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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **A Japanese Perspective on Late Nineteenth-Century Korean Reform Movements**

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Watanabe Sōki 渡辺惣樹. *Chōsen kaikoku to nisshin sensō: Amerika wa naze Nihon wo Shijishi, Chōsen wo mikagittaka* 朝鮮開国と日清戦争：アメリカはなぜ日本を支持し、朝鮮を見限ったか [The opening of Korea and the Sino-Japanese War: Why did the United States support Japan but abandon Korea?]. Tokyo: Sōshisha, 2014. ISBN: 978-4794220981.

In his most recent book, which focuses on post-Kanghwa Treaty (1876) Korea, Watanabe Sōki (2014), the prolific scholar of Japanese-American relations, addresses an important question: why did the United States eventually come to support Japan's decision to annex the Korean peninsula? He argues that this decision represented a departure from a position the two countries had traditionally held: supporting an independent Korea (199). The ramifications of this shift are important in Korea's pre-annexation history, but also in its post-liberation history, when again the United States showed a greater affinity toward Japan than toward southern Korea.

Watanabe focuses on the threats that Japan perceived from the Asian continent to justify the Japanese government's change in policy toward the Korean peninsula, which it saw as a conduit that China or Russia could exploit to threaten Japanese sovereignty and

peripheral interests. Additionally, Korea faced the threat of colonization by a traditional European imperial power. Watanabe frequently cites the 1866 French attack on Korea in retaliation for the murder of French Catholic missionaries, as if, but for other distractions, France too might have been a more active imperial participant in peninsular affairs (17, 78, 132–133, 200, 233, 293). These threats, along with the Korean government’s unwillingness (or inability) to strengthen its domestic and international position, led Japan and the United States to retreat from their position of protecting Korean independence and see as inevitable Japan’s annexation of the peninsula. A Korea left on its own threatened regional peace and security, as witnessed between 1895 and 1905, when Japan went to war first with China and then Russia. This same argument was one the Japanese also formally employed in 1910 to justify their annexation of the peninsula.

Japan’s “Korea Opening Project” (Chōsen kaikoku purojekuto) did encourage Korean reform efforts, which Watanabe explains in detail. After the Korean government finalized the treaty with Japan, it sponsored missions to China, Japan, and the United States in the early 1880s to accumulate information useful for Korean modernization. Upon their return, participants who formed the “opening faction” (*kaikaha*) were confronted by, using Watanabe’s terms, the “conservative” (*hoshuha*) or pro-China “serving the great” (J. *shidaiha*; K. *sidaeha*) faction. These confrontations forced many Korean reformers to live in exile. With the defeat of the 1895 Kabo reform movement, the author laments, the Koreans squandered their “last chance” to protect their independence.

Watanabe provides meticulous descriptions of key events that influenced this period. These include Japanese versions of the treaties that Japan signed with Korea and

China, and itineraries of missions that dispatched Korean reformers overseas. He applauds the efforts by Kim Okkyun and other “young reformers” to direct reforms after they returned from Japan, efforts that were invariably thwarted before they could gain traction by members of the pro-China Min clan (181–203). Forgetting perhaps that it was these “young reformers” who planned a coup that included the murders of several (conservative) government officials, the author criticizes the Korean government for petitioning Japan to extradite “traitors” (*ranshin*) living under its protection (219–220). He interprets Chinese participation in the plot to murder Kim Okkyun, and the inclusion of one of the plotters in the delegation to negotiate peace terms in 1895, as one of many examples suggesting China’s intention to resurrect its ancient *rakurogunka* policy—a policy that called for the reintegration of the Korean peninsula as an integral Chinese territorial possession (133, 265).

Watanabe argues that Japan’s historical interests in Korea were benevolent and that contentions that the Japanese harbored a long-term intention to absorb the peninsula are misdirected. According to Watanabe, the so-called Hideyoshi invasions of the sixteenth century are exaggerated: the Japanese generalissimo’s ultimate target was China rather than Korea (48). Likewise, the *seikanron* (“invade Korea debate”) of the early 1870s was misnamed; Japan at this time never intended to invade Korea (73). Equally inappropriate was the association of Japan’s efforts to “open” Korea in 1875 to 1876 with Western “gunboat diplomacy”: Korea was ripe for opening anyway, Watanabe argues, and did not have to be forced to open, as Japan was by American commodore Matthew Perry in 1854 (102–103). To the contrary, it was the Japanese residents in Korea who were often victimized by Koreans who attacked them and damaged their property. Can this extremely complicated history be

simplified in terms of continued Japanese benevolence in an environment that became increasingly hostile toward their presence?

A more productive analysis of this critical period in modern Korean history might have discussed factors that prevented Koreans from attaining the success that Japan enjoyed after the United States completed its “opening project” of the archipelago between 1854 and 1858. Was it simply the stronger, and more empowered, conservative faction that prevented Korean modernization? Or might other factors have influenced the different fates of these neighboring countries? To what extent, as Korean historian Andre Schmid (2002 asks, did the geopolitical position of the Korean peninsula, situated between a waning Chinese empire and a waxing Japanese empire, contribute to the difficulties Korea faced in reforming? Might efforts such as the Kabo reforms have enjoyed a better chance at success had they not been limited to *chūkō*—“strengthening the core”—political reform due to the lack of a legitimate alternative to the traditional Chosŏn monarchy around which to center the movement? By contrast, to what extent did Japan’s Meiji-era success hinge on it having, first, a political alternative to the shogun and, second, the enemy domains of Chōshū and Satsuma positioned to overthrow the shogunate? Could the Japanese have succeeded in *ishin*—revolutionary change—without the presence of these elements? And finally, to what extent did Korea’s “success” in deflecting French and U.S. attacks prior to 1876 lull the Korean leadership into a false isolationist-driven sense of complacency that the Japanese, overwhelmed by Western powers in Kagoshima (1863) and Shimonoseki (1864), could not afford to maintain (Palais 1975, 177)?<sup>1</sup>

The author might also have considered policy alternatives available to Japan. Did the Korean dismissal of the Kabo Cabinet truly limit Japanese options to annexation alone? Or was Japanese policy held hostage to the realist thinking that, as Prime Minister Yamagata Aritomo articulated in 1890, designated the state's duty to protect the homeland's expanding lines of sovereignty (*shukensen*) and interests (*riekisen*)? This formula directed that territories lying at a state's periphery, and thus within its line of interest, would eventually be incorporated within its line of sovereignty when the circumstances deemed it prudent to do so. This raises the question of whether the Japanese would have honored Korean independence had the Kabo reforms succeeded. Was the U.S. decision to accept Japan's position in Korea based on the peninsula's hopeless situation, as the author suggests, or on the fear that Japan's expanding lines of sovereignty and interest were dangerously penetrating its interests in the Philippine Islands, as suggested in the notes that U. S. Secretary of State William Howard Taft and Japanese Prime Minister Katsura Tarō exchanged in July 1905?

Indeed, several Korean scholars argue that Korean modernization efforts continued to taste success even after the Kabo Cabinet was forced out. Post-1895 Korea had several more "last chances" that produced fresh reform ideas. Seoul National University historian Yi T'ae-jin (2007) has been particularly active in arguing this position, insisting that it was the threat of success at modernizing that drove Japan to push for annexation while Korea remained relatively weak. Yi's thesis is supported by a number of personal accounts left by Westerners residing in Seoul over this period documenting the advances made in the Korean capital between 1895 and 1900. If Watanabe deems it important to establish 1895 as Korea's year of "last chance," at a minimum he needs to explain why the Independence Club

(*Tongnip Hyŏphoe*, 1896–1898), which created important symbols and developed a Korean-English bilingual newspaper to advertise Korea's independence from traditional Chinese suzerain control, is omitted from his discussion.

Watanabe relies on a wide variety of sources in compiling this monograph, including the online Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS) document collection. In addition to various Japanese sources, he also explores several early English-language efforts to examine this period, including Fred Harrington's *God, Mammon, and the Japanese* (1944) and M. Frederick Nelson's *Korea and the Old Orders in Eastern Asia* (1945). His citation of both William Griffis's *Corea, The Hermit Nation* ([1882] 1904) and Homer B. Hulbert's *The Passing of Korea* (1906) suggests an attempt to consider works that support and those that criticize Japan's Korea policy. Yet much more research has since appeared that is also worthy of Watanabe's consideration.<sup>2</sup> Greater attention to the Korean voice, even that offered in English or Japanese, might have influenced a more sympathetic view toward Korea's predicament over this rather difficult period.

Watanabe's *Chōsen kaikoku to nisshin sensō* is important reading, as it provides a fine example of Japanese national historiography—that is, history aimed at providing evidence to support a fact, rather than to critically challenge the significance and truth of a claim. The author is determined to present a late nineteenth-century policy adopted by Japan and the United States toward Korea as benevolent, and he relies primarily on sources that support this conclusion. His treatment of U.S. official John M. B. Sill's opinion from the 1894 FRUS documents illustrates this point. Here, the diplomat determined Japan's reform demands to be “in accordance with the line of policy endeavored to be pursued by Korea for

the past ten years” (296), which supports Watanabe’s thesis about the United States and Japan being unified in their policy toward Korea. Unfortunately, the author overlooks one of the key sentences of this exchange, which suggests Japan’s responsibility in the demands’ failure to gain acceptance by the Korean government: the Koreans “could not possibly accept [the demands] now in the face of [Japan’s] military occupation of their country.”<sup>3</sup> Such a national historical approach as that employed by Watanabe is not unique to Japan, or even to the Korean-Japanese example. Most, if not all, states develop a nationalized history that serves as the accepted narrative for school textbooks, museums, as well as other places where it is employed to instill national pride. The extent to which this peddling of simplistic historical images succeeds in strengthening domestic nationalist pride also increases the chances of encouraging international rivalry, strife, and at the ultimate extreme, unnecessary war.

Understanding Korea’s complex mid-to late nineteenth history requires critical examination from a plurality of angles, rather than through a simplistic account aimed at advancing a national history. Unfortunately, Watanabe’s approach appears increasingly to be an example of the norm, rather than the exception, in Korea-Japan historiography.

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## *Notes*

- 1 Harry D. Harootunian (1970) argues that these attacks influenced those of the targeted



domains to realize that the foreigner expulsion policy (*jōi*) was impractical at this time and to instead move to accommodation, at least for the time being.

- 2 The author might have benefited from consulting the following English-language monographs: Conroy (1960), Palais (1975), Deuchler (1977), Duus (1995), Shin (2000), Schmid (2002), Yi (2007), and Larsen (2008).
- 3 “Mr. Sill to Mr. Graham” (July 18, 1894), United States Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1894*, 32. Available at <http://digicoll.library.wisc.edu/cgi-bin/FRUS/FRUS>, accessed July 3, 2015.

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