

02

Opening up of Korea and Regional Perspectives

IB Lines of Inquiry

Inquiry Questions

Treaty of Ganghwa and Japan's influence

To what extent did the Treaty of Ganghwa mark the beginning of Korea's loss of sovereignty?

King Gojong's reforms and the role of Queen Min

How far were King Gojong's reforms driven by internal modernization goals versus external pressures?

Imo Incident and the return of the Daewongun

What does the Imo Incident reveal about the limits of reform in late 19th-century Korea?

Gapsin Coup and the 'Chinese Decade' (1885-1894)

How did the events of 1884-1894 prepare the ground for the Sino-Japanese War and Korea's subsequent transformation?

Introduction: Korea facing the outside world

By the 1870s, Korea stood on the brink of transformation. The Daewongun's decade of rule had reaffirmed isolationist policies, suppressed heterodox influences, and fortified the kingdom against external threats. His approach was rooted in the conviction that Korea's sovereignty and stability could best be defended by preserving Confucian order and resisting foreign intrusion. Yet while this strategy had temporarily strengthened royal authority, it left unresolved a deeper dilemma: how could Korea sustain its autonomy in a world where neighbouring states were being forcibly drawn into new systems of trade, imperial diplomacy, and empire?

The fall of the Daewongun and the assumption of direct rule by King Gojong and Queen Min did not resolve this dilemma but rather sharpened it. The court was now confronted with choices about whether, and how, Korea should adapt to the pressures of the age. Within Korea itself, these debates produced a spectrum of competing visions: conservative elites clung to the Daewongun's isolationism; gradual reformers sought cautious engagement and selective modernisation; and radical reformers demanded a wholesale transformation of Korea's institutions along foreign lines.

The late 19th century thus saw Korea emerge not as a passive pawn in the rivalries of China, Japan, and the Western powers, but as an arena where Koreans themselves argued, resisted, and experimented with different strategies for survival. The Treaty of Ganghwa, US-Joseon Treaty, King Gojong's early reforms, the Imo incident, the Gapsin Coup, and the decade of Chinese dominance that followed all reflected this central problem: Korea's struggle to preserve sovereignty while facing the realities of an increasingly interconnected and unstable world.

Timeline: Korea, 1876–1894

1876	Treaty of Ganghwa: Korea opens three ports to Japan; Japanese citizens gain extraterritorial rights.
1882	Imo Incident: Mutiny by old-style Korean soldiers; Japanese officials attacked; Daewongun briefly returns to power.
1882	Shufeldt Treaty opened Korean ports to U.S. trade, recognized Korea's sovereignty, and established formal diplomatic relations, marking Korea's first treaty with a Western power.
1883–1884	Establishment of Tongnip Sinmun: First Korean newspaper in Hangul; promoted modernization, national independence, and political awareness.
1884	Gapsin Coup: Pro-Japanese reformers attempt a coup; fails within three days due to Chinese intervention.
1885–1894	'Chinese Decade': Period of strong Qing influence in Korea; Chinese troops and advisors dominate politics; limits reforms.
1880s–1890s	King Gojong's Reforms and Queen Min's Role: King Gojong modernized Korea's government, military, and education system, supporting newspapers like Tongnip Sinmun, while Queen Min influenced foreign policy by seeking Russian support to counter Japanese influence.

Key Terms

Gaehwa reformers	A group of Korean officials and intellectuals in the late 19th century who supported modernization and political reform, inspired by Japan's Meiji Restoration, aiming to strengthen Korea against foreign pressures.
Byeolgigun	A modernized, elite military unit established in late 19th-century Korea as part of reform efforts, trained along Western lines and intended to strengthen the royal army.

Factionalism in the royal court	Competition between political groups within the court, influencing decisions about reform, foreign policy, and succession.
Unequal treaties	Agreements imposed by foreign powers on weaker states, giving privileges to outsiders and undermining the host country's sovereignty.
Sovereignty	The authority of a state to govern itself without outside interference; increasingly challenged in late 19th-century Korea.

I. Korea Confronts Japan: From the *Shinmiyangyo* to the Treaty of Ganghwa (1876)

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the Treaty of Ganghwa mark the beginning of Korea's loss of sovereignty?

In the years leading up to 1876, Korea's leaders faced a growing dilemma: how to defend sovereignty in a world where isolation appeared increasingly unsustainable. The *Shinmiyangyo* (as mentioned in the previous chapter) of 1871 had already shown the tension between Korea's Confucian worldview and the realities of Western imperialism. When a U.S. naval squadron entered Korean waters demanding trade and redress for the General Sherman incident of 1866, the Daewongun refused negotiation. Instead, Korean forts on Ganghwa Island engaged the Americans, who responded by bombarding and destroying coastal defences before withdrawing.

For the Daewongun, this was declared a moral victory: Korea had repelled foreign intrusion without conceding its Confucian order. Monuments were erected to honour fallen soldiers, and the event was enshrined as proof that steadfast isolation, not compromise, preserved national dignity. Yet the clash also underscored Korea's vulnerability to modern firepower, a fact not lost on reform-minded officials or neighbouring powers.

When the Daewongun fell from power in 1873, King Gojong and Queen Min inherited a court divided over how to interpret these lessons. Conservatives took *Shinmiyangyo* as confirmation that Korea should continue to close its doors, while a smaller circle of reformers argued that technological backwardness had been brutally exposed. For them, isolation alone could not guarantee survival.

The immediate trigger for the treaty was the Unyo Incident of 1875. When the Japanese gunboat *Unyo* entered waters near Ganghwa Island, Korean shore batteries opened fire, consistent with the long-standing policy of repelling intruders. The Japanese responded by bombarding the coastal defenses and then

demanded formal negotiations. This was a classic case of gunboat diplomacy, echoing the Western tactics Japan itself had experienced in the 1850s, and it forced Korea into a position it had long sought to avoid: facing the question of whether it could remain closed to outside powers.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Explaining Content from Historical Sources: The Unyo Incident

In 2002, historians gained access to a previously undiscovered Japanese source titled *Records of the Unyo's Voyage to Korea in Early Meiji 8*. They identified a report in this source dated to **September 29, 1875**, which was written immediately after the Unyo ship returned to Nagasaki. This was then compared to the well-known **October 8, 1875** report of the incident and a realization that the later version had been fundamentally altered by Japan became clear. Historians noted key areas where the Japanese government intentionally “re-wrote” the events to satisfy international law and diplomatic needs. In the early account, Captain Inoue Yoshika of the Unyo returned to Japan and drafted an initial report that painted a picture of calculated military aggression. This first report (September 29) candidly stated that the mission was to survey the terrain and that the devastating attack on the Korean fort was a planned punishment carried out the day after initial contact. Importantly, it made no mention of seeking drinking water as a reason for entering the area or flying a national flag during the initial approach.

Historians argue that the government realized that this narrative portrayed Japan as an unprovoked aggressor, and they issued a “revised report” on October 8, less than 10 days after the first report. This version reframed the entire event as a humanitarian and legal crisis. It introduced the “drinking water” claim to justify why the ship approached the fort and insisted that the Japanese flag was clearly visible, making the Korean response an illegal attack on a peaceful vessel. By collapsing the timeline, they transformed a pre-planned retaliatory strike into an act of immediate self-defense. This strategic fabrication allowed Japan to turn a military provocation into a diplomatic weapon, eventually forcing the opening of Korea under the guise of being the “injured” party.

1. To what extent did the discovery of the early Unyo report from September 29, 1875 change the interpretation of events of the Unyo?
2. To what extent should this source impact our understanding of future interactions between Japan and Korea?

Yet the Unyo Incident alone does not explain why Korea signed the treaty. Inside the court, the crisis exposed deep divisions. The Confucian conservatives (notably those who believed they should “defend orthodoxy, and reject heterodoxy”) argued that treaties with foreign nations would corrode Korea’s moral order and betray its Confucian heritage. They viewed isolation not simply as a diplomatic strategy but as an ethical imperative.



TOK Connection



⤴ Japanese woodblock print, depicting the landing at Ganghwa

TOK Question: When a historical event is represented only through the lens of one nation, to what extent can we still claim to “know” what truly happened?

This Japanese woodblock print portrays the 1876 Ganghwa Incident, the event through which Japan forced Korea to open its ports. While it conveys Japanese pride and military strength, it erases the Korean experience of coercion and loss of sovereignty. From a Theory of Knowledge perspective, this absence highlights how knowledge is shaped by power: what we “know” about the past often reflects the perspectives of those individuals or sections within a society who had the means to record and circulate their version of events. Korea’s resistance and perspectives, largely missing from such depictions, challenge us to question how one-sided representations become accepted as truth. The image thus illustrates the fragility of historical knowledge when the voices of the colonised are marginalised or excluded.

Making Connections: How might the discovery of the Unyo report from September 29, 1875 (see above Skills and Competencies of a Historian) impact the interpretation of this Japanese artwork?

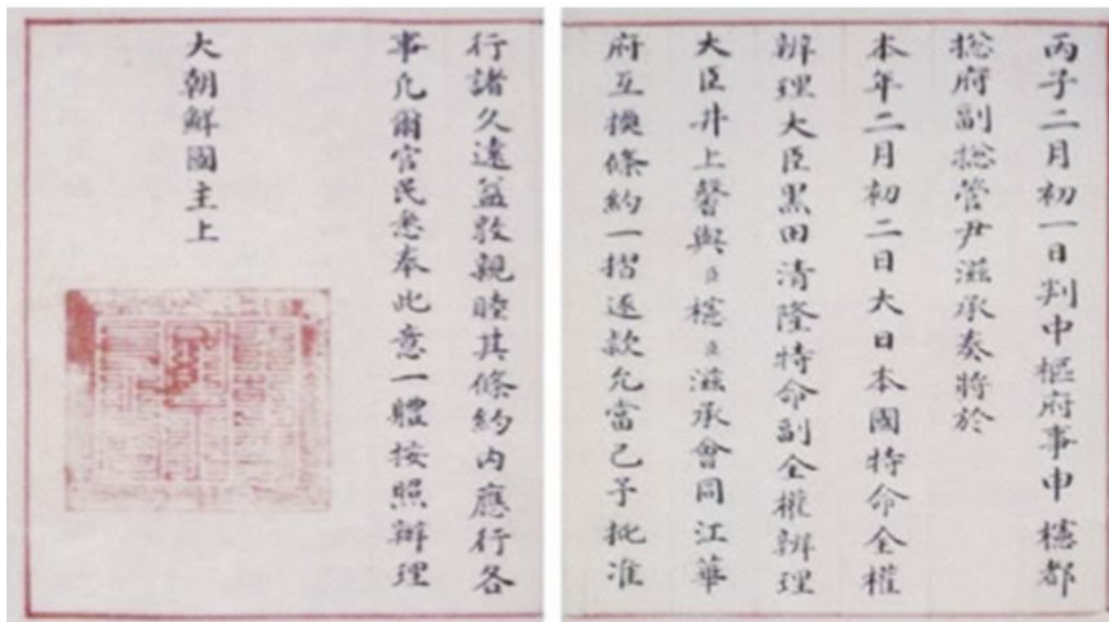
The Gaehwa reformers, however, were beginning to argue that Korea must engage with the outside world to preserve sovereignty. For them, the humiliation of the Shinmiyangyo (1871) and the technological imbalance it revealed showed that stubborn isolation would only invite conquest. King Gojong and Queen Min, inheriting a throne deeply constrained by factional politics, tried to walk a fine line: opening Korea cautiously to protect royal authority without yielding fully to either conservatives or radicals.



Conceptual Connections

Significance

The Treaty of Ganghwa marked a watershed in Korea's modern history – not only because it ended centuries of official isolation, but because it forced Koreans themselves to confront urgent questions about sovereignty, reform, and survival in a world increasingly shaped by imperialist power. By recognising Korea as an “independent state,” Japan undermined Qing claims of suzerainty and created a diplomatic ambiguity that would haunt Korea in the decades to come. For many Korean officials, the treaty was experienced as a profound humiliation, exposing the state's vulnerability to external coercion. Yet others saw in the enforced “opening” a potential pathway to modernisation and national strengthening, drawing comparisons to Japan's own Meiji reforms. The treaty therefore did more than impose foreign terms: it catalysed a domestic debate over what kind of reforms – if any – could best preserve Korea's sovereignty. In this sense, the Ganghwa Treaty was not simply a Japanese imposition but also a Korean turning point, initiating struggles within the court and society over how to respond to a rapidly changing regional and global order.



⏏ This is a ratification statement issued by King Gojong for the Treaty of Ganghwa (also known as the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1876 or the Japan-Korea Treaty of Amity)



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skills

Tasks

1. Read through the following summary of the term of the Treaty of Ganghwa

Article I	Joseon was recognised as an independent nation, equal in status to Japan.
Article II	Both sides could send envoys to each other's capitals to handle diplomatic matters.
Article III	Japan would use Japanese (with Chinese translation for ten years), while Joseon would use Chinese in official communications.
Article IV	Trade would continue in Busan, and two more ports would be opened for business.
Article V	These two new ports were to open within 20 months.
Article VI	Japanese ships could stop at any Joseon port in emergencies, and both countries agreed to help each other in case of shipwrecks.
Article VII	Japanese sailors were allowed to survey Joseon's coastline to make navigation safer.
Article VIII	Japanese officials could live at the open ports to support merchants and settle local issues if needed.
Article IX	People from both countries could trade freely without interference. If problems arose, such as unpaid debts, local authorities would step in to help resolve them.
Article X	If someone committed a crime, they would be dealt with by their own country's laws and officials.
Article XI	More detailed trade rules would be worked out within six months.
Article XII	The treaty came into effect immediately and was meant to establish lasting peace and friendship between the two nations.

2. Organise your ideas using the following table. Add more rows to address all the articles.

Clause	What does the treaty say? (Summarise in your own words)	Who benefits the most? Korea, Japan, or both? Why?	How does this clause challenge traditional Confucian diplomacy (tributary system, hierarchical order)?	If you were a Korean official in 1876, how might you react? Would you see this as a humiliation, a chance for reform, or both?
Article I				
Article II				

3. Analytical Skill Focus – Evaluating Change

Skill Target: Identifying continuity and change in diplomatic systems.

1. Which articles reflect continuity with Confucian diplomacy (e.g., hierarchy, mutual respect, ritual)?
2. Which articles reflect a shift toward Western-style diplomacy (e.g., equality, extraterritorial rights, trade expansion)?
3. What kind of power imbalance is implied by Japan's privileges in the treaty?
4. In what ways might this treaty be considered a "modernization opportunity" for Korea?
5. In what ways might the Treaty be viewed as a humiliation or loss of sovereignty?

The Shufeldt Treaty (1882): Korea's First Western Alliance

The Treaty of Ganghwa (1876) marked the beginning of Korea's forced engagement with the modern international order, but it was one dictated by Japanese coercion. To Queen Min and her circle of reformist advisers, Japan's growing influence was deeply troubling. They reasoned that if Korea could establish ties with Western powers, it might reduce Japanese leverage and balance Qing oversight. The result of this search for diplomatic diversification was Korea's first treaty with a Western nation: the Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce and Navigation with the United States, negotiated by American naval officer Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt and signed in May 1882.

Negotiations and Qing Involvement

Negotiations revealed Korea's awkward position in the late 19th-century diplomatic order. Shufeldt had courted Korea since the 1870s, but Korean officials resisted direct talks for fear of antagonising the

Qing. It was only through the mediation of Li Hongzhang, the senior Qing statesman, that the treaty was finalised. This arrangement allowed the Qing to appear as protectors of Korea, even as the treaty formally acknowledged Korea as an “independent state.”



⏮ General Grant (President of the U.S.A. 1869-1877) and Li Hongzhang, 1879

The Qing insisted on inserting a clause affirming their role: China would act as Korea’s intermediary in disputes with the United States. This ambiguity underscored Korea’s precarious sovereignty. While the treaty looked like a breakthrough, it also highlighted the limits of Korean autonomy in diplomacy.

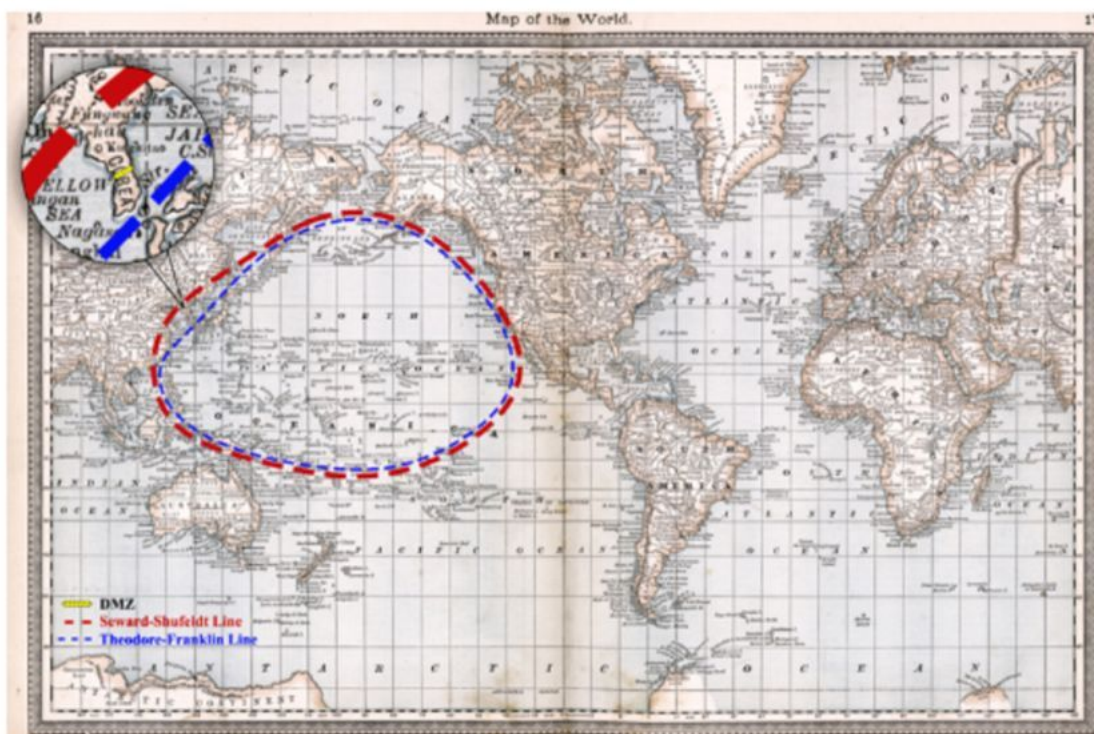
Terms of the Treaty

The treaty was modelled on earlier “unequal treaties” signed by Western powers in East Asia but adapted to Korea’s circumstances. Its main provisions included:

- **Diplomatic recognition:** The U.S. formally recognised Korea as an independent state – the first such recognition by a Western nation.
- **Most-favoured nation clause:** The U.S. gained any privileges that Korea might later extend to another power.
- **Trade rights:** American merchants gained access to Korean ports and the right to reside and trade.

- **Extraterritoriality:** U.S. citizens in Korea would be subject to U.S law, not Korean jurisdiction.
- **Protection clause:** The U.S. offered “good offices” should Korea face external aggression. While not a formal defence guarantee, Queen Min viewed this as a potential diplomatic shield against Japanese dominance.

The United States established a diplomatic post in Seoul in 1883, similar to those in Tokyo and Beijing, a formal step in the vision of William Seward and Robert Shufeldt to acquire Korea to complete the Seward-Shufeldt Line (SS Line) which extended from Alaska (acquired by Seward) through the Philippines (acquired following the Spanish-American War), as illustrated in the map. This was a critical step in the Korea Question, the vying for control of Korea between the United States and other external powers including China, Japan, and Russia.



⏏ Seward-Shufeldt Line vs. Theodore-Franklin Line



Source Activity Two

ATL: Thinking Skills

Tasks

1. Using information from the above sections as well as your own research, fill in the following table to help you better understand the terms of these treaties and the consequences for Korean sovereignty. Some cells have been done for you.

Aspect	Ganghwa Treaty (Korea-Japan, 1876)	Shufeldt Treaty (Korea-U.S., 1882)
Background/Context	Signed after Japan's gunboat diplomacy following the <i>Un-to</i> incident (1875); Japan sought to open Korea as part of its regional expansion.	Negotiated by U.S. naval officer Commodore Robert Shufeldt
Nature of the Treaty		
Opening of Ports		
Extraterritoriality		
Tariff Autonomy		
Sovereignty Clause		
Diplomatic Relations		
Most-Favoured-Nation Clause		
Questions: 1. To what extent did these treaties affect Korea's ability to control its own political and economic decisions? 2. What do these treaties reveal about Korea's position in East Asia and the balance of power among regional and Western powers at this time?		

Consequences: Korea Between Powers

The Shufeldt Treaty marked a turning point. Within three years, Britain, Germany, Russia, France, and Italy all signed treaties on similar terms, rapidly globalising Korea's foreign relations. King Gojong and Queen Min celebrated this as a victory for her policy of diplomatic diversification, hoping to prevent Korea from being swallowed by Japan or reduced to a Qing dependency.

However, the treaty also had unintended consequences. The extraterritorial rights and economic concessions resembled those imposed on China and Japan in the 19th century, limiting Korean sovereignty in practice. Furthermore, the prestige gained abroad contrasted sharply with discontent at home. Disgruntled soldiers and ordinary Koreans associated foreign presence with corruption and privilege: grievances that erupted only months later in the Imo Incident (1882).

Why is the Shufeldt Treaty historically significant?

- The treaty symbolised Korea's emergence as an actor in Western-style diplomacy, but only under Qing mediation.
- It accelerated Korea's entanglement in Great Power rivalries, making it a contested space in East Asian politics.
- For Queen Min, it was a calculated gamble: by reaching westward, she sought to preserve Korean autonomy, though at the cost of new inequalities.



Source Activity Three

ATL: Thinking Skills

Task: Analysing the Shufeldt Treaty

1. Read the following excerpts from the 1882 treaty and answer the questions below.

Source A: Article 1

"There shall be perpetual peace and friendship between the President of the United States and the King of Choson, and the citizens and subjects of their respective governments."

Source B: Article II

"If other powers deal unjustly or oppressively with either Government, the other will exert their good offices... to bring about an amicable arrangement, thus showing their friendly feelings."

Source C: Article V

"Citizens of the United States in Choson shall be subject to the jurisdiction of their own consular authorities, and not to that of the Choson authorities."

Questions:

1. What benefits did Korea gain from this treaty? Consider how Queen Min might have used it to balance Japan and Qing China.
2. Which clauses limited Korean sovereignty? How do they compare with earlier "unequal treaties" in East Asia?
3. Why might the "good offices" clause (Source B) have reassured the Korean monarchy? Why might it have also proved disappointing in practice?
4. How might ordinary Koreans – especially those who saw foreigners enjoying privileges denied to locals – have viewed this treaty?
5. To what extent can the Shufeldt Treaty be seen as a step forward for Korea's autonomy, and to what extent as another form of dependency?

II. King Gojong's Reforms and the Role of Queen Min

Inquiry Question

How far were King Gojong's reforms driven by internal modernization goals versus external pressures?

When King Gojong ascended the throne in 1863, he was only a teenager. His early reign was dominated by his father, the Daewongun, who governed as regent and became synonymous with isolation and conservative reform. For the Daewongun, Korea's survival depended on defending tradition, suppressing foreign contact, and reinforcing Confucian hierarchies. Yet when he was ousted from power in 1873, the political landscape changed. Gojong, supported by Queen Min, embarked on a new course: modernisation pursued not through wholesale adoption of foreign systems, but through a deliberate, selective process meant to preserve Korean sovereignty and identity.

Queen Min's Political Role

Queen Min was central to this process. Far from a passive consort, she built alliances with pro-reform officials and carefully positioned herself as a mediator between competing factions. She saw that Korea could not remain insulated while its neighbours transformed. The Meiji Restoration in Japan had redefined what it meant to be a modern state, and the presence of Western imperial powers on China's borders showed the dangers of failing to adapt. Queen Min consistently argued that Korea's modernisation must be selective and adapted to Korean traditions so that reforms strengthened rather than eroded the monarchy.

Her political strategy was pragmatic and highly diplomatic. At first, she cultivated Qing support to offset Japanese pressure, but when Qing dominance began to look suffocating, she explored ties with Russia. This balancing strategy was not evidence of weakness but of active statecraft: Korea's leadership sought to prevent domination by any one foreign power. At home, however, this activism earned her powerful enemies. Conservative yangban officials accused her of undermining Confucian stability, while younger radicals dismissed her approach as too cautious. Despite these challenges, Queen Min's influence positioned her as both a defender of Korean independence and a symbol of its contested path to reform.

Reform Initiatives under Gojong and Queen Min

From the mid-1870s, Gojong and Queen Min oversaw reforms that reshaped the state. At the institutional level, they created new ministries – Foreign Affairs, Commerce, and the Military – that reflected the needs of a modern bureaucracy. They also reorganised the army, establishing elite units trained by Japanese advisors and later supplemented with Western instructors.

But modernisation was not confined to government offices. Educational reform was particularly significant. New schools were founded in the capital and provincial centres, teaching not only Confucian classics but also science, mathematics, and foreign languages. The first modern military academy was established,

and in the 1880s institutions like the *Yugyeong Gongwon* (Royal English School) offered English-language instruction. Mission schools, often supported by American and European missionaries but sanctioned by the court, introduced a new model of education that emphasised merit and technical skills over lineage. Though initially small in scale, these schools produced a generation of reform-minded officials and intellectuals who would later drive both modernisation and nationalist movements.

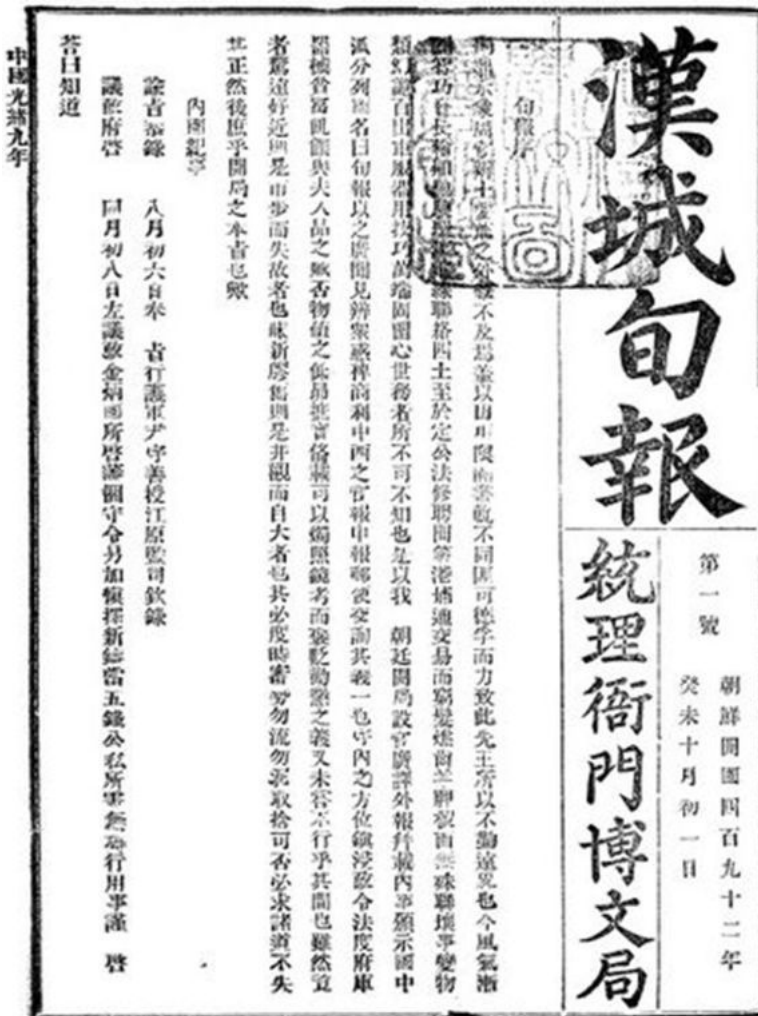
Universities and technical academies also began to emerge as a key feature of Korea's modernisation drive. The *Dongmunhak* (Bureau of Translation), established in 1883, trained interpreters in foreign languages such as English, Japanese, and Chinese, equipping them to negotiate treaties, read foreign newspapers, and engage in diplomacy on its own terms. This alone represented a dramatic departure from centuries of Confucian orthodoxy, which had prized literary cultivation above practical skills. It was followed by academies dedicated to law, commerce, and military service, each of which introduced subjects that were entirely new to the Korean curriculum. By sponsoring these institutions, the royal household signaled a recognition that Korea could no longer rely on the narrow intellectual training of the old literati if it wished to survive in a world of international law, modern warfare, and global commerce.

Even more revolutionary was the decision to allow children of commoners to attend these schools. Education had long been the preserve of the aristocracy, and for a farmer's or merchant's son to gain entry into institutions once reserved for the elite marked a profound shift in Korea's social structure. Though only a small number were able to benefit at first, the precedent it set was extraordinary: the idea that talent and aptitude, rather than birth, could determine one's role in public life. This erosion of yangban privilege, though gradual, was one of the most transformative legacies of the 1880s reforms.

Women, too, began to enter the sphere of formal education, largely through the patronage of Queen Min. She supported the establishment of the Myeongshin Girls' School, one of the earliest institutions for female education in Korea. Its curriculum combined moral instruction with geography, arithmetic, and history – subjects that had never before been considered suitable for girls. While contemporaries sometimes dismissed such efforts as tokenistic, the long-term impact was significant. Alumni of these schools would later emerge as writers, teachers, and even activists in the independence movement, linking women's education to the broader currents of national survival and self-strengthening.

A New Public Sphere: Newspapers and Knowledge

Education reforms were closely linked to a second innovation: the creation of a modern print culture. In 1883, the government founded the *Hanseong sunbo* (Seoul Trimonthly), the country's first newspaper. At first, its audience was limited, since it was printed in classical Chinese and addressed to officials. However, its very existence marked a departure from the idea that political knowledge should circulate only within the narrow channels of the bureaucracy. For the first time, world events, government policy, and discussions of reform could be transmitted regularly in printed form.



« The inaugural issue of the *Hanseong sunbo*, published 31 October, 1883

As the 1880s progressed, newspapers increasingly adopted Hangeul, the Korean alphabet long associated with women and commoners but rarely used in official contexts. This choice was transformative. It allowed newspapers to reach an audience far beyond the scholar-official class, introducing new readers to debates about trade, foreign affairs, and modernisation. It also gave Hangeul an elevated national significance: no longer dismissed as a script for the uneducated, it began to be seen as a vehicle for modern citizenship. In this sense, the expansion of newspapers both widened political participation and nurtured a sense of Korean identity that transcended class boundaries.

Infrastructure and Industry

Alongside education and print culture, Gojong pursued efforts to modernise Korea's infrastructure and economy. One of the earliest and most symbolic initiatives was the creation of a national postal service in 1884, which linked Seoul to the treaty port of Incheon and eventually to other provincial centres. Although short-lived – it was disrupted by political unrest later that year – the postal system represented a vision of a connected national community, facilitated by regular communication. Likewise, telegraph lines connected Korea's major cities to international networks.

Small-scale industries were also encouraged, often with royal subsidies or tax exemptions. Paper mills, printing presses, mints, and powder factories were established in the capital, while foreign technicians were hired to introduce modern methods. These industries were modest in scale but symbolised Korea's tentative entry into a global economy increasingly dominated by mechanisation and mass production. The royal palace itself became a showcase of new technologies: electric lights, telegraph lines, and Western-style rifles were introduced, often more for demonstration than for immediate utility, but they testified to Korea's determination to at least experiment with the tools of modern science.



Source Activity Four

ATL: Thinking and Research Skills

Institutions and the Building of Nations

In the late nineteenth century, under King Gojong and Queen Min, Korea embarked on an ambitious programme of reform. Their initiatives included new schools, modern ministries, newspapers, and universities. These institutions were more than just tools of modernisation: they were also symbols of Korea's struggle to maintain independence in an age of foreign pressure.

Korea was not unique in this respect. Across the world, states emerging from foreign domination or civil conflict turned to similar institutions as a way of consolidating their sovereignty and creating a sense of shared identity. By comparing Korea's reforms with cases in Europe, Japan, and Latin America, we can see the central role of education, culture, and communication in the making of modern nations.

Korean Reforms under Gojong and Queen Min

- *Hanseong sunbo* (1883): Korea's first modern newspaper, printed in both Hangul and Chinese characters, spread reformist ideas and made information more accessible.
- New schools and academies: the Royal English School and Yukyeong Gongwon trained young Koreans in modern subjects, science, and foreign languages.
- Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Commerce, and Military: helped centralise state power and manage Korea's relations with the outside world.
- Envoys abroad: Missions to the United States, Japan, and Europe gave Korea access to new knowledge and international recognition.

These initiatives aimed not only to strengthen Korea's defences but also to cultivate a sense of modern nationhood. However, they also faced resistance: conservative Confucian elites often viewed them as a threat to the traditional social order, while ordinary people sometimes saw them as benefitting only the elite.

Comparative Perspectives

Korea's experience fits into a wider pattern. Other societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also turned to institutions as instruments of nation-building.

- **Post-WWI Europe:** After independence in 1918, Czechoslovakia celebrated its National Theatre and promoted Charles University as a Czech-language institution – symbols of culture reclaimed after centuries of Habsburg domination. In Poland, the revival of Warsaw University reinforced national pride after 120 years of partition under Russia, Prussia, and Austria.
- **Meiji Japan:** Following the 1868 Restoration, Japan founded Tokyo Imperial University (1877) to train elites in modern sciences and technology. Schools and rituals instilled a common curriculum of loyalty to the emperor, binding people into a shared national culture.
- **Post-Revolutionary Mexico:** In the 1920s, the government restructured the National University and commissioned murals by artists such as Diego Rivera. These murals depicted a shared vision of Mexico's past and future, providing a unifying narrative.

Activity: Institutions and National Identity

Across these examples, institutions served both practical and symbolic purposes. They modernised societies, but they also reinforced cultural pride and national consciousness.

Task

Choose one institution – a school, a newspaper, a university, or a cultural project – from Korea and compare it with an institution in another country (Europe, Japan, or Mexico).

Answer the following questions

1. What challenge or problem was this institution trying to solve?
2. How did it help build a national identity (through language, history, or culture)?
3. Was its main purpose practical modernisation or symbolic nationhood?
4. What resistance did it face (from elites, minorities, or rival political groups)?

Think Further

1. Why do governments so often turn to schools, universities, and cultural institutions when trying to consolidate a nation?
2. Can we say that knowledge itself becomes a political tool in these cases?
3. How far were Korea's institutions a deliberate attempt to preserve independence, compared to other cases where independence had already been won?

III. The Imo Incident (1882): Korean Discontent Boils Over

Inquiry Question

What does the Imo Incident reveal about the limits of reform in late 19th-century Korea?

Reorganising the Military

Nowhere was reform more urgent than in the military. After centuries of relative peace, Korea's army was small, poorly paid, and armed largely with traditional weapons. The humiliating realisation that Korea could not defend its ports or borders without foreign mediation convinced King Gojong that modernisation was essential. In 1881, the court established the Special Skills Force (*Byeolgigun*), an elite unit trained and equipped with modern rifles and uniforms. This unit symbolised the monarchy's ambitions to build a professional, modern army, but it also exposed deep inequalities. Older soldiers, many of whom had not received regular pay in months, resented being overlooked while new recruits gained privileges and foreign training.

The grievances of these soldiers were both economic and symbolic. Corruption was rampant in military administration: wages were siphoned off by commanders, rations were adulterated with sand and husks, and soldiers often had to beg for or borrow food for their families. At the same time, the Special Skills Force appeared to embody the growing presence of foreigners in Korean affairs; Japanese advisors oversaw their drills, and their very existence was read as a sign that loyalty and years of service mattered less than the monarchy's new obsession with foreign models.



Source Activity Five

ATL: Thinking and Research Skills

The Byeolgigun ("Special Skills Force") was Korea's first modern military unit, trained by Japanese officers and armed with modern rifles. Formed in 1881 as part of the government's efforts to reform and strengthen the military, the unit symbolized Korea's attempt to modernize along foreign lines. However, its creation also deepened divisions within the army: while the Byeolgigun received new equipment and proper training, older soldiers were left



underpaid and poorly supplied. This inequality contributed directly to the outbreak of the Imo Incident in 1882, when resentful troops revolted in Seoul.

Questions:

1. How did the creation of the Byeolgigun reflect the Korean government's priorities for modernization, and whose interests were served or neglected in this process?
2. Research the ways in which social and economic inequalities within the military contribute to political instability. What does this reveal about the challenges of implementing reform in late 19th-century Korea?

Economic stress further sharpened these grievances. The late 1870s and early 1880s were marked by poor harvests and inflation, which combined with mismanagement to create food shortages in the capital. When the little that was distributed to soldiers was of inferior quality, this was interpreted not simply as neglect but as a betrayal of the Confucian duty of the ruler to care for his subjects. The older soldiers felt humiliated: the backbone of the dynasty's defense was now reduced to near starvation while a select few prospered.

What began as anger at unpaid wages quickly merged with resentment at the monarchy's reliance on foreign models and advisors. By 1882, the situation in Seoul was combustible.

The Mutiny in Seoul

The spark came in July, when traditional soldiers discovered that the long-awaited rice distribution was adulterated and unfit to eat. Outraged, they armed themselves and marched through the streets, calling for punishment of corrupt officials and "traitors" who had betrayed the dynasty. Korean records such as the *Ilseongnok* (Daily Records of the Royal Secretariat) describe a capital in turmoil as soldiers stormed armories, looted food stores, and attacked officials aligned with reformist policies.

Common townspeople joined in, as many of them were already weary of high prices and official corruption. Together, they targeted symbols of foreign influence and domestic betrayal. Several reformist ministers connected with Queen Min's faction were attacked, their homes burned, and their allies scattered. The Japanese legation, highly visible and deeply resented, was also assaulted. Advisors were killed and the compound was destroyed – but for the soldiers, this was not indiscriminate violence. It was a direct attack on the most visible representation of Korea's humiliating dependence on outsiders.

Amid the unrest, King Gojong turned to his father, the Daewongun. Though politically marginalised since 1873, the Daewongun remained a powerful symbol of principled resistance. As discussed in the first chapter, during his regency in the 1860s, he had led campaigns against corruption and Catholic missionaries and resisted foreign demands for trade. For the mutineers, his return represented the restoration of legitimate, Confucian order. He was escorted back to the palace and briefly regained power, dismissing reformist officials and attempting to restore stability.

The Return of the Daewongun

The Daewongun's restoration reassured mutinous soldiers that their grievances had been heard. His proclamations promised justice against corrupt ministers and sought to address the neglect of the military. For a moment, the uprising seemed to transform into a conservative "restoration," presenting itself as a return to orthodoxy rather than mere rebellion.

But his position was precarious. While soldiers and conservatives welcomed him, Queen Min and her allies understood the danger he posed to their authority and their reform agenda. His hardline rejection of foreign involvement could not be reconciled with the reality that Korea was already deeply enmeshed in regional power rivalries. His presence at the palace was less a return to lasting authority than a temporary solution to an immediate crisis.

Qing Intervention and Outcomes

The violence in Seoul and the Daewongun's return alarmed the Qing court. Determined to prevent further instability – and unwilling to allow Japan to seize the initiative – Qing officials moved quickly. General Wu Changqing and the young Yuan Shikai entered Korea with troops to restore order. Korean sources describe their arrival as swift and overwhelming: mutineers were dispersed, calm was restored, and the palace secured.

The Daewongun was lured into negotiations with the Qing, then forcibly taken to Tianjin. There he was placed under close supervision, effectively ending his political role in Korea. His deportation demonstrated both the continuing weight of Qing suzerainty and the limited autonomy of the Korean monarchy.

Gojong and Queen Min were restored, but their power was now constrained. Qing forces remained stationed in Seoul, and Yuan Shikai assumed an increasingly influential role in advising the court. Although Korea retained its formal independence, in practice its sovereignty was eroded, with the Qing exercising direct oversight over reforms and foreign relations.



Conceptual Connections

Korean and Other Perspectives

From a Korean perspective, the Imo incident was not a chaotic "riot" but an assertion of loyalty to the dynasty's traditions. The soldiers saw themselves as defenders of Confucian justice against corrupt elites and humiliating foreign encroachment. Their violence targeted what they saw as symbols of betrayal, not the throne itself.

The Daewongun's return underscores this perspective. To the mutineers, he represented continuity with Korea's Confucian past, a stern patriarch who would purge corruption and restore dignity. His removal by Qing troops did not erase his symbolic importance: he remained, in the minds of many Koreans, a figure of principled opposition to foreign interference.

King Gojong and Queen Min were not passive victims. Their recall of the Daewongun was a tactical move to defuse unrest; their reliance on Qing intervention was likewise strategic, aimed at curbing domestic rebellion and balancing against Japan. Yet the cost of this strategy was high: greater dependence on Qing advisors and diminished royal autonomy.

The Imo Incident also revealed the limits of reform when pursued without broad popular support. By privileging a small elite unit while neglecting the majority, the monarchy created resentment rather than loyalty. Reforms that were meant to strengthen the state instead deepened divides between reformist elites and the traditional soldiers and commoners who bore the brunt of economic hardship.

From the standpoint of later Korean reformers, however, the Imo Incident was also a warning. Some intellectuals and officials came to see the mutiny not only as a reaction against corruption but as a setback for meaningful reform. The violence discredited attempts at gradual modernisation and provided conservative factions with ammunition to resist change. For these reformers, the tragedy of the Imo Incident was that justified grievances were expressed in ways that ultimately strengthened foreign domination and slowed Korea's ability to chart its own course.

Significance

The Imo Incident was a turning point in late Joseon history. It reasserted Qing dominance, sidelined Japan temporarily, and exposed Korea's fragile sovereignty. The mutiny revealed how domestic grievances—unpaid wages, corruption, and resentment toward reform—intersected with foreign rivalries to destabilize the state. For reformers, it highlighted the dangers of modernization without consensus; for conservatives, it confirmed fears of foreign encroachment. Ultimately, the incident underscored how Korea's struggle for reform and independence was shaped as much by internal divisions as by external pressures.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Synthesis Activity: Understanding the Layers of Significance

1. Categorization Task:

Working in small groups, classify the significance of the Imo Incident into three categories:

1. Domestic (social and political tensions)
2. Ideological (debates over reform and conservatism)
3. Geopolitical (foreign intervention and loss of sovereignty)

Record one piece of evidence for each category from the summary above or from your prior notes.

2. Discussion Prompt:

1. Was the Imo Incident primarily a *domestic crisis* or a *geopolitical* turning point? Defend your argument with specific evidence.



TOK Connection

The Significance of Language in History

Knowledge Question: How does the language we use to describe events influence how they are understood and remembered?

Case study: The Imo Incident (1882)

- In Korean sources, the event is often referred to as the “Imo Incident”. The word *incident* suggests disruption, a crisis in governance, or a dramatic turning point in the nation’s history. It is relatively neutral, leaving room for multiple interpretations (corruption, foreign intrusion, reform).
- In Japanese and some Western accounts, it has been called the “Imo Mutiny.” The term *mutiny* implies illegitimacy, lawlessness, and betrayal of authority – portraying the soldiers as violent rioters rather than as defenders of traditional order.
- The choice of word – *incident* vs. *mutiny* – shapes the way the event is evaluated: Were the soldiers reckless rebels, or were they reacting to genuine injustice?

Wider historical parallels

- **“Boxer Rebellion” (China, 1899–1901):** To the Qing and many Chinese nationalists, this was a patriotic struggle against foreign domination; to Western powers, it was a “rebellion” to be crushed.
- **“Indian Mutiny” (1857) vs. “First War of Independence”:** British narratives stressed betrayal of loyalty by Indian soldiers, while Indian nationalists reframed it as the beginning of anti-colonial struggle.
- **“Kiel Mutiny” (Germany, 1918):** German naval commanders framed the sailors’ refusal to launch a final, hopeless attack as disobedience and betrayal, while later historians (especially in the Weimar and postwar periods) reinterpreted it as a workers’ revolt that helped spark the German Revolution of 1918–1919.
- **American Revolution (1775–1783):** American patriots and later national narratives framed the conflict as a legitimate struggle for self-determination and constitutional liberty, while contemporary British authorities depicted it as a rebellion or insurrection by unlawful subjects against imperial order.
- **Irish “Troubles” (late 1960s–1998):** British and unionist accounts often characterised IRA actions as terrorism and criminality, whereas republicans and many nationalists framed the same campaigns as an armed struggle or resistance against systemic discrimination and colonial rule.

IV. The Gapsin Coup and the “Chinese Decade” (1884–1894)

Inquiry Question

How did the events of 1884–1894 prepare the ground for the Sino-Japanese War and Korea’s subsequent transformation?

Background: The Rise of the *Gaehwa* (“Enlightenment”) Movement

By the 1880s, Korea found itself in an increasingly perilous international environment. The country had endured centuries as a Confucian tributary state under the influence of Qing China. Its ruling yangban aristocracy was steeped in tradition and saw Korea’s survival as dependent on continuing the time-honoured order. Yet external pressures were rapidly undermining this worldview.

Korea’s relative isolation was shattered following Japanese provocation during the Unyo incident and The Treaty of Ganghwa (1876) which was imposed after a show of naval force. It opened ports to Japanese merchants and gave Tokyo the same kinds of “unequal treaty” rights that Western powers had extracted from China. For the first time, Korea was forced into a treaty relationship with a foreign state that bypassed Qing suzerainty, signalling that the peninsula was becoming a focal point in the contest of empires.

Against this backdrop, new reformist currents emerged among a younger generation of Korean officials and intellectuals. This *Gaehwa* (“Enlightenment”) Party looked across the East Sea to Japan. The Meiji Restoration, which had transformed Japan from a feudal society into a modern industrial state within two decades, offered a powerful example of how an Asian society could appropriate Western institutions to preserve independence.

The *Gaehwa* reformers argued that Korea had to modernise radically and immediately. They advocated for:

- The abolition of rigid class distinctions, including *yangban* privileges.
- A centralised, meritocratic bureaucracy staffed through talent rather than birth.
- A reformed army, equipped with modern weapons and trained by foreign advisors.
- A stronger fiscal base through new systems of taxation and land reform.
- Independence from Qing China, which they saw as corrupt, stagnant, and incapable of defending Korea from Western or Japanese encroachment.

Kim Ok-gyun, perhaps the most famous of the reformers, expressed these frustrations in his later memoirs. He described the disillusionment with the conservatism of the court, his admiration for Japan’s reforms, and his conviction that Korea could either modernise or perish. To Kim and his allies, partial reforms or compromises with Qing authority would not suffice.

Yet their programme was elitist and largely urban. Few reformers had strong connections to rural society, and they made little attempt to mobilise farmers or artisans. In this sense, the movement remained a minority faction within the capital, cut off from the broader populace whose support might have been decisive. Importantly, it was backed by Japan's imperial ambition.

Meanwhile, Queen Min (Empress Myeongseong) emerged as the most influential figure at court. As seen above, she favoured cautious modernisation while simultaneously preserving Korea's status within the regional order. To counterbalance Japan, she leaned heavily on Chinese support, forging closer ties with Yuan Shikai, the Qing official posted in Seoul.

This situation – a reformist minority, a cautious monarchy, entrenched conservatives, and foreign rivals – set the stage for a dramatic confrontation in 1884.

The Gapsin Coup of 1884

The opportunity for the reformers came during December 1884, at the inauguration of a new postal service – itself a modest symbol of modernisation. With Japanese backing, Kim Ok-gyun and other *Gaehwa* leaders launched a sudden coup.

The conspirators assassinated conservative officials, seized the royal palace, and placed King Gojong under their control. For three days, they attempted to rule, issuing a set of sweeping reform decrees:

- **Abolition of the hereditary class system:** The privileges of the yangban were to be stripped, creating a more equal society.
- **Merit-based government:** Officials would be appointed through talent rather than family lineage.
- **Modern army and bureaucracy:** Modeled after Japan's reforms, with new training systems.
- **Economic reforms:** Taxation and land ownership were to be rationalised to create a stronger fiscal state.
- **Assertion of independence:** Korea was to declare itself no longer dependent on Qing China.

These decrees represented the boldest reform agenda in 19th-century Korean history. For the first time, Korean officials openly articulated a break from Confucian orthodoxy and Qing suzerainty, placing modernisation and independence at the centre of national survival.

But the coup quickly unraveled. Yuan Shikai, commanding Qing forces in Seoul, moved decisively. Within three days, the Qing army stormed the palace, massacred reformists and their supporters, and restored conservative ministers to power. Japanese troops clashed with Chinese forces during the fighting, and the Japanese legation was burned. Surviving reform leaders, including Kim Ok-gyun, fled to Japan. Later, in 1894, Kim Ok-gyun was assassinated by Hong Jong-woo in Shanghai.

The coup was over almost as soon as it began.

The Gapsin Coup – What *Actually* Happened?

The Gapsin Coup of 1884 was a brief but dramatic attempt by a group of Korean reformers to transform their country's political and social order. By the early 1880s, reform-minded leaders such as Kim Ok-kyun and Pak Yong-hyo – members of the Gaehwa (Enlightenment) Party – had grown increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of modernisation. Looking to Japan's Meiji Restoration as a model, they sought to dismantle Korea's rigid class hierarchies, modernise its army and administration, and free the country from the heavy hand of Qing influence.

The opportunity to act came in December 1884, when the inauguration of Korea's new postal service brought together key officials and foreign representatives in Seoul. During the celebrations, a fire broke out nearby, drawing off Chinese troops stationed in the capital. Believing this distraction – and the presence of a small Japanese military detachment – would give them a brief window of advantage, the reformers seized their chance.

On the night of 4 December, they launched their coup. With Japanese support, they took control of key government buildings and announced a sweeping programme of reform. Their proposals were ambitious: to abolish hereditary privileges, establish merit-based appointments in government, reduce the influence of conservative officials, and assert Korea's independence from Qing China. For three tense days, the reformers controlled Seoul, envisioning a new, modern Korea governed by enlightened principles.

But their success was short-lived. Qing forces under Yuan Shikai, stationed nearby, quickly regrouped and marched on the capital. Outnumbered and lacking popular backing, the reformers' movement collapsed almost as quickly as it had begun. By 6 December, the coup was over. Some leaders escaped to Japan, while others were captured and executed.

Though it lasted only three days, the Gapsin Coup was far more than a failed power grab. It exposed both the determination and the limitations of Korea's early reform movement – an effort led by intellectual elites who envisioned sweeping change but failed to mobilise wider support. In its aftermath, Qing influence in Korea grew even stronger, ushering in what historians call the "Chinese decade," a period when Korea's autonomy was further constrained under Yuan Shikai's oversight. Yet the ideals of the Gaehwa reformers – the drive for modernisation, independence, and national renewal – would continue to shape Korean politics in the years to come.

Aftermath: The Convention of Tianjin and the "Chinese Decade"

The fallout of the Gapsin Coup extended far beyond Seoul. Both China and Japan blamed each other for the instability. To prevent escalation, the two powers negotiated the Convention of Tianjin (1885). The treaty required both sides to withdraw their troops from Korea but stipulated that neither could send forces in the future without notifying the other.

This treaty effectively placed Korea in a position of what many scholars call "dual dependency." On the surface, Korea was independent, freed from its formal tributary ties to the Qing dynasty. Yet in reality, its sovereignty was heavily constrained, caught between the competing interests of China, Japan, and other

outside powers. Korea was neither fully autonomous nor entirely colonized, but trapped in a precarious middle ground.

The following decade (1884–1894) has often been described as the “Chinese Decade,” because of the extraordinary influence of Yuan Shikai, the Qing official appointed as resident minister in Seoul. Yuan’s presence went far beyond the role of a diplomat: he advised King Gojong directly, vetoed reforms that threatened Qing interests, and sometimes even issued instructions to Korean officials as though he were part of the government. For many Koreans, his role symbolized the frustrating reality that decisions about their country’s future were being shaped by outsiders.

Within this difficult environment, Queen Min played a key role in navigating Korea’s survival. Having seen the dangers of unchecked Japanese intervention during the Gapsin Coup, she now turned to Qing China as a counterweight, cultivating a close political relationship with Yuan. Yet she also looked beyond China, carefully building ties with Russia in the hope of finding another powerful ally to protect Korea’s fragile autonomy. Her balancing strategy reveals both Korea’s precariousness and the resourcefulness of its leaders: while reliant on outside patrons, they still sought to widen their diplomatic options and prevent domination by a single foreign power.

Meanwhile, reform continued, but only in a controlled and limited way. Korea introduced new schools, military training institutions, and modern infrastructure such as telegraphs and a postal service. Yet these projects were deliberately modest, shaped by Yuan’s desire to avoid empowering Korean reformers who might challenge Qing influence. For reformist intellectuals—especially those exiled in Japan—this was deeply disappointing. Leaders like Kim Ok-gyun and Pak Yŏng-hyo had hoped the coup would launch Korea into rapid modernization. Instead, they now watched from abroad as their country struggled under the weight of foreign supervision and cautious, piecemeal change.

This period illustrates a fundamental paradox of Korea’s position. In order to resist Japanese domination, Korea leaned more heavily on China and, increasingly, Russia—yet this only deepened the country’s dependence on outsiders. Reform was not absent, but always filtered through the priorities of stronger powers. For Koreans, the “Chinese Decade” thus represents not only a time of constraint, but also of strategic adaptation, as leaders tried to preserve space for autonomy within the tightening grip of imperial rivalry.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Considering Diverse Perspectives

Korean Perspectives on the Gapsin Coup and the “Chinese Decade”

Although often narrated as a clash between China and Japan, the Gapsin Coup was also a deeply Korean story.

- **The reformers as visionaries:** Figures like Kim Ok-gyun genuinely believed in transforming Korea into a modern nation-state. Their decrees reveal an advanced awareness of the institutional reforms needed for survival.

- **Elitism and limitations:** At the same time, their reforms lacked grassroots appeal. Ordinary Koreans were sceptical of violent upheaval and suspicious of Japanese involvement. Without popular support, the coup was doomed to fail.
- **Diversity of Korean reform thought:** Queen Min's diplomacy, the conservatives' defense of tradition, and the reformers' radicalism all reflected competing visions for Korea's future. The monarchy and elites were not passive but actively sought to navigate the crisis of sovereignty.

In this sense, the Gapsin Coup was not simply a "Japanese-backed plot" as Qing narratives often claimed, but a bold – if flawed – Korean attempt at self-strengthening.

Significance of the Gapsin Coup

1. Korea's Sovereignty Tested

The coup demonstrated Korea's precarious position: internal reform was impossible without provoking foreign intervention. The Convention of Tianjin institutionalised this vulnerability.

2. Intellectual Legacy

The reform decrees of 1884 became a touchstone for later generations. When Korea entered the Gabo Reforms (1894–1896), many of the same ideas resurfaced.

3. Prelude to the Sino-Japanese War

The Gapsin Coup highlighted the fragility of Sino-Japanese coexistence in Korea. The Convention of Tianjin only delayed conflict. By 1894, the Donghak Uprising provided the spark for war, fought largely over control of the peninsula.

4. Korean Agency

Despite foreign intervention, Koreans themselves – reformers, conservatives, and royal diplomats – played active roles. Korea was not merely a pawn but a contested space where multiple domestic visions collided.

Paper 1 Practice

Inquiry Question: To what extent did the weaknesses of the Enlightenment movement contribute to the failure of the Gapsin Coup?

Source A:

Context: Yong-ho Ch'oe (1931–2024) was a pioneering Korean-American historian and professor at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. He served on the history faculty there for over

three decades and helped establish the Center for Korean Studies. His scholarship ranged widely, including his seminal 1982 article “*The Kapsin Coup of 1884: A Reassessment*” in *Korean Studies*, where he reevaluated the motives and legacy of the coup. Ch’oe also co-edited the foundational *Sources of Korean Tradition* series, contributing substantially to the field’s academic infrastructure.

Content: “The leaders of the coup naively believed that simply by eliminating key conservative officials and making the king their captain, they could gain control of the government and implement their programs. However, their plan contained a fatal flaw: it did not take into account the determination of the Chinese troops in Seoul to assert their dominance in Korea. ...The reformers’ attempted coup totally ruined the image of the enlightenment movement in the eyes of the Korean people. The violent means used by the reform group to seize political power were repugnant to Korea’s traditional political culture and only served to justify the fear and distrust with which the conservative traditionalists viewed the Enlightenment Party.”

Source B:

Context: Yun Ch’i-ho (1865–1945) was born into an influential yangban family; his father, Yun Ungnyŏl, served as King Kojong’s minister of war and was a prominent figure in the late Chosŏn bureaucracy. In 1881, Yun joined a government-sponsored student mission to Japan, where he observed the rapid reforms of the Meiji era. Returning to Korea shortly before the Gapsin Coup of 1884, he was closely connected to several reform-minded participants, though he did not take part directly. His father’s subsequent punishment for supporting liberal reforms, combined with Yun’s association with reformist circles, forced him into exile soon after the coup.

Content: “First, to seize power by means of intimidating the ruler violated the accepted norms and proprieties. Second, one could not hold power for long by relying on an external force (that is, Japan). Third, since the coup had no public support, there would surely be popular revolts against the reformers. Fourth, once the Chinese learned of the true nature of the coup, they would use force to defeat it, in which case the Japanese would be outnumbered. Fifth, several members of the Min clan and some high officials beloved of the king had lost their lives in the coup. Even if the coup were successful, how could its leaders expect to remain in power by opposing the will and ignoring the desires of the king and the queen? And finally, if the reform leaders had sufficient followers to fill positions within the government, they might have a chance of succeeding. But they had neither the trust of the king nor the support of the people.”

Source C:

Context: Sheila Miyoshi Jager (b. 1963) is an American historian of Dutch and Japanese descent and a Professor of East Asian Studies at Oberlin College. She holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of Chicago. Her scholarship has focused on modern Korea and East Asia; her earlier works include *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea* and *Brothers at War*. In her 2023 book *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia*, Jager reframes nineteenth-century East Asian history by placing Korea at the center of geopolitical rivalry. She argues that as Russia, China, and Japan competed over Korea, the peninsula became the epicenter of a second “Great Game”—one that shaped the region’s

modern order. Drawing on multilingual sources and diplomatic, military, and political narratives, she shows how Korea's internal struggles and external pressures set the stage for the Sino-Japanese War, the Russo-Japanese War, and eventually Japan's annexation of Korea—events that fundamentally reconfigured East Asia.

Content: “Japanese policy underwent a marked change during this period. After a ten-month absence, the Japanese minister, Takezoe Shin'ichiro, returned to Seoul in late October 1884 to announce his support of the Korean reformers. With China distracted in a war with France, Takezoe was instructed to tacitly assist the Korean progressives. The plan was to seize the king and, in his name, proclaim a new reformist government. The preliminaries would involve a fire and an uprising. A precise list of government officials to be killed was drawn up, and the venue for the assassinations, an inaugural dinner at the new post office, was settled upon.

But the conspirators made a fatal mistake. Instead of keeping Gojong in the more defensible Kyōng-u Palace, Takezoe decided the king should return to the less defensible Ch'angdōk Palace. This went against the pleas of Pak Yong-hyo, but Queen Min complained the secluded palace was inhospitable, and Takezoe wanted to appear accommodating. Pak's objections were overruled, a decision the rebel leaders would regret. On December 6 Chinese forces surrounded Ch'angdōk Palace; the outnumbered Japanese troops fell back. Yuan Shikai moved in to lay siege, and the king and queen slipped away to the Chinese side. Without the king, the rebels knew their cause was lost.”

Source: Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia*, (2023) pp. 77–78.

Question 1: Explain how the content of both source A and source B can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)

Question 2: Analyse how the context of source C influences how it can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)

Question 3: Examine how the perspectives in all the sources can be used to answer the inquiry question. (12 marks)

By the time the Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1894, Korea's role as the focal point of East Asian rivalry was clear. The three-day coup of 1884 had already foreshadowed the struggles to come.

Conclusion

The Gapsin Coup lasted only three days, yet its impact extended far beyond its brief duration. It revealed both the possibilities and the limits of reformist activism, the dangers of relying on foreign support, and the fragility of Korea's sovereignty amid competing empires. Although the subsequent “Chinese Decade” slowed reform, it could not extinguish the desire for change; reformist ideas persisted in exile and underground, keeping alive the vision of a modern Korean nation.

Above all, the Gapsin Coup was a moment when Koreans themselves—rather than foreign powers—asserted agency, however briefly, over their country's future. Its failure highlighted the persistent reality that Korea's path to reform was inseparable from questions of power, influence, and external dependency.

In the following chapter, Korea's struggle for reform and self-determination unfolds further. The Donghak Peasant Revolution will challenge traditional social and political structures, revealing widespread popular dissatisfaction and the potential for grassroots activism. The Gabo Reforms (1894–1896) will attempt to modernize Korea's institutions and society, though their success will be constrained by entrenched interests and foreign pressures. Meanwhile, the First Sino–Japanese War and its aftermath, including the Treaty of Shimonoseki, the Triple Intervention, and growing Russian influence, will test Korea's sovereignty and shift the regional balance of power. These events will force us to consider key questions: To what extent did the Donghak Peasant Revolution bring about meaningful change? How did the conflict between China and Japan affect Korean interests and regional dynamics? And to what extent were the Gabo Reforms transformative in their aims?

Paper 3 Practice

Paper 3 questions for this chapter are likely to focus on the shifting balance of power in Korea, the struggle between internal reform and foreign intervention, and the political instability leading to the First Sino-Japanese War. The following mixed-format prompts reflect these themes.

1. "The Treaty of Ganghwa (1876) marked the beginning of Korea's loss of sovereignty." To what extent do you agree with this argument?
2. How far were King Gojong's reforms driven by internal modernization goals as opposed to external pressures?
3. "The Imo Incident of 1882 revealed the inherent limitations of late 19th-century Korean reform." To what extent do you agree with this statement?
4. To what extent did the 'Chinese Decade' (1885–1894) destabilize Korea?
5. "The Gapsin Coup demonstrated both the possibilities and the impossibilities of rapid reform in Korea." Discuss.
6. To what extent did the events of 1884–1894 prepare the ground for the First Sino-Japanese War and Korea's subsequent transformation?

Paper 3 Practice

Focus: Developing Analytical Paragraphs and Outlines

Practice question: “The Treaty of Ganhwa (1876) marked the beginning of Japan’s political and economic dominance in Korea. To what extent do you agree with this statement?”

Learning focus

By the end of this activity, you should be able to:

1. Plan an essay outline that organises arguments logically
2. Write an analytical PEEL paragraph (Point-Evidence-Explanation-Link)
3. Integrate precise historical evidence to support analysis
4. Maintain focus on the question throughout

Step 1 – Unpack the Question

- **Main claim:** The Treaty of Ganghwa marked the *beginning* of Japanese dominance
- **Key terms:** dominance, political and economic, beginning (→ implies later expansion)
- **Ask:**
 - What does “dominance” mean in this context?
 - What other powers influenced Korea at this time (China, Russia, Western powers)?
 - Did Japanese dominance truly begin in 1876, or later?

Step 2 – Brainstorm Relevant Factors

Supporting the claim	Challenging/qualifying the claim
Treaty opened Korean ports to Japan (unequal treaty terms)	China still exercised suzerainty (esp. during Chinese Decade, 1885-94)
Japanese merchants gained economic privileges	Japan’s political control not consolidated until 1895-1910
Symbolic first step toward imperial involvement	Domestic resistance (Queen Min, reformers) limited Japanese influence

Step 3 – Develop an Essay Outline

Introduction – Define dominance: briefly explain Treaty of Ganghwa, give judgement (e.g. marked the start of influence, but dominance developed gradually).

Body paragraphs:

1. **Political significance of Treaty of Ganghwa** – established Japan’s diplomatic equality and extraterritorial rights.
2. **Resistance and internal reforms under King Gojong and Queen Min** – attempts to balance Japan, China, and the West.
3. **Imo Incident (1882)** – evidence of anti-Japanese sentiment and China’s reassertion.
4. **Gapsin Coup (1884) and the “Chinese Decade”** – Japan’s temporary setback, showing limited dominance.

Conclusion – Weigh evidence and make final judgement on the extent to which 1876 truly marked the beginning of dominance.

Step 4 – Writing an Effective PEEL Paragraph

P – Point: Make a clear analytical claim linked to the question.

E – Evidence: Provide specific, accurate historical examples (dates, figures, outcomes).

E – Explanation: Explain how and why the evidence supports your argument; show causation or significance.

L – Link: Tie back to the question and transition to the next idea.

Paragraph:

Point: The Treaty of Ganghwa in 1876 marked Japan’s first major step toward expanding its influence in Korea.

Evidence: Negotiated after Japan’s display of naval power near Ganghwa Island, the treaty forced Korea to open three ports and granted Japan extraterritorial rights, undermining Korea’s sovereignty.

Explanation: These terms mirrored the unequal treaties imposed on Japan by Western powers, suggesting Japan’s intent to treat Korea as an inferior state and marking a shift in regional power dynamics.

Link: While this established a foundation for future dominance, Japan’s political control remained limited until the weakening of Chinese influence after 1894.

Step 5 – Using Evidence Effectively

Try to:

- **Use at least two precise examples** per paragraph (e.g. key dates, leaders, treaties, battles).
- **Blend factual recall with analysis:** avoid listing; always explain *why it matters*.
- **Cross-reference events:** e.g. connect the Treaty of Ganghwa to later incidents like the Gapsin Coup or Sino-Japanese War.

Weak evidence use

"Japan forced Korea to open ports."

Strong evidence use

"Under the 1876 Treaty of Ganghwa, Korea was compelled to open Busan, Incheon, and Wonsan to Japanese trade, giving Japan economic privileges similar to those Western powers had imposed on Qing China."

Step 6 – Practice Task

1. Write a **one-paragraph response** using PEEL to answer:

"How significant was the Treaty of Ganghwa in increasing Japan's political influence in Korea?"

2. Peer review with focus on:

- Clear analytical **point**
- Use of **specific evidence**
- **Explanation** linking evidence to argument
- **Link** to overall question

Korean War: Connections to the Cold War in Asia (Regional Study 11)

From the Treaty of Ganghwa to the Korean War: Long-Term Divisions

The **Treaty of Ganghwa (1876)**, forced on Korea by Japan, began a pattern of unequal treaties that eroded sovereignty. Like later agreements with the United States and European powers, it was imposed without meaningful Korean consent, opening ports, granting extraterritorial rights, and declaring Korea "independent" from China in a way that actually increased its vulnerability. This pattern – Koreans excluded from decisions about their own future – would resurface decades later at the **Cairo Conference (1943)**, when Allied leaders promised Korea independence "in due course" without Korean participation. The memory of being subject to the will of others, first through imperial treaties and later through Allied diplomacy, left Korea deeply divided over how to protect its sovereignty after 1945.

King Gojong and Queen Min's cautious reforms highlighted another source of division: the lack of consensus on what kind of modernisation Korea needed. Their selective reforms, like the creation of the Pyolgigun, were meant to strengthen the monarchy without undermining traditional hierarchies. Yet these reforms alienated both the traditional soldiers and radical reformers. By failing to unify elites, reform became politically polarising. This same lack of consensus persisted into the post-1945 period: elites in the South framed modernisation as controlled, state-led development under capitalism, while the North pushed for revolutionary transformation. The fractured vision of reform in the 1880s foreshadowed the ideological split that hardened into two rival states after liberation.

The Imo Incident (1882) revealed how modernisation without broad support could provoke violent backlash. Disgruntled soldiers rose against corruption, privilege, and foreign influence, briefly restoring the Daewongun as a symbol of Confucian order. Their resistance was not simply reactionary but reflected resentment at reforms that seemed to benefit a narrow elite while ordinary Koreans bore economic hardship. The reliance on Qing troops to suppress the mutiny set a dangerous precedent: domestic disputes became occasions for outside powers to intervene. This dynamic was repeated after 1945, when U.S. and Soviet forces stepped into Korea's internal conflicts, each claiming to stabilise but ultimately deepening division.

The **Gapsin Coup (1884)** further entrenched polarisation. Reformist elites, backed by Japan, attempted to remake Korea rapidly along modern lines, but Qing intervention crushed the effort. Reform was now linked in the public mind with foreign dependency, weakening its legitimacy. The resulting "Chinese Decade" (1885-1894) showed how Korea's internal struggles became battlegrounds for larger powers. The lesson – that reformist or revolutionary movements could not succeed without outside sponsorship – foreshadowed the Cold War division. By 1950, both the North and the South were locked in similar patterns: unable to achieve their visions independently, they depended on foreign patrons (the USSR and the U.S.) to support their projects.

By the late nineteenth century, Korea was thus deeply fractured between reformists and conservatives, monarchists and radicals, advocates of slow modernisation and champions of rapid transformation. All of these divisions were compounded by a structural vulnerability – the inability to resolve disputes without foreign involvement. When liberation came in 1945, Korea did not enter independence as a unified nation but as a society marked by unresolved ideological debates, memories of humiliation under unequal treaties, and a recurring dependence on external powers. These long-standing patterns made the peninsula vulnerable to Cold War polarisation.

The Korean War (1950-1953) was therefore not only a product of international rivalry but also the culmination of these earlier struggles. Just as in the 1870s-1890s, Koreans were divided over modernisation, sovereignty was repeatedly negotiated by others, and foreign powers exploited internal disputes to advance their own agendas. The war was the violent climax of divisions whose roots stretched back to the late nineteenth century.

Paper 2 Practice

See below for ideas of ways you might use the material in this chapter to address questions for the Paper 2 **Thematic study 3: Authoritarian rule (from 1750 CE onwards)**.

Although the focus of this chapter is the late 19th century transformation of Korea under King Gojong and Queen Min, the material is directly relevant to the Paper 2 inquiry question:

- **How was authoritarian rule challenged?**

Both the **Imo Incident (1882)** and the **Gapsin Coup (1884)** illustrate how authoritarian rule in Korea was tested by different forms of resistance – from popular unrest at the grassroots level to reformist agitation among elites. Together, these events provide rich comparative material for students writing about internal opposition and popular resistance to authoritarian regimes in a global context.

Popular Resistance: The Imo Incident (1882)

The Imo Incident represents a striking example of authoritarian rule challenged from below. At its core, the uprising was driven by grievances among rank-and-file soldiers, who felt marginalised by the country's reforms. The creation of a Japanese-trained special regiment, coupled with chronic arrears in pay and poor treatment, sparked resentment among traditional units. When soldiers finally rioted in July 1882, their actions targeted not only corrupt officials but also foreign symbols of intrusion, particularly Japanese advisors and merchants.

From the perspective of authoritarian states, the Imo Incident highlights how reform from above – intended to strengthen the military and centralise power – can provoke resistance when it is implemented unevenly or seen as favouring outsiders. Authoritarian regimes often depend on their military for legitimacy and survival; when that support collapses, they become dangerously vulnerable. Comparisons can be drawn with other authoritarian states where popular discontent among soldiers or workers destabilised rule. For example, the mutinies of 1905 in Tsarist Russia, including the famed Potemkin mutiny, revealed how grievances over pay, treatment, and hierarchy could escalate into direct challenges to autocratic authority. Similarly, in China, unrest among soldiers and local populations played a critical role in undermining Qing authority in the late 19th century.

The Imo Incident also demonstrates the symbolic dimension of resistance. The mutineers sought to recall the Daewongun, associating him with integrity, Confucian values, and resistance to foreign domination. In this sense, the rebellion was not simply reactionary violence but a form of popular protest against the monarchy's accommodation of external influence. For Paper 2 purposes, this allows students to argue that authoritarian regimes are often challenged not only by material hardship but also by perceived betrayals of national identity and sovereignty.

Internal Opposition: The Gapsin Coup (1884)

If the Imo Incident represents a bottom-up challenge, the Gapsin Coup reveals the vulnerabilities of authoritarian monarchies to opposition from within the elite. The coup was led by reformist intellectuals and officials, many of whom were influenced by modernising ideas from Japan and the West. They were frustrated with the monarchy's dependence on Qing advisors and the slow pace of reform, which they viewed as a barrier to Korea's survival in an age of imperial competition.

The Gapsin leaders sought to seize power and implement sweeping reforms, including bureaucratic centralisation, tax rationalisation, abolition of the traditional yangban hierarchy, and strengthening of the military along modern lines. These ambitions reflect a different type of challenge to authoritarian rule: rather than outright rejection of state authority, the coup was an attempt to replace a conservative authoritarianism with a reformist one. It illustrates how elites within authoritarian systems may rebel not to abolish authoritarianism, but to remake it in a way that better serves national strength and their own version of legitimacy.

Although the coup collapsed within three days due to Qing military intervention, its significance lies in how it exposed the fragility of Gojong's rule. The monarchy's reliance on Qing forces to suppress reformist rivals undermined its independence and revealed a dangerous dependence on foreign backers. Comparisons can be drawn with other authoritarian states where internal elites challenged the ruling system. The Decembrist Revolt in Russia (1825), for instance, reflected a similar dynamic: reform-minded officers attempted to push Tsarist rule towards liberalisation, only to be crushed by the existing autocracy. Likewise, the Young Turk Revolution (1908) in the Ottoman Empire illustrates how disaffected elites could challenge authoritarian monarchies in the name of modernisation.

Challenges from Above and Below

Taken together, the Imo Incident and Gapsin Coup highlight two distinct but complementary ways in which authoritarian states can be challenged. From below, discontented soldiers and ordinary people resisted reforms that deepened inequality and threatened traditional values. From above, reformist elites and intellectuals sought to break the monarchy's authoritarian inertia and dependence on foreign powers. These dual challenges are important for Paper 2 comparisons, as they mirror patterns visible in other regions: authoritarian regimes are rarely challenged by a single actor, but by a combination of popular movements and elite opposition.

The Korean case also underscores the importance of external powers in shaping the outcome of such challenges. In both 1882 and 1884, authoritarian rule survived not because of inherent instability but because of the intervention of foreign patrons, particularly Qing China. For comparative purposes, this invites discussion of the extent to which authoritarian regimes are sustained not only by domestic mechanisms of control but also by geopolitical contexts.

Conclusion

The Imo Incident and the Gapsin Coup thus provide students with concrete case studies for examining how authoritarian rule can be destabilised. They show how authoritarianism in Korea was contested by soldiers motivated by material and national grievances, and by elites motivated by reformist and modernising ambitions. Although both challenges failed in the short term, they exposed the structural vulnerabilities of King Gojong's monarchy and foreshadowed the turbulence of the "Chinese Decade" that followed. In comparative Paper 2 essays, these examples allow students to demonstrate nuanced understanding of how authoritarian states are tested by both internal opposition and popular resistance, and how their survival often hinges on a delicate balance of coercion, reform, and foreign support.

Extension/Paper 2 Link: The Imo Incident and the Gapsin Coup can be compared to other challenges to authoritarian control, such as the **1905 Russian Revolution** or the **Taiping Rebellion in China**, where internal unrest, elite dissent, and popular grievances tested the authority of the state. Like these cases, both Korean uprisings reveal how authoritarian regimes are vulnerable to competing interests and social pressures despite attempts at central control.

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