Competing imperialisms in Korea

Kirk W. Larsen

The story of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Korea is, in many ways, a story of competing imperialisms. For many Koreans, this story is a straightforward and tragic account of increasing Japanese power and domination on the peninsula, culminating in Meiji Japan’s formal annexation of Korea in 1910. This quest had political, military, and economic dimensions. The Japanese imperialists had to contend with an often-defiant Korean populace as well as foreign competitors, chief among them the Qing Empire (China) and Czarist Russia. But as Japan overcame these obstacles, its annexation of Korea seemed inevitable. Some of the scholarship on this period has focused on the question of who or what is to blame for Korea’s inability to defend itself against the Japanese advances—was it the feckless King Kojong; his father, the “Grand Prince” Taewôn’gun; the yangban aristocratic elite; the unwanted meddling of Qing China; the negligence or betrayal of the United States; or some other factor? However, most appear to assume that Japan’s ultimate domination of Korea was more or less inevitable. While scholarly research has demonstrated that the actual process of Japanese imperialism in Korea was filled with far more contingencies and setbacks than the simple narrative of a Japanese “plot” to conquer Korea would indicate, there remains a great deal of validity to the conventional narrative. In addition, it is also illuminating to view the course of imperialism in Korea in the nineteenth century as one of a series of competing (and often overlapping) imperial structures and practices. These reflected a much greater diversity of origins and influences than simply the aims and whims of Tokyo. Korea successfully defended its position and participation in a Sino-centric regional order until at least 1876 when the Chosôn Kingdom signed its first modern treaty with Japan. While rhetoric of the day emphasized modern, Western-style treaties as the key to entering the “family” of sovereign and independent nations, the reality of the day was one of stronger imperialist powers imposing their will upon weaker victims. The only real question was what type of imperialism would predominate. In the case of Korea, Meiji Japan initiated the introduction of informal, unilateral imperialism to Korea during the period 1876–1882. The subsequent period, 1882–1905, is characterized primarily by Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese competition in and over Korea but all within the framework of informal, multilateral imperial structures, most notably the treaty port system. After 1905, with its major competitors removed from the scene, Japan, in keeping with global trends, shifted toward a more formal imperialism in Korea, ultimately annexing and absorbing the peninsula in 1910.
Opening the “hermit nation”

Foreigners who approached the Chosŏn Kingdom in the nineteenth century found a Korea that appeared to be more or less content with the then-dominant imperial structure in the region. This structure was predicated on the centrality and superiority of China, both Ming China (1368–1644) and the subsequent Qing Empire (1644–1912). While both sides of this relationship insisted that it lacked coercion and was based on mutually acceptable Confucian morality, the reality was often that the stronger Ming and Qing made onerous and difficult demands of its Korean vassal—military assistance, human tribute, and the like—that are difficult to fully describe if one uses only the language of the “tribute system.” Nevertheless, by the nineteenth century, the most disagreeably coercive aspects of the relationship had subsided and China and Korea enjoyed a comfortable distance and a minimum of interaction. Relations between Chosŏn Korea and its other East Asian neighbor, Japan, usually are not labeled as imperialism of either country. Japan did attempt the conquest of Korea with the late sixteenth-century invasions of Hideyoshi Toyotomi, but after their failure, both Japan and Korea appear to have accepted restricting their relations to a bare minimum.

Foreign encounters with Korea in the nineteenth century generally confirmed the oft-repeated notion that the Chosŏn Kingdom was content with its limited relations with China and Japan and wished to be more or less left alone. But the Korean desire to maintain its status as a “hermit” would come under increasing challenge as the nineteenth century wore on. Western ships which were plying the waters around China and Japan in ever-increasing numbers began to appear on Korea’s coasts as well. And while shipwrecked crews were reasonably well treated by the Koreans (and quickly hustled off to China for repatriation), some Western governments longed for the greater security offered by a treaty with Korea that would at minimum guarantee good treatment of shipwrecked sailors and allow for ships in distress to be able to acquire food and supplies from Korean ports.

In addition to the need for a “wood and water” treaty, some in the West harbored the more ambitious desire to fully open Korea to diplomatic and commercial relations with the outside world as had been accomplished previously with China and Japan. A British newspaper confidently predicted that “Korea will no doubt soon figure as a place of trade, through the enterprise of Englishmen.” Other Westerners, particularly Americans, made similar predictions for their countrymen. A third issue was the desire to propagate Christianity in Korea. Roman Catholics had taken the lead in seeking contacts and converts in Korea with a small but influential number of French priests illegally entering Korea (the first arriving in 1836) and organizing congregations of Catholic believers, some of who had converted by reading Catholic materials brought back from China.

The typical Korean response to these foreign forays was resistance and exclusion. Foreign explorers, merchants, and other adventurers who happened upon Korea’s shores almost uniformly reported being informed by local officials that their presence in Korea was illegal and unwanted. In addition, Korean Catholic believers were subjected to periodic purges with hundreds and sometimes thousands being executed in 1801, 1839, and 1866. Chosŏn officials sometimes pointed to the then prevailing structure of Chinese imperialism in Korea as a pretext for avoiding unwanted relations with outsiders. The supposed rule that “vassals cannot conduct diplomacy” had been utilized by Korean officials at least as early as the seventeenth century and was often deployed in the nineteenth century (even as late as 1871) in order to convince visiting foreigners to leave Korea alone. However, when the inquiring foreigners subsequently approached Korea’s putative suzerain, the Qing Empire, they were often informed that Chinese non-interference in Korean affairs was a bedrock principle of the longstanding suzerain-vassal relationship, leaving the foreigners with no one with which to negotiate on Korean matters.
The year 1866 was pivotal in the history of imperialism in Korea. The Korean persecution of Catholics (including the execution of nine French priests) resulted in a French military mission led by Admiral Pierre-Gustave Roze that attacked Kanghwa Island but retreated after encountering stiff Korean resistance. Weeks before the French assault, the General Sherman, a British-chartered American sailing ship, sailed up the Taedong River to the outskirts of P’yŏngyang. Conflicts with local Koreans ensued (perhaps spurred on by the relentless proselytizing of the Welsh Protestant missionary Robert Jermain Thomas who was on board the General Sherman) with the end result being the destruction of the ship and the murder of all who were on board. This incident led to several American attempts to obtain an explanation and apology for the destruction of the General Sherman, which culminated in the 1871 American attack on Kanghwa Island. Much like the French punitive mission of five years earlier, the 1871 Low-Rodgers Expedition engaged in a series of violent conflicts with Koreans on the island (more than three hundred Koreans died) but then withdrew, having failed to either obtain more information about the General Sherman or progress toward a treaty.

In short, Chosŏn Korea had proved able to resist the encroachment of foreign imperialism and to maintain control over the terms of how it engaged with the outside world for decades longer than its East Asian neighbors. While military force (or merely the threat of military force) was sufficient to force China (1842) and Japan (1854) to open, Korean resistance, albeit sometimes with high causalities, was able to keep foreign forces at bay. However, changes both outside and within Korea would combine to begin in earnest the process of opening the “hermit nation” in 1876. Internally, there remained a strong segment of Korean officials and elites who advocated a resistance-at-all-costs approach to foreign imperialism. The Grand Prince T’aewŏn’gun, who ruled as regent in the place of his young son (King Kojong) from 1864 to 1873, is thought to have embodied this type of unflinching resistance. The T’aewŏn’gun advocated fighting back against the French in 1866 and the Americans in 1871 as well as repelling unofficial attempts by outsiders to seek trade or plunder on the peninsula as was the case of the repeated efforts of the German adventurer Ernst Oppert to either convince Korea to open its doors to the outside world or, lacking this, ransack the tombs of Korean royalty (1866, 1867). But the T’aewŏn’gun was hardly alone in his determination that the foreigners could and should be resisted with force. Neo-Confucian stalwarts such as Yi Hang-no, Ch’oe Ik-hyon, Yi Man-son, and Hong Chae-hak repeatedly and publicly called for violent resistance to the “wild beasts” that were appearing on Korea’s shores with troubling frequency.

In 1873 the T’aewŏn’gun’s son, King Kojong, felt old and strong enough to push his father aside and begin ruling in actuality as well as in name. He proved to be more willing to entertain the notion of negotiating with foreigners rather than simply fighting them. In doing so, Kojong was supported by some among the Chosŏn elite such as Pak Kyu-su, the scion of a “practical learning” (silhak) clan. Their flexibility and pragmatism was needed in an era of growing change. In general, the nineteenth century saw an increasing number of polities and peoples beginning to adhere to Westphalian norms of national identity and sovereignty and to Western modes of treaty-based diplomatic and commercial interactions. As such, Korea increasingly stood out as a recalcitrant outlier. “Corea cannot hope to exclude foreigners much longer,” wrote an American diplomat in 1868. Korea’s neighbors had agreed to intensified relations with the West in accordance with Western diplomatic principles. China and Japan had even gone so far as to sign a Western-style treaty between themselves in 1871. But it bears noting that the norm of the time was for Western powers to impose new treaties upon recalcitrant would-be colonies at gunpoint (or by gunboat).
However, it was not a Western nation but rather Japan that finally successfully opened Korea in 1876. In the years leading up to the 1876 Treaty of Kanghwa, Japan had begun a process of rapid modernization and Westernization often associated with the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Japan’s insistence on approaching Chosŏn Korea as an empire led by an emperor caused no small amount of Korean resentment and resistance. But Japan’s abolition of its system of feudal domains (han) and their daimyo leaders meant that Korea had little choice. Previously, most official Korean-Japanese relations were conducted between Chosŏn officials and representatives of the Tsushima-based Sō clan. The abolition of the Tsushima domain meant that there was literally no one other than Meiji officials with which to conduct diplomacy.

Korea continued to resist Japanese overtures (with said resistance prompting some Japanese to call for an attack on Korea in the “Seikanron” debates of 1873) until yet another conflict off of the coast of Kanghwa Island prompted a Japanese threat of forceful retaliation. The 1875 Un'yō incident (in which Korean shore batteries fired on a Japanese ship) gave Japan the opportunity to exercise the same sort of gunboat diplomacy that had opened up Japan some two decades earlier. But rather than fight, King Kojong—urged to compromise by an increasingly concerned Qing Empire—agreed to a treaty that contained some of the same types of provisions that had been used to open China and Japan. This ushered in a new era of imperialism in Korea.

The 1876 Treaty of Kanghwa is often hailed as a milestone in Korea’s diplomatic history and is usually regarded as Korea’s first “modern” or at least Western-style treaty. As was often the case, actual implementation of the treaty’s provisions would take much time and labor to secure. While Pusan, the only allowed locale for Korean-Japanese trade for centuries, was immediately the first port to be designated as an open treaty port, other ports such as Wŏnsan (1880) and Chemulp’o/Inch’ŏn (1883) took years to open. It also took years before Japan was able to establish a permanent diplomatic presence in the Korean capital. But once these gains were achieved, Japanese merchants and adventurers moved to Korea to pursue their fortunes in trade. There they found a ready market for manufactured goods (mostly Western in the early years) with markups of as much as 1000 percent being recorded. They also sought to obtain Korean agricultural (rice, soybeans, and cowhides) and marine products for export. This commercial activity took place under almost entirely unregulated conditions. Chosŏn Korea had no maritime customs service, and the first few Korean attempts to pursue tariff negotiations with Japan were rebuffed by Tokyo (in the name of waiting until trade got on a better footing).

In short, the system that Japan implemented and enjoyed during the period 1876–1882 bore many resemblances to the treaty port system that had been established and was developing in China and Japan save that there were no other foreign competitors in Korea. Japan enjoyed monopolistic but informal imperialism in Korea.

1882: multilateral imperialism comes to Korea

This system of informal unilateral imperialism was challenged and ended by a series of events that took place in 1882. Korean officials and leaders and their Qing Chinese counterparts were increasingly concerned about the implications of a Japanese monopoly over access to Korean diplomacy and markets. Some Koreans were persuaded by the essay written by the Qing official Huang Zunxian, A Strategy for Korea, which argued that perilous times required a pragmatic differentiation among various powers and called for Korea’s cultivation of closer ties with the Qing Empire, the United States, and Japan in order to deal with the growing threat of Czarist Russia and other foreign powers. Others, including Pak Kyu-su, reached similar conclusions (this despite Pak’s personal experience of, as governor of P’yŏngan Province, having ordered the destruction of the General Sherman and the killing of its crew in 1866). Their motivation
often did not include any real admiration or respect for the foreigners but rather was a pragmatic acknowledgment of contemporary power relations.

Fearing strong domestic resistance to more relations with Western nations, King Kojong proved reluctant to take the first step toward treaty negotiations. As a result, the Qing statesman Li Hongzhang, decided to take matters into his own hands by offering to negotiate Chosŏn Korea’s first treaties with Western powers. He hoped that by involving a number of foreign powers in Korea, no single power would emerge predominant (he used the phrases "using one poison to counter another" and "using one barbarian to control another" to describe his strategy; a present-day description might use the term "balance of power"). Therefore, he invited the American Commodore Robert Shufeldt, who had previously made several unsuccessful attempts to approach Korea directly to negotiate a treaty, to Tianjin to negotiate on behalf of Korea. The resultant Treaty of Amity and Commerce was used as a model for treaties negotiated by Li with the British (1882, 1883) and the Germans (1883). Once the precedent was set, Chosŏn Korea would proceed to negotiate treaties with other major powers in ensuing years, including Russia (1884), Italy (1884), France (1886), and the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1892) among others.

A second development in 1882 was also initiated by the Qing Empire, albeit in response to events on the ground in Korea. In July of 1882, Korean soldiers mutinied to protest unequal (or absent) pay and unequal treatment. Their mutiny soon took on political overtones as they enlisted the T’aewŏn’gun to their cause. The rioting soldiers proceeded to attack foreigners (which at the time meant only Japanese) and their businesses and residences in the Korean capital, and the T’aewŏn’gun announced his intention to repudiate all of the recently negotiated treaties. Fearing both the loss of the diplomatic gains secured by the treaties and also the possibility of a forceful Japanese military response to the mutiny, the Qing Empire dispatched three thousand troops from Shandong to Korea to put down the rebellion.

The dispatch of troops to assist the Qing-invested monarch of Korea had precedent in the history of Sino-Korean relations. Ming troops had played a critical role in the halting of the Japanese invasions of Korea in the late sixteenth century (1592–1598). However, in something of a break from tradition, the Chinese troops in 1882 remained in the Korean capital even after the crisis was ended. They constituted a powerful political force aimed at least in part on furthering Qing interests in Korea.

Still later in 1882, the Qing Empire negotiated its own set of commercial regulations with Chosŏn Korea. The resulting Regulations for Maritime and Overland Trade between Chinese and Korean Subjects put in writing both Qing claims to traditional Chinese suzerainty over Korea and the Qing assertion of commercial access and privilege in Korea.

Taken together, these 1882 developments transformed the treaty port system in Korea from one of unilateral Japanese privilege to one in which a number of powers and peoples—but most notably the Chinese and Japanese—competed for power and markets in Korea. This competition within the structure of still informal but now multilateral imperialism would be one of the main features of imperialism in Korea for the next two decades.

The post-1882 system also more fully resembled the treaty port system that had been implemented in China and Japan previously. Under this system, designated cities or towns (treaty ports) were set aside for foreign residence and commercial activity. Within these treaty ports, foreigners generally enjoyed the privilege of having any legal dispute being adjudicated according to foreign law and in foreign courts (extra-territoriality or “extrality”). In addition, many treaty ports had certain areas designated in which foreigners administered most if not all affairs (concessions or settlements). In the case of Chosŏn Korea, these settlements sometimes were demarcated by nationality with (usually) a Japanese and a Chinese settlement existing side by
side sometimes accompanied by an “international settlement” set aside for Westerners. In China and Japan, foreign merchants enjoyed the benefits of generally low tariff rates (often via “unequal treaties” which were imposed under considerable duress) and (in China) a Customs Service managed by foreigners. Both of these features were also implemented in Korea.

The post-1882 system of multilateral treaty-port-style imperialism proved resistant to the attempts of individual nations to assert exclusive privileges. This was discovered by Japanese merchants in Pusan who sought in 1883 to exclude newly arrived Chinese competitors from participation in commercial activities in what was previously an exclusively Japanese domain. Chinese diplomatic officials were able to point to treaty-guaranteed rights to force the Japanese to back down. Chinese merchants, too, found that their efforts to take advantage of the presence of aggressive Qing officials such as Yuan Shikai to facilitate the evasion of customs duties (if not outright smuggling of ginseng) were stymied by Korean customs officials, despite the fact that said officials were actually employees of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service.

The period 1882–1894 was characterized by increasingly intense competition, particularly between China and Japan for markets and power in Korea. By all accounts, Chinese merchants swiftly proved to be worthy competitors to their Japanese counterparts as they poured into Korean treaty ports (particularly Inch’ŏn and Seoul, the Korean capital) and eagerly acquired as much ginseng and gold dust as they could, often exchanging them for British and Chinese textiles. A growing Japanese demand for Korean rice meant that Japan always had a larger share of Korea’s export market, but by the early 1890s, imports into Korea were nearly equally divided between Chinese and Japanese merchants (with merchants of other nationalities playing a negligible role in Korea’s foreign trade).

At the same time that Chinese merchants were challenging Japan’s dominance in the commercial realm, Qing officials were seeking to enhance China’s political power on the peninsula. They reveled in the Chosŏn Kingdom’s continued dispatch of tribute missions to Beijing and sought to demonstrate Qing suzerainty in a variety of symbolic ways at official diplomatic functions, special occasions, banquets, and the like. But they also sought to promote and project Qing power using an assortment of newer tactics. These included setting up and managing Korea’s first overland telegraph lines, establishing and operating Korea’s maritime customs service (although as noted above, not always with expected results), and taking an active role in Korea’s attempts to borrow money from abroad (stymying Korea’s attempts to secure loans from non-Chinese sources in some cases and actively supporting and even subsidizing Chinese loans to the Chosŏn government in others). In all of these areas, the Qing Empire appears to have been far more adept at innovating and adopting the latest imperialist techniques from across the globe than has often been recognized.

While the Qing Empire and Imperial Japan were directly competing for power and privilege on the Korean peninsula, other imperialist powers were often present but usually only peripherally involved in the Sino-Japanese competition or its outcome.

Despite its significant imperial presence in South (India, Burma, etc.) and East (Singapore, Hong Kong, etc.) Asia, Great Britain never demonstrated much official interest in Korea and its merchants tended to follow suit. The British were more than happy to follow the precedent set by the Korean-American Treaty of 1882 and negotiated with the Qing Empire for a British-Korean Treaty but soon followed up with a re-negotiated treaty that was deemed more amenable to British interests (the so-called Parkes Treaty of 1883). Subsequently, British interest in Korea flared up periodically, usually in response to perceived Russian designs or advances on the peninsula. Such was the case in 1885 when the British occupied Kŏmun-do (which they had christened Port Hamilton), a small group of islands off of the southern coast of the peninsula.
The official British justification for this act was the need to forestall Russian seizure of a Korean port (perhaps near the treaty port of Wŏnsan). Once the Russian threat diminished, the British withdrew in 1887. British merchants initially displayed considerable interest in Korea, with the famed firm Jardine and Matheson setting up shop in Inch’on soon after the port was opened. However, few found lasting success (one British observer quipped that “There is no abundance of anything in the country except magpies”), and Britain as a whole seemed content to allow Chinese merchants to market and distribute British goods in Korea. The reports of British consuls stationed in Korea are filled with lamentations concerning the lack of British attention to or interest in Korean markets.

After its military setback of 1866, France appears to have lost interest in Korea for the next two decades, concluding a treaty with Korea only in 1886. French Catholics were subsequently permitted to live and preach in Korea without the persecution of earlier decades; some were instrumental in the construction of the still-famous Myŏng-dong Cathedral in Seoul. And while Germany was one of the first Western powers to negotiate and sign a treaty with Korea, its presence in Korea was negligible. The German firm Myer and Company did an often-successful import/export and transportation business in Korea and even loaned money to the cash-strapped Korean government at times. But few other German companies followed its lead in Korea.

Although the United States played a significant role in the opening of Korea to the Western world with Commodore Shufeldt’s negotiation of the 1882 Korean-American treaty, the United States, too, seemed lukewarm at best in its interest in Korea. American diplomats and advisors sought to push the Chosŏn Kingdom toward what they regarded as progress and modernity. American missionaries (mostly Protestant) set up schools and hospitals and sought Korean converts. A few American firms, the most famous being Morse, Townsend, and Company, set up shop in Korea, facilitating, among other things, the electrification of Kyŏngbok Palace.

Besides Japan and China, the most significant power with abiding interests and presence in Korea was Czarist Russia. Concerned by growing Japanese power on the peninsula and chafing under an increasingly interventionist Qing presence in Korea, King Kojong sought Russian assistance, going so far as to pursue a secret alliance in 1885 and again in 1886. In both cases, once the news became public, outcry from Great Britain, the Qing Empire, and other powers forced both the Koreans and the Russians to back down and disavow the plans. Nevertheless, Russia remained an interested party in Korea and emerged as the major non-Japanese power on the peninsula following the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). 

While many Western powers often used the rhetoric of Westphalian equality and the “family of nations” to describe the ideal system of international relations, actual practice diverged, often dramatically, from the ideal. Some, most prominently the British and the Americans, tacitly and even overtly acquiesced to Qing claims to suzerainty over Korea. While the American Commodore Shufeldt concluded that the treaty he had negotiated in 1882 clearly established Korean sovereignty and independence, American diplomats in Korea were later instructed that “the agitation of the subject of Korea’s complete independence of China, by representatives of the United States, is neither desirable nor beneficial.” The British, too, had negotiated a treaty with Korea whose wording seemed to verify Korean independence. But when the British occupied Kŏmŭn-do (an obvious abridgment of Korean sovereignty in its own right), British diplomats negotiated directly with the Qing Empire (rather than the Korean government) to resolve the issue. More generally, most foreign powers in Korea during this period of multilateral informal imperialism proved less interested in protecting Korean sovereignty and more interested in securing the same unequal access to and privilege in Korea that other powers enjoyed.
1894: turning point?

When rebels initially associated with the Tonghak (Eastern Learning) Movement gathered momentum in the early 1890s, and marched north toward the Korean capital in 1894, King Kojong turned to the Qing Empire, asking for Qing troops to come to Korea to help quell the rebellion. Invoking the terms of the 1885 Convention of Tianjin, Japan followed suit and also sent troops to Korea. A tense standoff was followed by the outbreak of the 1894–1895 Sino-Japanese War. To the surprise of many, Japan won a series of victories on both land and sea.

With boots on the ground in Korea, Meiji Japan decided not only to directly challenge Qing power in Korea but also to push the Korean government to move in ways more amenable to Japanese interests. Japanese soldiers surrounded the palace of King Kojong and elicited a Korean declaration of independence from China, including the announcement of cessation of tribute missions to Beijing. Although echoes of the customary relationship and the principles that underlay them would still be occasionally visible in the years to come, this move (and the subsequent dramatic series of Qing defeats in the war) effectively ended the Qing-Chosŏn suzerain-vassal relationship. For better or for worse, Chosŏn Korea was now firmly within the world of Western-style international relations.

Japanese pressure also led to the creation of a new cabinet that called for a series of wide-ranging reforms (often referred to as the kabo and ülmi reforms). Many of these were aimed at modernizing Korean politics and society along Western lines. Others were more narrowly aimed at enhancing Japanese commercial prospects on the peninsula. Resistance to these reforms coalesced around defiance of the so-called top-knot edict, which required Korean males to cut off their customary top-knot and wear their hair Western (or recent Japanese) style, and the vocal opposition of Queen Min. Japanese displeasure at the Queen’s defiance was manifested when a group of Japanese thugs, most likely at the behest of Japanese official Miura Gorō, assassinated the Queen on October 8, 1895, but most of the kabo and ülmi reforms were not implemented.

Japan also sought to use its suddenly increased power in Korea to engage in a series of moves aimed at enhancing Japanese commercial prospects in Korea and sharply curtailing those of Japan’s Chinese competitors. These included pushing for unilateral exemption from various tariff duties (as well as attempting to seize control of the Korean Customs Service), attempting to seize Chinese property (particularly in Inch’on), and calling for the abolition of extra-territorial privileges for Chinese in Korea. In some respects, Japan appeared to be pushing for the return of the informal but unilateral privileges it had enjoyed during the period 1876–1882. In the words of one observer, “Japan has abolished the impalpable suzerainty of China only to replace it by a palpable and selfish domination of her own.” However, the norms of multilateral imperialism were vigorously defended, most prominently by Great Britain. British officials went to considerable lengths to protect the interests of Chinese merchants in Korea, usually pointing to treaty provisions to do so. In most cases, the British efforts to “restore [the Chinese] to equal rights with those subjects of other Powers” were successful.8

Japan might have pushed more vigorously for an expansion of its power and prerogatives in Korea but for the strong Korean domestic opposition as well as the international resistance to its moves. In addition to Great Britain, Russia spearheaded the so-called Triple Intervention, which forced Japan to relinquish its claims to parts of the Liaodong Peninsula in China in the face of Russian, French, and German opposition.

Fearing increased Japanese encroachment on the peninsula, Chosŏn Korea sought aid and support from Russia. This extended so far as Russian protection of the Korean King Kojong in the aftermath of Queen Min’s assassination. The beleaguered Korean monarch actually resided in the Russian legation in the Korean capital from February of 1896 to February of 1897.
Once Kojong felt secure enough to leave the protection of the Russian legation, he took the unusual step of formally declaring that Korea was no longer merely a kingdom (wangguk) but rather an empire (cheuguk). The accompanying appropriation of imperial symbols, rituals, and practices makes it clear that at least some of the underlying motivation for this shift was the desire to reinforce Korea’s separation and independence from China. The construction of the “Independence Gate” (tongnimmun) by the Independence Club had similar aims. However, at the same time that Korea was asserting equality vis-à-vis China with symbols and language that would have been familiar to both Koreans and Chinese for centuries, the establishment of the Empire of the Great Han (Tae Han Cheguk) also highlighted the reality of late-nineteenth century power politics. Treaties and international law might speak of sovereign equality among the “family of nations,” but more often than not, empires violated the sovereignty of and, in an age of “high imperialism,” colonized, absorbed, annexed, and otherwise eliminated what were previously sovereign nations. Only empires had a chance of survival in such a world.

Whatever the formal status of Korea and its ruler, the treaty port system in Korea continued to expand following the Sino-Japanese War. In addition to the three ports—Pusan, Wŏnsan, and Inch’ŏn—opened earlier, six additional ports were opened during the period 1895–1905: Chinnamp’o (1897), Mokp’o (1897), Kunsan (1899), Masan (1899), P’yŏngyang (1899), and Sŏngjin (1899). Merchants flocked to many of these ports seeking to buy Korean products and sell foreign ones. And while the general tendency of observers and historians is to describe commercial relations in an age of imperialism as ones with imperialist winners and colonized losers, the reality on the ground in Korea was more mixed. For example, many Koreans were able to utilize gold—which surprisingly did not function as a medium of exchange for most of Chosŏn Korea’s history—to purchase desired goods such as kerosene, matches, and machine-woven textiles. All of these foreign imports could arguably be seen to have significantly influenced if not improved the quality of life of many Koreans. Moreover, while the conventional narrative of nineteenth-century imperialism focuses on the ways in which the manufactured goods of the industrial revolution often disrupted if not destroyed local handicraft industries in the colony, in the case of Korea, evidence indicates that imports of machine-woven cotton thread actually enhanced the efficiency and profitability of some Korean hand-woven textiles. On the other hand, the growing integration of Korean agriculture into regional and even global markets meant that events far from home could have a profound effect, often a deleterious one, on local production and prices. And few would dispute the fact that all of the imperialists in Korea, but perhaps particularly the Japanese, engaged in their extractive enterprises not with Korean needs or interests in mind.

The Russo-Japanese standoff in Korea opened up the peninsula for many powers and companies seeking lucrative concessions. American firms won contracts to build streetcars and the first electrical grid in the Korean capital. Another firm, the Oriental Consolidated Mining Company, secured the rights to a very productive and profitable gold mine in Unsan. Japanese firms constructed an ever-expanding railroad network and, one by one, sought to buy out or otherwise marginalize and eliminate competing concessions on the peninsula.

1905: the beginning of the end

In its quest for sole possession of concessions in Korea, Japan’s most formidable opponent was Russia. A series of consortia sought and sometimes won timber concessions for logging along the Yalu River, but most faltered due to financial difficulties. However, in 1903 the Yalu River Timber Company, backed by the Czarist government, began to move forcefully not only to extract lumber from Korea but also to solidify Russian power in the northern part of the
Korean peninsula. Russian soldiers and Chinese bandits were brought into Korea under the guise of being lumberjacks. Russia established a virtually independent enclave in the port city of Yongamp’o. Japan’s fear of Russia’s expansionistic intentions and capabilities (which would be all the more easily supported by the impending completion of the Trans-Siberian Railroad) led Japan to initiate the Russo-Japanese War in 1904. Japan’s victories, particularly on sea, led to the Treaty of Portsmouth and a significant weakening of Russian power in the region. As a result, few were able or willing to protest Japan’s announcement that Korea would be a Japanese protectorate, with Japanese officials making all of the key foreign policy and diplomatic decisions on behalf of Korea.

This announcement was resented and resisted by many Koreans. Some of them took to the hills and fought against the growing Japanese presence as “righteous armies” (ŭibyŏng). This type of popular resistance to foreign, particularly Japanese, presence in Korea had a long lineage. Violent anti-Japanese outbursts accompanied both the 1882 soldiers’ mutiny and an 1884 coup attempt led by pro-Japanese Korean officials. In addition, the movement that coalesced into the Tonghak Rebellion in the early 1890s had among its diverse ideological and practical motivations the desire to “expel the arrogant enemies from abroad.” Tonghak rebels agreed to disband if both the Qing and Japanese armies would leave Korean soil. When the Sino-Japanese War and the increased presence and activities of Japanese troops in Korea ensued instead, many Tonghak rebels took up their arms again to fight against the Japanese and were hunted down and killed. After 1905, many more righteous armies formed. But they, too, were hunted down and killed by the thousands by the better-equipped and -supplied Japanese army.

King Kojong (by then the Kwangmu Emperor of the Empire of the Great Han) made a last ditch effort to appeal for international support by dispatching a delegation to the 1907 Hague Conference. Due to Japanese pressure, the delegation was not received or recognized. In the words of one scholar, “in the summer of 1907, the world declared Korea illegal.” In retaliation for Kojong’s efforts, the Japanese forced him to abdicate in favor of his son, Sunjong (or the Yung-hŭi Emperor). But few believed that Sunjong wielded any real power.

The Japanese were able to use their enhanced power in Korea to slowly but inexorably crowd out competitors. Growing Japanese control of finance and banking, of transportation infrastructure, of the Customs Service, and of various levers of political power left little room for Chinese, American, or other competitors. The forms of the treaty port system—ports, concessions, extraterritoriality, etc.—remained in place until 1910 (or even beyond), but Korea increasingly became a place of Japanese dominance if not monopoly.

The Japanese commercial ascent in Korea was also enhanced by a growing industrial base in Japan which, utilizing all the advantages of late industrialization, was increasingly able to directly challenge Western—especially British—manufactured goods on their own terms, at least in the East Asian region. Thus, the decline of Chinese commercial fortunes in Korea was also a decline, at one remove, of British fortunes as well.

The Japanese statesman Itō Hirobumi was sent to Korea as the first Resident-General in 1905. Itō was not afraid to be firm and demanding in his administration of Korea. He expressed little to no opposition to the hunting down and killing of righteous army guerrillas. He also was instrumental in forcing Kojong to abdicate in 1907 as well as in the negotiation of the 1907 Japan-Korea Treaty, which gave Japan even more power to interfere in Korean domestic affairs. On the other hand, he steadfastly resisted the idea of full and formal annexation of Korea, preferring the continuation of the protectorate. However, Itō’s 1909 assassination in Harbin, China, at the hands of the Korean An Chung-gŭn gave momentum to those in Japan calling for annexation. On August 22, 1910, Korea disappeared as a sovereign nation and was formally annexed by Japan. Annexation also signaled the beginning of the end of the treaty port system.
in Korea (which would be dismantled in the years to come) and the effective end of competing empires in Korea (at least until the Pacific War in the 1940s).

At the end of the day, the story of Japanese dominance and ultimate annexation of Korea was a story that had been repeated in many places across the world. In the age of high imperialism, nearly all of Africa (Liberia and Ethiopia excepted) and much of South and Southeast Asia were formally colonized by one power or another. Less formal and interventionist forms of imperialism like the treaty port system gave way to formal annexation and absorption. For many Koreans, 1910 would usher in an era of turmoil and suffering that in many ways would not end for at least 35 years.

While the pre-1910 period of Korea’s history has receded further and further into the mists of the past, there remain areas that warrant additional scholarly attention. Promising areas of ongoing and potential future research regarding competing imperialisms in Korea and their impact on the peninsula include a strong strand of revisionist explorations of areas of unexpected reform, resiliency, and innovation in late-Chosŏn Korea. These include the aforementioned arguably positive impacts that foreign trade had on Korea and Koreans as well as the surprisingly diverse array of reform efforts of the Kwangmu Emperor (King Kojong’s formal title after 1897). In addition, explorations of this period that better situate the various imperialist activities in Korea within regional and even global trends and patterns will surely enhance our understanding of this critically formative period of Korean history. As some see early twenty-first-century patterns and developments that closely resemble the pre-1914 world of national (if not imperial) competition and conflict, understanding the Korean peninsula in an age of competing imperialisms may become more relevant than ever.

Notes

1 Examples of scholarship that grapples with these questions include Yi Tôk-ju, Chosônun wae Ilbon ūi sikminji ga doehnûnga?; Yur-bok Lee, West Goes East; Young-ick Lew, “Yuan Shih-k’ai’s Residency . . .”; and Yung-hwan Jo, ed., Korea’s Response to the West.
3 See, for example, Kojong sillok, June 4, 1871 (Kojong 8.4.17).
6 Swartout, Robert R., Mandarins, Gunboats, and Power Politics: Owen Nickerson Denny and the International Rivalries in Korea, 93.
9 “A Call to Arms Issued at Paeksan” in Peter H. Lee, ed., Sourcebook of Korean Civilization. Volume 2: From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 364. Among the diverse and sometimes contradictory motivations of the Tonghak rebels was a clear anti-foreign (particularly anti-Japanese) animus. However, Tonghak manifestos also mentioned specific aspects of foreign imperialist practice, including telegraph lines, treaty port rice merchants, and taxes on fish and salt collected in port cities. See “Thirty Demands of the Tonghak Peasant Army” in ibid., 367–368.
10 Dudden, Japan’s Colonization of Korea, 7.
11 See, for example, Tae-jin Yi, Kojong sidae ŭi chaejomyōng.
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Kirk W. Larsen


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