
Korea 1800-1860: Intellectual and Social Reactions to Western Contacts

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The dawn of the nineteenth century would bring forth a new era of change, discovery and challenge for the late Chosŏn kingdom (1392-1910). Western Europeans first came to the shores of the Korean peninsula and made significant contact with its people in this period. The first such encounter happened in 1787, with the arrival of the French ships *Boussole* and *Astrolabe*, followed by "visits" by other English and French ships in 1799, 1811, 1832, 1845, 1846 and 1854. These initial Western contacts coincided with radical transformations within Korean society in political, socio-economic and intellectual areas.

Political changes are evident in the deterioration of the Korean state apparatus. In 1800, the accession of the ten-year-old Sunjo, who was widely regarded as a pawn of his mother's family in-laws, brought on a period of unrest that threatened to destabilize the country's already tottering administrative, economic and social institutions. From a purely political standpoint, the deviation from a more "traditional" form of monarchic government to one dominated by royal in-laws created serious problems. Nepotistic appointments to bureaucratic positions served to corrupt fiscal and administrative practices both at the center and in the provinces. The heavy tax burdens imposed upon the peasantry increased the incidences of social upheaval and rebellion in the countryside. The crisis in the political arena had an unexpected result, as large numbers of Koreans converted to Catholic Christianity.

Intellectual changes are represented by the rise of a distinctive Koreacentric scholarship within the

Sirhak, or practical learning, school of thought which advocated new, pragmatic historical methodologies based on "scholastic empiricism." Largely in response to the dismal conditions of this time, some of the *Sirhak* thinkers were drawn to Catholicism (first introduced to Korea by missionaries in 1784 and then known as *sohak*, or western learning), with its doctrine of original sin and promise of a "heavenly kingdom on earth." Yet the readiness to accept the teachings of the Catholic Church on the part of some of the ordinary people and the *Sirhak* thinkers was by no means universal. In fact, the Korean state banned Catholicism and instituted a series of official persecutions against Christian converts as well as missionaries – in 1801, 1839 and 1866 – to rid the country of what the ruling elite considered the Western corruption of the Confucianist ideal.

It should be noted that Korea's long ties to Confucianism, often called the state religion of the Chosŏn kingdom, were partly responsible for the rampant anti-foreign sentiment manifest within some of the ranks of Korean officialdom. Strictly speaking, the tenets of Neo-Confucianism recognized China's supremacy in the world order and as a corollary deemed less significant any country falling outside its sphere of influence in East Asia. For this reason, Many Koreans feared corruption through exposure to "barbaric" foreigners and were generally unwilling to accept the Western intrusion into their country.

Yet while modern scholars have already shed much light on the undeniable link between the pervasive Confucian ideals of the Korean ruling class and Korea's unmitigated "isolationist" policies prior

to 1875, there has also been a longstanding, and I argue ill-founded, tendency to characterize nineteenth century Korea as a "hermit kingdom." In fact, many among the country's élite had long maintained a pragmatic and, given the limited information at their disposal, surprisingly accurate assessment of Western European civilization; they were even keenly aware of the nature and implications of the Western presence in East Asia well before the first European ships arrived at Korea's shores at the end of the eighteenth century. Korean knowledge of the West and Westerners grew as increasing contacts were made through encounters between Koreans and Western vessels.

Scholarly works that cover the history of Korea from 1800-1860 are so lacking that the historical literature of that period may be described as a "black hole." Nearly all Western studies of the diplomatic, social, and institutional history of Korea focus on the period after 1860, commencing with the rule of the Taewŏngun (1864-1873), during whose reign Korea officially opened its doors to international trade in 1876. In short, there has been comparatively little consideration of the complex interplay of domestic and foreign affairs in the first half of the nineteenth century, apart from cursory overviews in general survey histories. The latter, however, have yet to break ground on what is becoming recognized as one of the most turbulent and least understood periods of modern Korean history.

What is more, much of the scholarship on Korea's late nineteenth century contacts with the West has placed great emphasis on the central government's outright hostility towards the "barbaric" aggressions of the West. This perspective fails to address the fact that many early encounters were not violent in nature but reflect peaceful attempts on the part of the Westerners to bring about trade and commercial exchange. It is important to realize that Korean attitudes toward Westerners, often referred to as "Western barbarians (*yangi*)," were consider-

ably influenced by a series "threatening" crises in neighboring Japan and China around this time. The first half of the nineteenth century was indeed a crucial point of transition for these three countries as the West, led by Britain and the United States, began the process of opening the East to commercial and diplomatic exchanges. Indeed many of these "openings" would be accomplished by force, as illustrated by the Opium War in 1839, which was soon followed by the encroachment of Admiral Perry's "black ships" upon Japan. These incidents of coercive diplomacy gave fair warning to Korea. To avoid a similarly ignominious fate as that suffered by China and Japan, Korea's central government, which was already by nature predisposed to recoil from any contact from the West, withdrew deliberately from the arena of East-West diplomacy until the turn of the twentieth century.

Yet despite Korea's general desire to be excluded from Western diplomatic exchanges, Korean officials were by no means inhospitable to those Westerners who managed successfully to make contact prior to the so-called official period of "seclusion." Official records indicate that the vast majority of French and English visitors to Korea were rather well-received. Even if most Koreans were eager to hasten the departure of these foreign vessels, careful measures were made to make the foreigners' sojourn comfortable and without incident. In many cases, the Koreans approached their new guests at first with caution but proceeded to attempt communication with them in an amicable fashion.

Narrative accounts kept by English travelers mention the hospitable treatment they received from the Koreans upon their arrival. Much of the interaction between the two parties seems to have taken place aboard English or Korean vessels, rather than on land in the Korean coastal villages themselves. Captain Basil Hall, who kept a detailed account of his trip along the Korean coastal waters during this time, took note of the

"unique" appearance of the Koreans alongside numerous other cultural and geographic observations in a book he later published as [An] Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and Great Loo Choo Island. In it, he remarks initially that "Their [the Koreans'] beards and moustaches, which, apparently, had never been cut, and their fans and their long pipes and strange language and mannerisms gave a grotesque air to the group, impossible to describe." Hall then proceeds to invite some of his new hosts, including their "distinguished chief" aboard for a breakfast of eggs, commenting that: "The politeness and ease with which he [the chief] adapted to the habitudes of a people so different than himself was truly admirable."

Apart from the Western narrative vignettes on this particular encounter, official Korean accounts provide equally fascinating insight into the nature of the exchanges between the two parties and also, in some cases, shrewd observations of daily life and custom aboard ship or in the coastal village. Importantly, it appears that the vast majority of these exchanges were, in fact, quite amicable and respectful on both sides. Many of the official Chosŏn court documents of this time contain meticulously detailed accounts of these exchanges, including the numerous items and individuals aboard each vessel, as well as information on measurements and materials used in the construction of the ship. In a particularly interesting example taken from the annalistic Veritable Records of the Chosŏn Kings (Chosŏn Wangjo Sillok) in the year 1816, which was circulated among the educated governing élite, Korean officials are given a first-hand glimpse into maritime life aboard one of the smaller English vessels accompanying the sloop *Alceste* during a brief stop around Hwanghae island:

As for the vessel's composition, it was of wood, shaped like a halved melon, pointed

at both head and tail. It was 30 hands in length, and six hands in width. The pine panels were nailed with iron nails, and on the top and middle decks there were 10 large rooms and 20 small ones, at both head and tail of the boat there were compasses positioned about. Black and white sheep were being raised within the boat itself, and there were roosts for ducks and chickens set up as well as pig pens, and from front to back, banners of various color were pinned up. In front of the door of the quarters of a person with rank, a man wearing armor with sword stood guard all day long and restricted people from entering or leaving...As for that which was used as dishware were decorative vessels, wine goblets made of glass and spoons of silver. Those weapons on board included 30 sabres, 35 guns, 24 spears (lances), eight large cannons.

Following this, members of the ship's crew are listed by order of rank, while amusing descriptions of their general appearance and attire provide colorful images for the reader:

Some of their faces were white as if powdered or black like ink, some had short-cut hair, and some had it shorn clear to the crown of the head, at the top of which was a small, braided bunch of hair; as for that which they wore, some wore western cloth (jackets) of coarse felt or coarse linen, or various kinds of silks. As for what they wore over their clothing, some wore cloaks, others wore short sleeves, some had a sash of red silk. The unlined summer jacket was attached at the left with gold buttons. As for sleeves, some were short while others were wide. For the individuals holding rank, they were patterned with bright hues.

What remains remarkable about the two-way exchanges is the willingness of both parties to com-

municate and engage in cultural exchange and observation. These exchanges, to be followed by others of a similar nature throughout the first half of the 19th century, can serve to remind us that the Koreans, despite their reputation for being isolationists in the minds of the Western world, were not disinclined to adopt new perspectives on the West, often while extending a courteous, helping hand toward their occasional visitors. We must be reminded that events transpiring after 1860 cannot be the sole means by which to gauge the entire spectrum of nineteenth century western encounters on the Korean peninsula.

It is certainly worthwhile to note that preconceived notions of the West had been established in Korea long before the early nineteenth century. Such was the case with the introduction of Western religious and scientific texts received via diplomatic exchange with China, which were carefully scrutinized and in the case of Western science, employed and further developed by court officials to meet the technological needs of the dynasty.

One question, however, whether opinions of the West outside of the court always mirrored those voiced by the central government.

The traditional scholarly view maintains that the Korean royal authorities, hardened by "orthodox" Confucian values at a time when the steady encroachment of "heterodox" Western intellectual influence in the form of Catholicism had begun to gain considerable acceptance by the local populace, rebuffed Western appeals for diplomatic contact outright so as to avoid the ignominious fate suffered by its neighbors China and Japan. Even so, the Korean court, faced with increasing external pressures to conform to predominantly western diplomatic conventions, was eventually forced to capitulate to the demands of the Western powers. Yet this picture presupposes a unified, monolithic Korean élite that firmly opposed opening the country to the West. In fact certain distinguished scholars of the

Sirhak as well as the general literate élite openly expressed an interest in commercial and intellectual intercourse with the West. Among these were members of the fallen *yangban* (gentry) and *chungin* (middle people) class. One such example is Ch'oe Han-gi (1803-1875), a "marginalized" scholar who argued against Korea's "closed-door" policy to the West and advocated domestic reforms, which he thought exposure to the West might hasten. Once these competing voices are placed into the historical context, it may likely be the case that the Korean court's diplomatic policy to the West was colored not only by diplomatic considerations but by a dynamic and important debate within Korean society, especially among its intelligentsia.

It would appear that future studies on this period of Korean history will need to provide a balanced perspective that takes into account the potential varied perspectives of people in all walks of life, not just those of the governing élite. In order to attempt to help fill this "black hole" in modern Korean historiography, it may be useful to juxtapose the stated position of the Korean royal court, as represented in the dynastic histories and official documents, with the perspectives of these hitherto underexamined voices from the peripheries. This may be done by supplementing official works or literary texts with a close examination of documentary evidence such as provincial and regional gazettes and almanacs. Through this approach, we may expect to determine the degree to which regionalism and local socio-economic factors conditioned individual perceptions on the events of the day. By this means we will be better able to understand the complexity of early Korean political and intellectual reactions to the West, which undoubtedly left an indelible imprint on the course of future developments in the later nineteenth century.

SUGGESTED READING

Choe, Ching Young, *The Rule of the Taewongun 1864-1873: Restoration in Yi Korea*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972.

Deuchler, Martina, *Confucian Gentleman and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977.

Hall, Captain B. *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and the Great Loo-choo Island*. London, 1818.

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