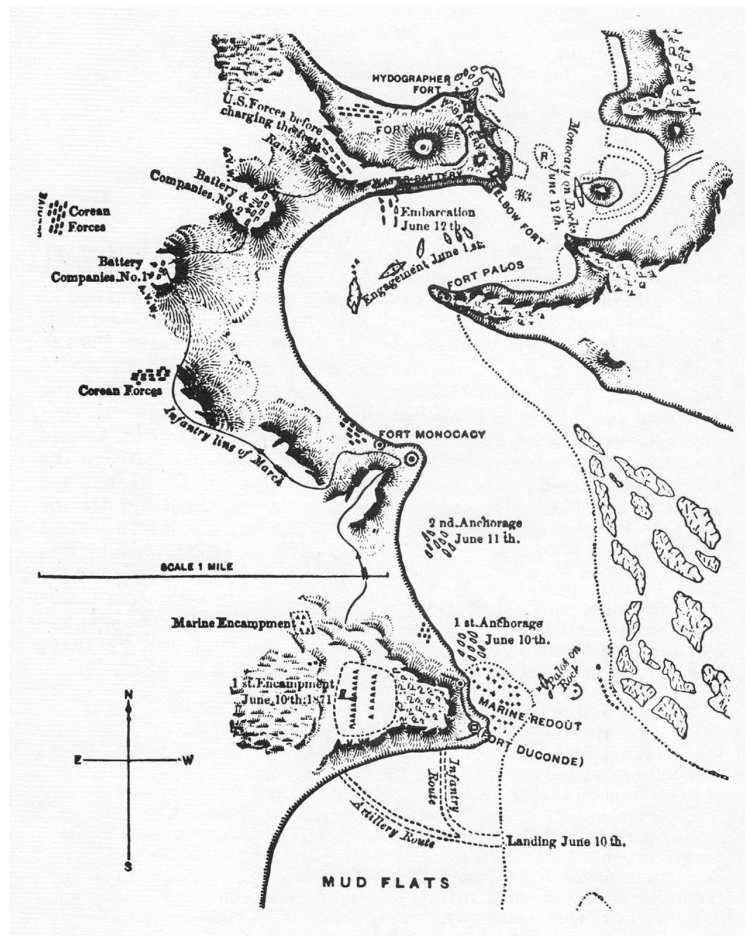
²⁵ Blakemore, Erin. "How Japan Took Control of Korea." History.com. February 28, 2018. (web)

Appendix I



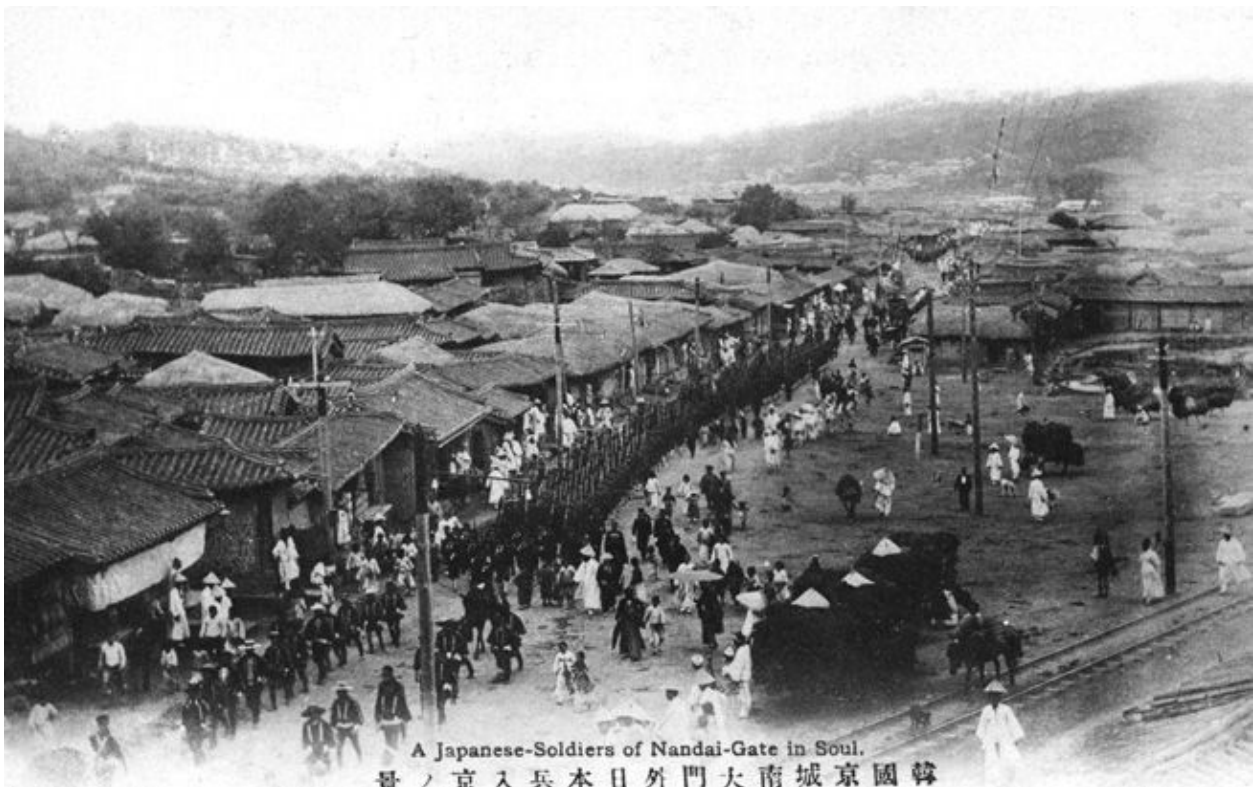
This image depicts the spheres of influence over East Asia, as well as the geographical location of Joseon, and the nations which immediately surround it.

Appendix II



This is a map of the Ganghwa Island using American titles and labels for location. One can see the geography and landscape of the area to better understand Rear Admiral John Rodgers' reports on the Shinmiyangyo Incident.

Appendix III



This image depicts the streets of a Joseon city, present day Seoul, which are filled with Japanese military men.

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Image.

https://ugc.futurelearn.com/uploads/images/51/e2/hero_51e2ca11-9dc1-446c-bf7e-77be77a6a76a.jpg.

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