

# Korean Perceptions of Japan during the Great Han Empire and the Japanese Annexation of Korea

CHU Chinoh

## Abstract

*There might have been two ways through which Korea could have maintained independence despite what seemed a fait accompli. First, it could have gotten military assistance by forging an alliance with either Russia or Japan. But setting up an alliance with one side would have created animosity with the other side, thus making a war between Russia and Japan inevitable and colonization of Korea the outcome. The Independence Club stressed the importance of protective neutral status in order for the Great Han Empire to sustain its national sovereignty. The club desired balanced relations between Russia and Japan, but ended up believing that Russia held the greater danger for Korea. Their support of Japan, the United States, and Britain subsequently led to the strengthening of Japanese influence and encouraged a pro-Japanese atmosphere among Koreans. In the process, Japan's influence grew as it ended up taking a mediating role between the Korean government and the Independence Club, opening the way for the Japanese colonization of Korea.*

**Keywords:** Independence Club, Emperor Gojong, Great Han Empire, neutral state, Japan, Russia

---

CHU Chinoh is Professor of Korean History at Sangmyung University. He received his Ph.D. in Korean History from Yonsei University in 1995. His publications include “Hanil gwangyesa yeongu hyeonhwang-gwa ilbon-ui yeoksa gyoyuk” (Current Status of the Studies on the Korea-Japan Relations and the Japanese Education of History) (co-authored, 2007) and “Seo Jae-pil-ui hanguk geundaesa insik” (Seo Jae-pil’s Perceptions of Modern Korean History) (2009). E-mail: cchu@smu.ac.kr.

## Introduction

In spite of geographic proximity and the sharing of many similarities, Korea and Japan also retain significant differences. Although other colonized nations have had challenging relations with imperial rulers, few have matched the complexity and bitterness that have sometimes existed between Korea and Japan. If Western powers had colonized Korea, would the sense of betrayal been as great?

Koreans commonly point out the fact that higher culture, originating in the Korean peninsula, was funneled to Japan in the ancient period. Accordingly, Koreans thought that their country was superior to Japan in terms of civilization since Confucianism had a much longer history in Korea. Thus, when Japan established colonial rule through military force, Koreans found it more than difficult to accept. They harbored a sense of humiliation over the fact that their nation was subject to colonization by Japan. Nevertheless, in terms of contemporary civilization, Japan modernized before Korea, and, thus, at a certain point in history, the country became the object of envy and a model for Korean intellectuals. Given this background, the content of most Japanese history books is biased in the way that the history of the region is presented, though some historians use more discretion. As an example, one of the most right-wing textbooks asserts that Japan liberated Korea from China with its victory in the 1894 Sino-Japanese War, and does not elaborate on the history leading up to the 1905 Russo-Japanese War.

In actuality, Korea already considered itself an independent nation without Japanese help. Despite frequent interventions from China, which regarded Korea as a tributary state, tributary relations were limited to bilateral relations between Korea and China, and did not involve Japan. In an apparent bid to separate Korea from China, with the setup of the Ganghwa Treaty, Japan had stressed that Korea was an independent state, free from China. However, rather than establishing a truly sovereign state on the Korean peninsula, Japan accelerated its own program of aggression on Korea. Prompted by the Shimonoseki Treaty, Japan further exploited Korea by even more brutal means than China.

Japan committed the ruthless crime of killing Korea's Queen, desperate to solidify its grip in the wake of the Triple Intervention (Chu 2010).

Korean efforts toward modernization, initiated by the Independence Club and progressive forces within the government, were ignored by Japan. As a result, the Great Han Empire fell under colonial rule with Japan taking the lead among imperial nations with its victory in the war against Russia.<sup>1</sup> The question to ask is whether Korea's fall was the inevitable consequence of the country's failure to carry out modernization reform. While this may have been a factor, it is also true that colonization of Korea came as a result of Japan's aggressive pursuit of power, which had been ongoing since the Meiji Restoration. While carrying out the Meiji Reform, Japan had been actively seeking to colonize Korea or, at the very least, make it a protectorate under Japan's care.

Along with the Japanese government, the Japanese liberal forces and the Japanese people in general cooperated in the colonization efforts. For example, Ito Hirobumi and Fukuzawa Yukichi, who are now memorialized on Japanese currency notes, were heroes who led Japan's modernization but, for Koreans, they were initiators of Japan's aggression against Korea. That Japan had such hunger for power was already well known at that time. Against this backdrop, it made sense that the Korean government and intellectuals would try to find a way to protect Korea from Japan's possible invasion. With the 100th anniversary of the annexation in mind, this article is intended to shed light on how relations between Korea and Japan proceeded one hundred years ago. Instead of focusing on the history of Japan's invasion of Korea, however, I will explore whether the recognition of and response to the Japanese threat had been appropriate or adequate, focusing on the role of the Independence Club and the Korean government. Such inquiry is one avenue for exploring whether an understanding of this history

---

1. Some scholars assert the colonial modernization theory by reiterating the claims of Japan in this respect. Advocating the New Right, they have raised political and ideological issues in the historical sphere of Korea, triggering a fierce debate. For academic debate on the Korean Empire, see Yi et al. (2005). For criticism of New Right groups from some historians, see Lee et al. (2008).

might give rise to a response to the current tensions among major nations surrounding the Korean peninsula.

### **The International Situation and Relations with Japan after the Korean Royal Refuge at the Russian Legation**

The Agwan Pacheon incident, when King Gojong of Joseon dynasty and his crown prince left the Gyeongbokgung palace to take refuge at the Russian legation in Seoul in February 1896, prompted the decline of Japan's influence in Korea. At that time, Russia had been focusing only on Manchuria in dealing with East Asia and had rejected Gojong's repeated call for refuge via the Russian minister to Korea, Karl Waeber. Russia's basic position was to prevent possible armed conflict with Japan as Russia had yet to see the completion of the Trans-Siberian Railway. But with the Agwan Pacheon, in which the Joseon king voluntarily sought refuge with Russia, Russia found that it could use the issue as a means of showing internationally that it was not interested in Korea.

Under these circumstances, Russia ironically emerged as the strongest foreign force expanding its interest in Korea, but the Korean issue remained a marginal concern in Russia's policy in East Asia. Russia offered no assistance to the United States and France seeking interests in Korea. Russia also encouraged the Korean government to refuse Japanese demands, but stopped short of calling for withdrawal of its armed forces. When the Korean government dispatched Min Yeonghwan to the crowning ceremony of Nikolai II in order to ask for Russia's provision of a loan and protection of the royal palaces, the Korean requests were rebuffed. At best, Russia agreed to the most minimum of the official requests. Russia, however, also endorsed Japan's influence in Korea by pledging coordination through the so-called Lobanov-Yamagata Agreement (Chu 1987, 72-73).

While Japan was pursuing a policy of domination over Korea in 1895, the Jeongdong Club forces, composed of close confidants to the royal family, were approaching Russia and the United States for support

against Japan. They were the leading forces of the Agwan Pacheon. These people consisted of the core progressive forces in the government, who later took the lead in founding the Independence Club (Dongnip Hyeophoe). Key members of the club included Philip Jaisohn (Seo Jae-pil), An Gyeong-su, Yi Wan-yong, and Yun Chi-ho, who belatedly joined them. They called for independence, citing the fact that China endorsed Korea's independence with the Shimonoseki Treaty. But as Korea was already considered an independent state (in theory only, as laid out by Japan), their claim proved to be problematic.

The government funded and supported the Independence Club's newspaper, the *Dongnip sinmun* (The Independent),<sup>2</sup> which served as the state mouthpiece and carried articles critical of Japan. For instance, some Japanese newspapers reported that anti-Russian sentiment was rising in Korea in reaction to Russian merchant Iulii Ivanovich Briner's acquisition of forest harvesting rights in areas near the Yalu River. But the *Dongnip sinmun* reported that "there is no anti-Russian sentiment among Koreans and foreigners and there has been no pressure in the process of concluding the contract. Why on earth should Korean people hate Russia as they feel at ease with the Agwan Pacheon, which took place voluntarily? On the contrary, people seem to harbor distrust regarding Japan's territorial greed."<sup>3</sup>

In addition, when the Japanese government asked for compensation for the Japanese people murdered by the "righteous army"—rebels that had taken up arms against Japanese incursions—across the country, the paper said there could be no compensation for those who forced their way into a country. It went on to say that such incidents were triggered by Japan's excessive interference in Korea's domestic affairs and that the assassination of the Korean queen by the Japanese, in particular, added fuel to the fire of opposition. The paper also criticized Japan's excessive military budget for the year 1897, saying, "it is

---

2. When the newspaper was launched in 1896, it published a four-page edition—three pages in Korean and one page in English—three times a week. It was converted to a daily newspaper in 1897 and the English section was published separately under the title, *The Independent*.

3. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," November 5, 1896.

better (for Japan) to focus more on academic and business affairs than on military build-up as the current military budget is enough.”

What should be noted is that the paper’s opinion regarding Japan was not completely negative. Seen as a protector of Korea’s independence, Japan was described by the *Dongnip sinmun* as a savior for Korea. Its writers stopped short of entirely criticizing Japan by claiming that anti-Japanese sentiment in the country was created as “some people didn’t understand the will of the government.” The paper also called for expanded relations for commercial purposes despite possible problems on the political front. Instead of calling for withdrawal of Japanese soldiers in the wake of the Agwan Pacheon, it defended the stationing of the Japanese troops, citing the need to “quell the civilian forces which murder foreigners and create chaos.” Given this, the paper seems to have believed that Japan was not attempting to threaten Korea’s sovereignty. It called for expanded business relations with Japan, unless Japan directly violated Korea’s sovereignty (Chu 1987, 91-92).

There were many changes in Korea at that time prompted by various factors. First, Russia refused the Korean government’s request for loans to pay off debts to Japan and to use for reform projects. Min Yeong-hwan, upon returning home from Russia, told King Gojong that Russia had no will to help Korea and strongly urged the king to return to the palace and resume communication with Japan. An Gyeong-su, the Independence Club president, informed Japan of affairs within the Korean government and another club member, Yi Wan-yong, also seemed to firmly believe that Korea needed Japan’s help in its bid to maintain independence. Following the advice of his advisors, Gojong returned to the Gyeongung palace and proclaimed the establishment of the Great Han Empire.

### **Russia’s Aggressive Advance and Confrontation with the Independence Club**

Russia faced a dilemma in its policy toward Manchuria in 1897 and began to turn its eyes on Korea as the alternative arena of engagement.

At that time, rather than offering loans, Russia was willing to dispatch financial and military advisors to Korea to step up political and military pressure. Judging that Russia was trying to push into both Manchuria and Korea, Britain attempted to keep Russia in check. With Russia's appointment of Alexis de Speyer as its minister in Korea, the country began to adopt a different policy toward Korea. A fervent expansionist, Speyer opposed further opening of ports as demanded by other nations. He attempted to sign a contract with the Korean government to increase the number of Russian military trainers (Synn 1981, 250).

The Independence Club regarded Russia's change in policy as a serious challenge to Korea's sovereignty. This is because club members envisioned Korean neutrality as a means of maintaining its independence. They believed that neutrality would check the influence of any one power and create a balance of power among the vested countries. *The Independent* stressed the need to open more ports while opposing the dispatch of more Russian military trainers to augment the military forces in Korea. The paper argued that Korea did not need an increase in military forces because "there is no country to be occupied unless the Korean people should so demand it," and that Korea "only needed enough military force to crack down on civil uprising."<sup>4</sup> The paper believed that signing a military contract with Russia was tantamount to diplomatic suicide, with the possible danger that other nations would attempt to overthrow the Korean government. Here, the "other nations" really meant Japan. Yi Wan-yong, the second president of the Independence Club and Korea's Foreign Minister, declined to sign the contract with Russia for the military trainers. As a result, Yi lost his position. The newspaper praised Yi as "a brave minister who was sacked because of his efforts to protect the nation."<sup>5</sup> However, Kato Masao, the Japanese minister to Korea, was behind Yi's actions. When the Japanese government lodged its protest on the move to increase the number of Russian military trainers, describing it as a violation of the Lobanov-Yamagata Protocol of 1896, the Russian government noti-

---

4. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," May 25, 1897.

5. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," November 11, 1897.

fied its Japanese counterpart of its intention to postpone the signing of the contract with Korea, which Kato relayed to Yi.<sup>6</sup>

Japan helped to provoke distrust between Korea and Russia by spreading false rumors about the contents of the protocol (M. Lee 1994, 133-136). It was confirmed that there was little possibility of Russia extending a loan to Korea and that Russia's goal was to increase the dispatch of military trainers only. Against this backdrop, the major forces of the Independence Club were inclined to look to Britain and Japan while giving up expectations of support from Russia. This prompted Russia to adopt an aggressive policy of engagement in a bid to break the power balance. Given this, Britain staged a military demonstration by deploying its Far East Fleet off the Port of Jemulpo (old name of Incheon) in order to protest the firing of their representative, John McLeavy Brown, who had been serving as financial advisor to the Korean government. In response, Japan blocked the Korean Strait while inspecting the moves of the Russian fleet. In exchange for handing over Weihaiwei to Britain, Japan gained Britain's help in its bid to infiltrate Korea, thus creating an alliance between the two nations (Yoshida 1966, 12-13). At this time, there was a change in attitude toward Japan. *Dongnip sinmun* reported that "Those who committed ill after the Sino-Japanese War were illiterate, ordinary Japanese people, not those from the government or the intellectuals. . . . Now the Japanese repent their past wrongdoings."<sup>7</sup> *Dongnip sinmun* also described Japan as a nation different from some countries in that, like Britain, it did not want to see Korea and China become colonized by other nations.<sup>8</sup>

The Independence Club fiercely objected to Russia's demand to set up a coal-mining base on Jeoryeongdo island, Busan, because it interpreted Russia's move as an attempt to seize Korean territory. A club debate, which was held in February 1898, asserted that Korea would become a subordinate of Russia once the construction of the Trans-

---

6. *Nihon gaiko bunsho* (Japanese Diplomatic Document), no. 31-2, p. 452.

7. *The Independent*, "Editorial Notes," August 9, 1897.

8. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Foreign Correspondence," February 3, 1898.

Siberian Railway was completed.<sup>9</sup> In a written document, club leader An Gyeong-su and 135 members called on the emperor to reject Russia's bid for the coal base. As the government replied that it had permitted the coal base in tandem with its allowance of a similar one to Japan, the club members also demanded the return of Japan's base (Jeong [1897] 2004, 177-178). However, club members were not as firmly committed to the idea of Japan having to give up its base.<sup>10</sup> After Russia cancelled the plan on Jeoryeongdo island, there was no further discussion about the issue.<sup>11</sup>

Russia's bid to use the island concerned Japan as well as Korea. For Japan, the setup of a Russian base off the Busan port could be a serious threat as, at that time, Japan maintained the upper hand over the other nations in terms of commercial rights and lands in Busan. In addition, the island was a gateway in the Korea Strait and the establishment of a Russian base would deal a serious blow to Japan's military control. Thus, Japan called on its people residing on the island not to sell their land, while also demanding confirmation that the area be designated as a Japanese concession (*jogyoji* 租界地).<sup>12</sup>

There is little record to show direct Japanese engagement in the club's anti-Russian movement. However, when the club members were trying to hide amid speculations of Russia's possible retaliations against the club members, the Japanese minister informed Yun Chi-ho that Russian minister Speyer did not have the power to harm the club leaders.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, students from the Gyeongseong School, set up by Japan, took the podium during a massive anti-Russian rally organized by the club. Thus, whether there was direct Japanese involvement or not, the club's adoption of an anti-Russian stance was a blessing for Japan.

---

9. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (The Diary of Yun Chi-ho), entry dated February 13, 1898.

10. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (The Diary of Yun Chi-ho), entry dated March 3, 1898.

11. Though Jeong Gyo said Japan also withdrew from the coal base (Jeong [1897] 2004, 183), Japan was still paying a land fee for the land to the Korean empire in 1899 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 1960, 353).

12. *Nihon gaiko bunsho* (Japanese Diplomatic Document), no. 31-1, pp. 190-198.

13. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (The Diary of Yun Chi-ho), entry dated March 9, 1898.

From the perspective of the Great Han Empire, allowance of the coal base to Russia did not necessarily mean conceding the territory to Russia. Rather, such a move offered an opportunity to keep Japan in check since the Japanese had already been permitted a coal base in Incheon. Russia was the only power that could counter Japan at the time. But with the club's anti-Russian stance, the opportunity to keep Japan in check was lost. The club members drove public opinion favorably toward Japan. Nonetheless, the Korean government continued to lean toward accepting Russia's request, to which *Dongnip sinmun* commented critically: "In the old days, the people excessively trusted Japan to permit Japan's rights in full, but these days, after Russia overthrew the stage, the pro-Japanese government and the people only try to get close to Russia."<sup>14</sup> As an alternative, the paper proposed the need for neutral diplomacy, based on checks and balances, stating "In relations with each nation, like a beautiful woman admired by all . . . never stand with one side, but ally with both Eastern and Western forces to check each other, as remaining neutral among all the nations is the best way to reach independence."<sup>15</sup>

In the end, Emperor Gojong, at the advice from the Japanese minister, rejected the Russian minister's pressure to maintain the military and financial advisors. The Japanese minister pledged to Gojong that Japan would protect the royal family and called on him to reject Russia's pressure, even helping to write the official letter sent to the Russian Legation.<sup>16</sup> Russia proposed to Japan that it would concede the position of financial advisor for Korea to Japan, only to be rebuffed by the latter. Instead, Japan came up with a proposal to maintain its power in Korea in exchange for giving Manchuria over to Russia. Accordingly, Russia acknowledged Japan's economic prestige in Korea through the Rosen-Nishi Convention of April 1898, expressing its intention to endorse Japan's diplomatic dominance but not its political one over Korea. This belief on the part of Russia was based on the assump-

---

14. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," January 20, 1898.

15. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," January 20, 1898.

16. *Nihon gaiko bunsho* (Japanese Diplomatic Document), no. 31-1, pp. 165-170.

tion that it could invade Korea at any time, if needed, as long as Russia had control of Manchuria. After April 1898, Japan, not Russia, emerged as the most threatening foreign force to Korea. Having the economic and diplomatic upper hand over Korea, Japan began to cautiously pursue its policy of aggression, including measures designed to secure markets, exploit interests, and influence the cultural sector, all the while being careful not to trigger a reaction from Korea. Based on its strong alliances with Britain and the United States, Japan had no fear of diplomatic isolation.

### Reform Movement of the Independence Club and Japan

With the withdrawal of Russia, the Independence Club understood that “Korea had become an absolute independent state,” while believing that the Rosen-Nishi Convention “guaranteed Korea’s independence jointly by Russia and Japan.” The club embarked on efforts to reform domestic politics and, at that time, did not direct criticism toward Japan. It also raised no opposition to Japan being given the right to construct a railway between Seoul and Incheon, by the concession of American financier James Morse, the original holder of the right. Nor did it comment when Japan assumed the right in August 1898 to construct a railway linking Seoul and Busan. The club, on the contrary, warmly welcomed Japanese politician Ito Hirobumi, who came to give a lecture at the Gyeongseong School, describing him in an editorial for *The Independent* as “greatly contributing to Korea’s independence.”<sup>17</sup> It is clear that club members believed that Korea had been liberated from China with the support of Japan. They wrote a poem applauding Ito<sup>18</sup> and gave him a pair of tea cups inscribed with the image of Independence Gate (Jeong [1897] 2004, 183). At this time, Britain and Japan were regarded as “having no desire to take Korean territory.” As for

17. *Dongnip sinmun*, “Editorial,” August 31, 1898.

18. The poems are found in documents on Ito Hirobumi in Committee for the Compilation of Documents Relating to Ito Hirobumi (1981).

Britain's pledge that it would not stand in the way of Japan's bid to advance into Korea in return for acquiring the rights for the Weihaiwei from Japan, the paper described this as meaning "Britain's expression of support for Japan's efforts toward Korea's independence." Regarding the stationing of Japanese troops in Seoul, it said, "They are here to protect their people as Koreans injured Japanese and seized their property without reason. . . . Without them, Seoul might have been taken by civilian forces, causing extreme chaos." It also asserted that "Japan's military build-up was designed to prevent Russian aggression rather than to take over Korea." An increasing number of club members seemed willing to accept the Theory of Uniting the Great East (Daito Gapporon 大東合邦論).<sup>19</sup> The *Maeil sinmun* carried editorials claiming, "it would be wonderful to see Korea and Japan join hands in a grand alliance to form a fortress to watch over Asia."<sup>20</sup>

The *Daehan Shinbo* (Great Han Weekly) of the Gwangmu Club also carried an ad in search of an editorial writer for its new magazine, *Singungmin* (New People), and offered a copy of the *Daito gapporon* 大東合邦論 (The Theory of Uniting the Great East) as the prize to the winner.<sup>21</sup> This magazine later heralded the theories of Oriental Peace based on racial competition and Japanese hegemony (Park 1992). At that time, Independence Club member, An Gyeong-su, who plotted an aborted coup d'état against the Great Han Empire, sought refuge in Japan with support from the Japanese minister. Those who failed in the coup d'état chose Japan because of the nation's willingness to accept them. Working behind the scenes, Bak Yeong-hyo sent money from Japan to support the disruptive and violent pan-national rally (called Manmin Gongdonghoe). Gojong sent armed forces to disperse the rally, yet most of the leaders were able to seek refuge at the houses of Japanese and American residents in Korea.<sup>22</sup> The Japanese minister mediated with the government while Ko Yeong-geun and others sought

---

19. *Dongnip sinmun*, June 7, 1898.

20. *Maeil sinmun*, September 23 and November 3, 1898.

21. *Maeil sinmun*, June 23, 1898.

22. *Yun Chi-ho ilgi* (The Diary of Yun Chi-ho), entry dated February 1, 1898.

asylum in Japan (Jeong [1897] 2004, 19-22). The number of refugees in Japan rapidly increased following the Agwan Pacheon. During the early stages of the asylum, there was little contact between the members of the Independence Club in Korea, such as Yu Gil-jun and Jo Hui-yeon, and those in Japan, like Bak Yeong-hyo, due to the lingering dispute after the Gabo Reform of 1894. But they began to resume contact from late 1896. Japan did not try to prevent them from meeting, though authorities closely monitored their moves. Bak Yeong-hyo and his factional members likely were encouraged by the Independence Club's deployment of the anti-Russian campaign in 1898. Moreover, Bak hoped that the realignment of the Japanese government would favor his political comeback. Newspapers during that period hinted at such a possibility.<sup>23</sup>

Bak Yeong-hyo's key confidants returned home from Japan around this time and, while residing in the Japanese settlement, contacted the People's Association (Minhoe). The purpose of their reentering Korea was to determine the appropriate timing for Bak's return home to be in line with the expanding influence of the People's Association and the Independence Club. Upon arrival in Korea, they quickly made contact with the Independence Club and frequently reported to Bak on the domestic situation.<sup>24</sup> They expected assistance from Japan; however, for political reasons, Japan was unwilling to be seen as openly supporting the return of Bak Yeong-hyo and An Gyeong-su, so their plans fell through and the Independence Club faced dissolution.

Japan had already made progress in its bid for power over Korea as it had been given superior rights with the effectuation of the Rosen-Nishi Convention. Continuation of rebellious activity that threatened the life of Gojong and increasing recognition that Japan stood behind the Independence Club could have potentially led to a second Agwan Pacheon, thus Japan had to exercise caution. Japan warned club members that it would "prevent them from gathering in the Japanese settle-

---

23. *Dongnip sinmun*, April 7, 1898; *Maeil sinmun*, June 20, 1898.

24. *Gojong sillok*, vol. 40, 9th day of the second lunar month, 4th Gwangmu year (1900).

ment for the purpose of plotting a movement though it would permit their staying for simply taking shelter.” On the other hand, Japan called on Gojong to accept the club’s demands and said it would concede to Gojong’s request for military protection, should the need ever arise. In essence, Japan was employing duplicitous tactics to win both sides. As for the club, it regarded Japan as the benchmark for Korea to follow. Regarding the establishment of a national assembly, club members said, “In an uneducated society, monarchism is more stable than democracy, as seen in cases of modern and ancient histories, and Western countries. Even before learning from Western nations, Japan was far more advanced than Korea and had made rapid progress in the previous 30 years. After exploring various systems of legislation in many Western nations, Japan established its national assembly in 1890.”<sup>25</sup>

With regard to economic policy, however, the club differed from Japan, in that it wanted unconditional free trade rather than preferential favor for Japan. The members maintained a proactive attitude with regard to the exports of grains, in particular, while calling for dissolution of privileged commercial rights. However, they did not have any countermeasures for the possible commercial exploitations or grain price rises in local markets. *The Independent* predicted that consumers would enjoy the benefits of cheaper foreign goods and this would benefit the nation as a whole, though some domestic manufacturers would face collapse.<sup>26</sup> The club urged the need for the nation to enter into the global capitalist economic system for the purpose of protecting national sovereignty as well as enhancing its economic development on an international level.

According to the club’s position on expanding trade, Korea was supposed to sell raw materials and resources like farm and mining products in return for importing manufactured goods from Japan. It defended such a system by saying: “Japan needs material resources to

---

25. *Dongnip sinmun*, “Hauiwon-eun geupchi anta” (Councilors Are in No Hurry), April 7, 1898.

26. *Dongnip sinmun*, “Editorial,” June 9, 1898; *The Independent*, “New Treaty Ports,” June 7 and 9, 1898.

meet the country's rapid industrialization. With its geographic proximity, Korea can provide Japan with raw materials and food grains";<sup>27</sup> and "As Korea lacks technology and capital, it is better to import manufactured goods while exporting farm products. It does not make sense for Korea to directly engage in manufacturing."<sup>28</sup> In contrast, Hong Jong-u, who was rejected by the club for his assassination of Kim Ok-gyun—one of the leaders of the Coup of 1884 (Gapsin Jeongbyeon) who took asylum in Japan—called for withdrawal of Japanese troops, prevention of Japanese currency circulation, and prohibition of exports of food grains.<sup>29</sup> *Dongnip sinmun* strongly opposed his views, stating that the circulation of the Japanese currency "is inevitable, as the value of the Korean currency is so low."<sup>30</sup>

### Relations between Korea and Japan after Dissolution of the Independence Club

After the forcible dissolution of the Independence Club, Emperor Gojong was able to gain control in the political sphere. Gojong, however, faced the serious issue of summoning back to the country refugees like Bak Yeong-hyo and Yu Gil-jun, the only remaining challengers against him. Japan first considered sending them home or moving them to another region, partly due to the cost of protecting them and also for fear of inspiring anti-Japanese sentiment in Gojong. But Japan eventually refused the demand, citing the previous capital punishment of An Gyeong-su and Kwon Hyeong-jin upon returning home. Japan's continued protection of Bak and Yu served as a political threat to hold over Gojong, and it was hoped that they would be useful in the event of the establishment of a pro-Japanese regime.

Externally, although the Great Han Empire proclaimed autonomy,

---

27. *The Independent*, "Editorial," October 9, 1896.

28. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," June 1, 1897.

29. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," March 22, 1898; *The Independent*, "Local Items," April 12, 1898.

30. *Dongnip sinmun*, "Editorial," April 4, 1898.

it lacked the ability to adequately protect its sovereignty. Gojong had to resort to seeking foreign armed forces that could protect him. In this context, Korean ministers maintained close relations with foreign legations while the foreign envoys attempted to further their interests through these relations. Accordingly, the relations between high-ranking officials and foreign envoys fluctuated, and the change in power dynamic was especially sensitive in the lead up to the Russo-Japanese War. Confrontations were most fierce between the forces siding with Japan and those siding with Russia. Pro-Russian officials stressed Korea's need to get protection from Russia to check Japan while pro-Japanese forces urged the invitation of Japanese military trainers (Moriyama 1987, 117).

Witnessing the unfolding of events during the Boxer Rebellion in China, Gojong was fearful that a similar situation could erupt in Korea, which would prompt the major powers to dispatch their military forces. In fact, to prevent Japan from raising the issue of Manchuria, Russia presented Japan with a plan for the division of the Korean peninsula. Previously, in March 1896, Japan had called on Russia to divide Korea using the 39th parallel, but the proposal had been rejected. This time, Japan took a hard-line position, calling for a swap of Korea for Manchuria (Suh 2003, 128).

In December 1900, Russia proposed a plan to Japan for neutrality of Korea under the guarantee of mutual forces. But the proposal failed because the Japanese foreign ministry also demanded the neutrality of Manchuria. Japanese demands became increasingly more excessive (Moriyama 1987, 118). In 1902, Russia's proposal for permanent neutrality of Korea was unsuccessful due to opposition from Japan and a lukewarm response from the United States. In the midst of such conflict, Russia took aggressive action in southern areas, targeting Manchuria and then Korea. Gojong remained cautious in his dealings with Russia because, on the one hand, he hoped that Russia might be able to keep a check on Japan. On the other, he also feared Russia's interfering in commercial affairs and possible demand for concessions. He demanded the withdrawal of Russians who were purchasing land and constructing houses in Yongampo. Gojong also sent a personal let-

ter to Russia proposing a secret alliance between Korea and Russia in order to repel Japan in the event of an outbreak of war between Russia and Japan. Gojong was seeking to maintain Korean independence by calling on Russian support in the event that his efforts toward establishing neutral status failed (Suh 2003, 134-135). For Gojong, this seemed to be the only choice left to prevent Japan's move to make Korea its protectorate.

Japan had already begun such efforts on the occasion of the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion in 1900. Komura, who took office as foreign minister in 1901, decided to wage war against Russia and struck the Anglo-Japanese Alliance to pave the way for such a move. In 1903, Japan came up with measures designed to force Russia to acknowledge Japan's dominance over Korea and Japan's rights in Korean domestic affairs and military assistance. Japan thus triggered a full-fledged war against Russia. The Russians wanted not only to monopolize Manchuria but also divide Korea. Japan rejected Russia's demand to make Korea north of the 39th parallel a neutral zone and refused to acknowledge Russia's exclusive right to Manchuria. Japan's hard-line policy received unanimous support from its own people in general and from the foreign ministry as well. Thanks to briskly formulated immigration policies allowing Japanese to immigrate to Korea, supported by both the government and civilian sector, the number of Japanese immigrants increased 46 percent during the one-year period in 1903 (Suh 2003, 152-153).

Japanese hard-line forces belonging to the East Asia Common Culture Association (Toa Dobunkai 東亞同文會) at that time approached Korean officials with an idea for creating a Korea-Japan defense alliance. They came with a proposal for expatriating Korean refugees from Japan to the United States. Konoe Atsumaro, leader of the East Asia Common Culture Association, called for Japanese military forces to be stationed on the Korean peninsula, with the virtual goal of annexing Korea. Gojong continued to pursue the neutrality of Korea by sending his close confidants to read the political situation in Japan, but Gojong's request was rebuffed. Instead, Japan attempted to sign an alliance with Korea on condition of expatriating refugees. With the

looming Russo-Japanese War amid influx of armed forces of major nations, Gojong tried to build up his military forces as the last choice to protect Korea. In 1903, Gojong came up with a conscription program with the goal of founding a navy alongside calls for establishment of paid soldiers. But such an attempt ended in failure due mainly to lack of financial support (Song 1976).

In January 1904, shortly before the eruption of the Russo-Japanese War, Gojong announced Korea's plan to remain neutral in time of war. Many European nations welcomed the move, whereas Japan and Russia refused to acknowledge it. Wary of a decline in its influence, Russia, though it had no will or intention to maintain an alliance with Korea, refused to recognize the country's desire for neutrality. Japan, for its part, also would not provide a security guarantee pursuant to its alliance with Korea. Japan eventually initiated its war against Russia in February 1904, which led to the collapse of the Great Han Empire's sovereignty. Under the circumstances, the only alternative was for Gojong to seek refuge at the Russian legation. After the outbreak of the war, Russia summoned its minister, Alexander Pavlov to return to Russia, discarding a previous pledge that it would protect the Korean royal family to the end. The Great Han Empire was coerced into entering an alliance with Japan through the forced signing of the Korea-Japan Protocol. But this really meant a unilateral decision establishing a protectorate rather than an alliance.

## Conclusion

In its quest for power, Japan aggressively colonized the Great Han Empire. There may have been two ways through which Korea could have maintained independence, despite what seemed a *fait accompli*. First, it could have received military assistance by forging an alliance with either Russia or Japan. But setting up an alliance with one side would have created animosity with the other side, thus making a war between Russia and Japan inevitable and colonization of Korea the outcome. Members of the Independence Club had feared such a sce-

nario and, as it turned out, history proved them right.

Another possible solution was for Korea to seek a neutral status, which could have taken various forms, ranging from permanent neutrality to neutrality strictly limited to wartime. Regarding neutrality, a treaty could have been concluded with one or a number of nations. But the concept of a wartime neutral state was almost impossible for Korea as Korea was likely to be the battlefield, with both Russia and Japan trespassing on its soil, thereby destroying the principle of wartime neutral status. Accordingly, Korea's most important aim was to secure permanent neutral status as a way of enhancing Korea's ability to maintain its independence. However, the idea of neutrality is only feasible when countries share common interests. The principle is easily discarded when it does not serve the parties involved.

The Independence Club stressed the importance of protective neutral status in order for the Great Han Empire to sustain its national sovereignty. The club desired balanced relations between Russia and Japan, but ended up believing that Russia held the greater danger for Korea. In actuality, during this period, Russia was focused on gaining control of Manchuria, with the Korean issue a mere sideline. Nevertheless, the club took an anti-Russian stance, which, in turn, amplified anti-Russian sentiment. Their support of Japan, the United States, and Britain subsequently led to the strengthening of Japanese influence and encouraged a pro-Japanese atmosphere among Koreans. In addition, the club members turned to Japan for refuge when they experienced political setback in Korea. Gojong and the Korean government also sought assistance from Japan to deal with pressure from Russia. In the process, Japan's influence grew as it ended up taking a mediating role between the Korean government and the Independence Club. The relationship between Gojong and Japan ultimately weakened the club. The Great Han Empire fared no better and had no choice but to establish a modern nation-state centered around the imperial household, as Korea lacked the political forces that could have replaced Gojong. Intellectuals and officials concerned with modernization blindly supported Japanese aid, believing that it would weaken or overthrow the imperial regime (Chu, Doh, and Cho 2003). In the end, all sides in Korea lost to

the Japanese.

Gojong might be considered most responsible for the nation's loss of sovereignty. By not taking into account the ideas of opposition forces, including refugees and the Independence Club, he failed to exercise good political judgment. He also failed to establish an adequate military force, despite the dire need to do so at a critical time and made a serious error in not maintaining stable diplomatic ties to protect Korea from outside forces. He lacked the ability to be a strong leader, for during a crisis his only solution was to flee and take refuge at a foreign legation. In his position as emperor, his duty was to protect national sovereignty and not rest the blame on officials who were inclined to favor Japan. However, Gojong was not entirely at fault for the Japanese colonization of Korea. It would be unfair to describe Gojong as a monarch without any will for reform. But equally, it would be false to acclaim Gojong as a king who was completely dedicated to protecting national sovereignty. Historical examination reveals that Gojong must share some, but not all, of the responsibility for the downfall of the Great Han Empire.

---

## REFERENCES

- Chu, Chinoh. 1986. "Dongnip hyeophoe-ui daeoe insik-ui gujo-wa jeongae" (Structure and Deployment of the Independence Club's Understanding of Foreign Forces). *Hangnim* 8.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2010. "Cheongil jeonjaeng-ui joseon dongnimnon bipan" (A Critique of Japan's Theory on Joseon Independence through the Sino-Japanese War). In vol. 2 of *Hanil yeoksa-ui jaengjeom 2010* (Controversial Issues in the History of Korea and Japan in 2010), edited by Cho Gwang and Son Seung-cheol. Seoul: Gyeongin Publishing Co.
- Chu, Chinoh, Doh Myeonhoe, and Cho Jaegon. 2003. "Hanguk geundae jeongchisa-wa wanggwon" (Korean Modern Political History and Royal Authority). *Yeoksa-wa hyeonsil* (History and Reality) 50.
- Committee for the Compilation of Documents Relating to Ito Hirobumi (Ito Hirobumi Kankei Monjo Kenkyukai), ed. 1981. 『伊藤博文関係文書』 (Documents Relating to Ito Hirobumi). Tokyo: Hanawa Shobo.

- Jeong, Gyo. [1897] 2004. *Daehan gyenyeonsa* (The History of Late Daehan). Vol. I. Seoul: Somyoung Publishing.
- Lee, Min-won. 1994. "Agwan pacheon jeonhu-ui halleo gwangye, 1895-1898" (Korea-Russia Relation After the Agwan Pacheon, 1895-1898). PhD diss., The Academy of Korean Studies.
- Lee, Sincheol, et al. 2008. *Nyu raiteu wiheomhan gyogwaseo baro ilgi* (Correct Reading of the New Right's Dangerous Textbooks). Seoul: Seohae Munjip.
- Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 1960. *Guhanmal oegyo munseo* (Diplomatic Documents in Late Korean Empire). Vol. 4. Seoul: Republic of Korea, Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
- Moriyama, Shigenori. 1987. 『近代日韓關係史研究』 (A Study of the Modern History of the Japan-Korea Relations). Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press.
- Park, Chan Seung. 1992. *Hanguk geundae jeongchi sasangsa yeongu* (A Study of the Korean Modern Political Thoughts). Seoul: Yeoksa Bipyeongsa.
- Song, Byungki. 1976. "Gwangmu gaehyeok yeongu: geu seonggyeok-eul jungsim-euro" (A Study of the Gwangmu Reform: With a Focus on Its Characteristics). *Sahakji* (Journal of History) 10.
- Suh, Young-hee. 2003. *Daehan jeguk jeongchisa yeongu* (Studies on Politics of the Great Han Empire). Seoul: Seoul National University Press.
- Synn, Seung-Kwon. 1981. *The Russo-Japanese Rivalry over Korea 1876-1904*. Seoul: Yuk Phub Sa.
- Yi, Tae-Jin, et al. 2005. *Gojong hwangje yeoksa cheongmunhoe* (Historical Hearings of Emperor Gojong). Seoul: Pureun Yeoksa.
- Yoshida, Kazuki. 1966. 「日英同盟と朝鮮侵略」 (Japan-Britain Alliance and Aggression of Joseon). 『日本史研究』 (Journal of Japanese History) 84.