

HISTORY OF KOREA

Course Companion for IB History Paper 3,
Regional Study Asia and Oceania. Korea 1840-1945



KOREAN WAR LEGACY
FOUNDATION



EuroClio

Inspiring History and Citizenship Educators

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History of Korea. Course Companion for IB History Paper 3, Regional Study Asia and
Oceania. Korea 1840–1945

Written by
Abigail Gometz, Paul Grace, Bridget Martin, Allison Cecil and Lexi Oudman.

Edited by
Greg Ahlquist, Webster Thomas High School
and
Ute Ackermann Boeros, American International School of Cyprus.

Designed by Ewa Pawińska



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Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs

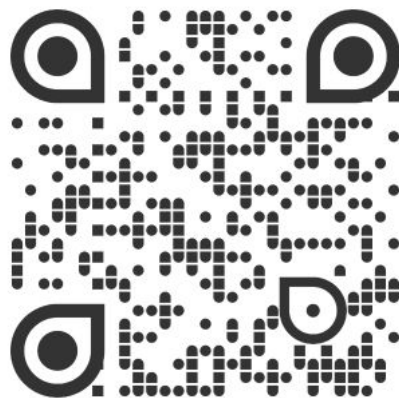
The mission of the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (MVPA) is to honour and serve those who have dedicated their lives and sacrificed for South Korea and to preserve and promote their patriotic spirit. The MVPA runs programs worldwide to honour those who fought to protect South Korea and the ideal of free democracy.

History of Korea is a collaboration between the Korean War Legacy Foundation and EuroClio.

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FOREWORD

Thomas Kuhn's concept of a "paradigm shift" became a lived reality for both the Korean War Legacy Foundation and the World History Digital Education Foundation—organizations I established respectively in the State of New York in 2012 and in the State of Delaware in 2016—when EuroClio formally welcomed them on April 27, 2024, during its 30th Annual Conference held in Sofia, Bulgaria. Supported by the Council of Europe, EuroClio comprises the history teachers' associations of 48 member countries as well as numerous international partners. Upon unanimous approval granted at EuroClio's General Assembly, my two foundations entered an unprecedented phase of collaboration with the history education communities of all eleven European United Nations countries that supported the Republic of Korea during the Korean War (the United Kingdom, France, Greece, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Italy, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Germany), as well as seven—originally six—former Eastern European communist states that supported North Korea (East Germany, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania), in addition to EuroClio's broader global network. This development represents a profound paradigmatic shift for our institutions, opening new horizons for international cooperation, cross-cultural engagement, and more ambitious scholarly and educational initiatives.

Our first formal partnership emerged during the 5th World Congress of History Teachers of the Korean War, organised by my foundation from August 1–4, 2024, at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. History and social studies teachers from sixteen nations participated in a study of the United Kingdom's Korean War curriculum, *Exploring and Teaching the Korean War*, published jointly with the UK Historical Association in 2020. On August 3, the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (MPVA) of the Republic of Korea, the sole sponsor of my foundation, concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with EuroClio in support of our work. As a result, both my foundation and EuroClio jointly participated in the International Baccalaureate (IB) Annual Conference in Singapore from April 21–23, 2025, which facilitated our entry into the extensive global network of the world's largest private K–12 educational system.

It was within this context that we launched the present IB World History curriculum project earlier this year. This book has been developed by leading IB curriculum specialists: Abbie Gometz ("Mid-Century Challenges to the Korean Monarchy and Korea's Opening and Regional Responses"), Paul Grace ("Impact of Regional Rivalries"), Bridget Martin ("Impact of Reforms

under the Korean Empire”), Allison Cecil (“Impact of Japanese Rule”), and Lexi Oudman (“Impact of the Second Sino-Japanese War”). The project has been guided by my foundation’s Executive Director, Joseph Karb; Curriculum Director, Greg Ahlquist; together with EuroClio’s Executive Director, Steven Stegers; Senior Program Manager, Dr Paula O’Donohoe; President, Ute Ackermann-Boeros; and Ned Riley of The International Baccalaureate (IB).

This curriculum book spans the extensive and complex historical period from the late Joseon Dynasty, beginning in the 1840s, through Korea’s tragic experiences of colonisation (1910–1945) and national division under United States and Soviet occupation in 1945. My recent monograph, *The Metamorphosis of U.S.–Korea Relations: The Korean Question Revisited*, analyses how Korea was internationalised through the 1882 Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation and subsequently marginalised amid the geopolitical rivalries of neighbouring great powers.

Commodore Robert Shufeldt, the American diplomat who negotiated the 1882 treaty with the Joseon Dynasty, famously wrote:

“The Pacific is the ocean bride of America—China and Japan and Korea—with their innumerable islands, hanging like necklaces about them, are the bridesmaids. California is the nuptial couch, the bridal chamber, where all the wealth of the Orient will be brought to celebrate the wedding. Let us as Americans—let us determine while yet in our power, that no commercial rival or hostile flag can float with impunity over the long swell of the Pacific sea. ... It is on this ocean that the East and the West have thus come together, reaching the point where search for Empire ceases and human power attains its climax.”

—Han, 2022: 56

As the first American to articulate the notion of “the Korean Question,” Shufeldt also predicted in an 1880 letter to the U.S. Secretary of the Navy that “Corea would in fact be the battlefield of any war between China and Russia or Japan” (Han, 2022).

One of the most significant contributions of this curriculum book is its Korea-centred analytical perspective. It illuminates how the Korean nation responded to patterns of internationalisation and marginalisation—often accompanied by external disparagement—contrasted against the longstanding dominance of non-Korean explanatory frameworks. Korea’s *Silhak* (Practical Learning) tradition, major socio-economic and political reforms, resistance and independence movements during the colonial era, and the subsequent division of the peninsula are presented within this interpretive approach. Given the sensitivity and historical contestation of this period, our distinguished advisor, Professor Gregg Brazinsky, has offered invaluable guidance to ensure academic rigour and pedagogical reliability. I also want to acknowledge Professor Tae-Jin Yi whose research, writing, and guidance have provided invaluable direction and scholarly lines of thought for the chapters of this book.

This IB volume represents the sixth book in our K-12 Global Korean Studies curriculum series and is expected to reach approximately 5,000 IB schools worldwide. The Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs of the Republic of Korea has recognised the far-reaching significance of this endeavour and has extended unwavering support. I express my profound gratitude to the MPVA leadership, especially Vice Minister Kang Yun-jin, whose commitment to our work since 2012 has been instrumental in advancing this project.

Finally, I extend my deepest appreciation to EuroClio's leadership—Steven Stegers, Paula O'Donohoe, and President Ute Boeros—as well as to Ned Riley of The International Baccalaureate (IB) and to my own team: Executive Director Joseph Karb, Curriculum Director Greg Ahlquist, and the dedicated community of social studies educators who have made this book possible.

Jongwoo Han

Shinhan Chair Professor, Underwood International College, Yonsei University
President, The Korean War Legacy Foundation & World History Digital Education Foundation
December 1, 2025

Introduction

Gregg Brazinsky

Today a new generation of young people around the world is becoming interested in Korea's story. They are inspired by the music of Blackpink and other K-Pop groups that stream on their cellphones, the innovative novels of South Korean writers such as Nobel Laureate Han Kang, and, of course, the unending slate of Korean dramas and movies that have gained international popularity thanks to Netflix and other streaming services. Korean is one of the few languages being taught at American universities to see enrollments increase in recent years while tourism to Korea from around the world has grown dramatically. It is fair to say that interest in Korea among young people has never been higher.

Yet the younger generation of K-Pop fans and K-drama addicts are usually only exposed to a part of Korea's story. Most often it is the glitzier and shinier image of present-day South Korea that they consume as tourists and fans. That young people take such passionate interest in a culture that is different from their own is certainly a reflection of their intellectual curiosity and open-mindedness. But there is another equally compelling part of Korea's experience that today's younger generation too often misses out on: its long struggle for nationhood and independence. The chapters in this pathbreaking textbook, which cover the period between the mid-nineteenth century and the end of World War II, provide a thorough and engaging overview of these turbulent years. Written for International Baccalaureate students by a group of leading social science teachers from around the world and carefully edited by Jongwoo Han, Greg Ahlquist, and Ute Boeros, it is a unique curricular resource that will stand out as one of the best tools for introducing the next generation to Korea. Students who read the textbook will undoubtedly come to appreciate that Korea was not always a prosperous, developed country with abundant soft power and that the cultural and economic achievements of today are, in some ways, products of a vastly more difficult era in which much of the rest of the world often treated Korea as an afterthought.

Kim Gu, a famous Korean nationalist and leader of the independence movement against Japan, captured the hardships that Koreans endured during the turbulent era covered by this textbook in an essay he published in 1946. "As a man belonging to a nation that has lost its independence," he wrote, "I lived the seventy years of my life in much shame, sorrow, and trouble." Kim's life had traversed many of the events described in this book. He participated in the Donghak uprising as

a youth and remained committed to strengthening Korea and securing its independence for decades thereafter. He had spent several years in prison for his alleged role in a conspiracy to assassinate the Japanese Governor General and suffered torture at the hands of the colonial government. This did not stop him from participating in the March First demonstrations in 1919 and then becoming a leader of the Korean Provisional Government in China. Like many Koreans of his era, his life was characterized by an unending but ultimately unfulfilled quest for national independence.

Kim's life was a microcosm of the historical events described in the chapters of this textbook. These chapters tell the story of how all of Korea struggled to achieve national independence during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It was a quest that they pursued in different ways for over one hundred years and, one might argue, are still pursuing today. The Koreans were not, of course, an itinerant people searching for a territorial homeland, but they were a beleaguered people whose autonomy was constantly being threatened and impinged on by the larger and more powerful nations surrounding them. They struggled to adjust their politics and ideas to a rapidly changing world in which longstanding elements of the international order were torn apart and powerful new technologies vastly increased the capacities of foreign powers to intrude in Korean affairs.

What made the sudden intrusion of foreign powers so traumatic for Koreans, however, was not merely their military might and advanced technology. It was the ideas, religions, and worldviews that they brought with them. Westerners and Japanese brought to Korea new conceptions of enlightenment, new technologies such as electrification, and new religions such as Christianity which would exert a deep and pervasive influence over Korean society for decades to come. Koreans disagreed deeply and passionately about how to best achieve nationhood and independence in this rapidly shifting global environment. Some wanted to shut out foreign influences completely while others saw learning from the West and Japan as vehicles for enlightenment. Kim Gu and other Korean nationalists such as Gu's rival and future president of South Korea Syngman Rhee were relatively conservative and pro-American. Others such as Kim Il Sung and Kim Won-bong believed that Korea's problems demanded more radical solutions. This textbook, which perhaps more than any other available resource for secondary schools incorporates the Korean perspective on developments during the era of colonialism, shows how Koreans continued to exert agency during some of the most trying times in their history.

Organized chronologically, the chapters of this textbook offer insights into both the external forces that shaped Korea during the era of high imperialism and how Koreans adapted to, resisted, manipulated, transcended, and reshaped these forces. The first chapter looks at the period between 1840 to 1876 when the Joseon Dynasty found itself confronting a host of new foreign threats. Chinese hegemony in East Asia, which had set the parameters of Korea's foreign policy for centuries, started to fall apart after the Opium Wars. The chapter describes how the Daewongun sought to prevent any reverberations of these events from reaching Korea through pursuing a policy of isolation and carrying out campaigns against

Catholics. It also describes the emergence of the Donghak Movement, which took a slightly different approach to these challenges. Donghak's followers had diverse and complex motives but generally sought to address the Joseon Dynasty's social and economic weakness, promote reform, and respond to the threats posed by imperialism and the country's difficult economic circumstances. They believed that they could save their homeland through dissent.¹

¹On the nature of the Donghak Movement see also George Kallander, *Salvation through Dissent, Tonghak Heterodoxy and Early Modern Korean* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 2013).

By the late nineteenth century, as Chapter 2 demonstrates, isolation was no longer a viable option for Korea. It was inexorably drawn into an escalating rivalry for influence between China, Japan, and the Western powers in the Pacific. Koreans responded with a combination of frantic experimentation and vigorous debate. The chapter describes some of the early reforms implemented by King Gojong which included reshaping the bureaucracy and the creation of new educational institutions. By the 1880s, some Korean elites such as members of the newly created Enlightenment Party were seeking to effect even more radical and far-reaching reforms before suffering a setback when they attempted to establish a new government through the Gapsin Coup.

Koreans were continuing their struggle to fashion a modern national identity when international rivalries finally brought war to the peninsula in 1895. Chapter 3 describes how the Sino-Japanese War ended Chinese dominance on the peninsula and permanently changed Korea's international status. The treaty in turn triggered more foreign intrigues. But the brief three-year period covered by this chapter (1894-1897) was also a period in which Koreans continued their efforts to carry out changes and reforms with the objective of determining their own national destiny. The Sino-Japanese War itself had been triggered when the Donghak Movement finally coalesced into a widespread rebellion that fought to end corruption and make land distribution more equitable. While the Donghak Rebellion strove to transform Korea from the bottom up and was largely indigenous, the contemporaneous Gabo Reforms aimed to do so from the top down with some influence from Japan. And yet the Gabo reforms also reflected some of the demands made by the Donghak Rebellion's leaders. They ended slavery and passed new tax laws that repudiated class privilege. Even if they were partially a byproduct of Japanese machinations, these reforms were an important moment in Korea's struggle to build a modern nation.

As Chapter 4 explains, however, Koreans did not get the chance to resolve their disagreements about what their nation should look like. Within Korea, the years between 1897 and 1907 were characterized by continued struggle over the nation's future. After Gojong declared himself emperor in 1897 he launched a new wave of modernization programs known as the Gwangmu Reforms. The chapter also introduces students to the Independence Club, an association of reform-minded Koreans. The club's members, which included famous progressive intellectuals such as Yun Chiho and Seo Jaepil, professed admiration for the West and embraced modernization even while encouraging pride in Korean traditions. The club had several significant accomplishments including the publication of the first newspaper written entirely

in the Hangeul alphabet before it ran afoul of the monarchy and was disbanded. Yet these efforts to effect change and reform were ultimately not enough to fend off foreign intrusions. Having gained America's acquiescence and scored impressive victories against Russia on the battlefield, Japan made Korea a protectorate in 1905, paving the way for annexation five years later.

Even Japanese colonization did not stop Koreans from envisioning themselves as a nation—sometimes in competing ways. The Japanese colonial government employed a combination of political repression and cultural assimilation policies to extinguish any sense of Korean identity, but, as Chapter 5 demonstrates, Koreans resisted in a variety of ways. These included political protests such as the March First Movement Demonstrations, military struggles such as those waged by the Korean Independence Army in Manchuria, and literary and cultural activities that often contained subtle criticisms of Japanese rule.

Japanese repression and Korean resistance both climaxed during World War II. Between 1937 and 1945, Imperial Japan forced Koreans to fight in its military, labor in its mines and factories, and serve as sex slaves for its military. But Koreans found new methods—both violent and non-violent—to fight against their subordination. The final chapter captures this dynamic. It shows the various methods that Japan used to intensify its colonial rule and describes the harsh conditions that many Koreans were subjected to. It also devotes attention to the contested politics of Korean nationalism during this era. It shows how there were sharp disagreements among Koreans as to the best strategy for resisting Japan. Yet the resilience and cultural pride that lies at the heart of South Korea's more recent rise to global prominence also comes across.

Taken together, the chapters in this textbook beautifully convey the diversity of thought that existed among Koreans during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It is easy to see this era as one in which Koreans did not really have much agency in shaping developments on the peninsula. Yet the chapters in this textbook show a much more interesting and complicated picture. The detailed and nuanced picture of Korea's history presented in this textbook will be of great value to contemporary students and teachers for many reasons. History is never simply the study and memorization of dates and facts. Studying history forces us to imaginatively reconstruct the experiences of people who lived in other times and other places. This textbook asks students and educators to conjure in their minds a period of Korean history that speaks directly to major currents in global history, the situation on the Korean peninsula today, and some of the challenges that people around the world face in an era when globalization and free trade are being challenged by economic nationalism and localism.

The historical events related in this textbook occurred during the era of high imperialism in which the Western powers and Japan forcefully claimed territories in Asia and Africa. Driven by a combination of ideological and economic motives, they imposed their laws, customs, and languages on foreign peoples while extracting their resources and exploiting them through a variety of different means. Korea's experiences coping with great power rivalry and

colonialism echo those of numerous countries in the global south during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The techniques that imperial Japan used to govern and control Korea have their share of similarities as well as some dissimilarities to European colonial practices elsewhere in the world. And the different forms of resistance that Koreans developed to Japanese colonialism which included both everyday forms of resistance as well as more dramatic political and military actions can also enable students to draw interesting comparisons between Korea's experiences and those of other colonized nations. As Erez Manela has skillfully demonstrated, the rise of anti-colonial nationalism in Korea after 1919 had important parallels with developments in China, India, Egypt, Vietnam and other parts of the world.² Ultimately, studying Korea during the late 19th century and early 20th century is valuable not only because of what it tells us about Korea but also because of what it can teach us about the world at the time.

² Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

The textbook also offers students a window into the traumatic events that occurred in Korea between 1945 and 1953. It provides critical context that is often missing from accounts that begin with the end of World War II. When Washington and Moscow divided Korea along the thirty-eighth parallel in 1945, they superimposed the budding Cold War rivalry on top of frictions that already existed among Koreans themselves. As readers of this textbook will come to understand, some of the political and social divisions that prevailed in Korea in 1945 grew out of the disagreements that emerged among Koreans in the late nineteenth century over how to manage Great Power and in the early twentieth century over how to resist Japanese colonialism. Koreans never had the opportunity to resolve these arguments peacefully; instead, they were skewed and escalated by the Cold War. Ultimately, Koreans would fight a horrific three-year war that in many ways reflected these disagreements but did not, in any sense, resolve them.

Nor is it possible to understand the evolution of North and South Korea after the Korean War without some familiarity with the period covered in this textbook. In a manner that bears some resemblance to the way that the Daewongun once sought to prevent all forms of foreign influence from contaminating Korea, North Korea has continued to reject Western and international influences. Even today, it views the 1866 General Sherman Incident, during which the Daewongun ordered the destruction of an American merchant vessel that tried to open up trade with Joseon, as a heroic episode. The North Korean government often claims that Kim Il Sung's great-grandfather Kim Eungu fought courageously against this act of American aggression. At a broader level, while North Korea's high degree of mistrust of other countries and global influences undoubtedly stems in part from its experience fighting the United Nations Command during the Korean War, it also reflects the bitter experiences that Korea endured between 1850 and 1945. From the North Korean perspective, it is simply better to build up the military power necessary to keep the world at bay than it is to run the risk of allowing outside powers to dominate Korea again.

South Korea's global position today owes much to the reform and enlightenment thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Independence Club and other progressive intellectuals of the era wanted to strengthen Korea, but they wanted to strengthen it so that it could participate and thrive in the international community. After being left in ruin by the Korean War, South Korea has managed to do just that. It went through a period of remarkable economic growth during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s that turned it into one of the world's leading economies. Since the 1990s, it has transitioned to a pluralistic democracy and often ranks as high or higher than the United States on major indices of democratization. It plays an active and important role in international organizations ranging from the United Nations to the G20 to cultural and human rights organizations. South Korea has, in many ways, fulfilled the vision of Korea as a modern nation that nationalists such as Soh Jaepil, Kim Gu and others envisioned, although it has not been able to achieve their dream of a unified nation.

As students engage with the activities and materials included in this textbook about the dilemmas that Koreans faced during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, they will no doubt also reflect on how those dilemmas are like the ones that people around the world face today. We live in an era in which the forces of globalization and integration are increasingly coming to clash with localism and nativism. After decades of a liberal internationalist world order based on the free flow of trade and ideas, many leaders and people are suddenly expressing ambivalence about the changes that this order has brought about. Some see globalization as a force that has raised living standards around the world and enabled peoples in different countries to learn from each other in unprecedented ways. But others see it as a force that has destroyed jobs and threatened native cultures and identities. It is a debate not unlike the one that Koreans engaged in during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when Western and Japanese influence suddenly became impossible to resist.

One of the key reasons that South Korean cultural productions have enjoyed an exponential growth in popularity around the world in recent years is that so many people see reflections of themselves and potential new identities in its artists, themes and characters. This textbook helps students and teachers find the same relatability in a much earlier generation of Koreans. Hopefully, it can enable today's younger generations to understand more deeply the full story behind how Korea became such an important global force.



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01

Mid-Century Challenges

IB Lines of Inquiry

Inquiry Questions

Rise of Sedo (factional) politics and the weakening of the royal authority

To what extent did the rise of Sedo politics present a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

Spread of Christianity

To what extent did the spread of Christianity pose a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

Threat of Donghak Learning

To what extent did the threat of Donghak learning challenge the Korean monarchy?

Heungseon Daewongun's reforms (1864 to 1873) and isolation policy

To what extent did Daewongun's reforms address the challenges facing Korea in the mid-19th century?

Introduction

In the mid-19th century, Korea stood at a crossroads. Still governed by the long-standing Joseon Dynasty, it appeared – at least to outside observers – as a land isolated from the rapidly industrialising and imperialising world, resistant to foreign contact and entrenched in tradition. Western diplomats and imperialists referred to it as the “*Hermit Kingdom*,” a phrase that conjured images of a society cloistered in time and in need of being “opened.” This language, however, reflected more about the mindset of external powers than the reality of Korean society itself.

Far from being static or sealed off, Korea was experiencing profound internal transformations. The weakening of royal authority through *sedo jeongchi* – a political system dominated by aristocratic in-law families – had fractured the court and created deep administrative instability. At the same time, new ideologies and spiritual movements were taking root. Catholicism, introduced by Korean scholars and foreign missionaries, was gaining converts, even as the state responded with waves of violent persecution. Meanwhile, Donghak (Eastern Learning), an indigenous movement blending Confucian ethics with local beliefs and social justice ideals, emerged as a grassroots challenge to both foreign influence and domestic corruption.

Amidst these tensions, a single figure attempted to restore central control: the Heungseon Daewongun, father of the young King Gojong. As regent from 1864 to 1873, he launched a bold programme of political and fiscal reform while fiercely resisting foreign encroachment. His isolationist policies, which led to military confrontations with France and the United States, were shaped by both a deep suspicion of Western imperialism and a desire to preserve Korea's cultural and political sovereignty.

This chapter explores the period between 1840 and 1876, a time often mischaracterised as stagnant but in reality marked by ideological ferment, popular resistance, and ambitious state-led reform. Through these developments, we will see how Korea navigated the complexities of internal decay and external pressure, laying the groundwork for the dramatic transformation that would follow in the late 19th century.

Timeline

1839-1849	Sustained persecution of Catholics, culminating in the Gihae Persecution (1839), establishes a pattern of repression under the Joseon court.
1849-1863	Reign of King Cheoljong: A weak monarch manipulated by the Andong Kim clan; corruption and factionalism deepen as the monarchy loses authority.
1850s	Rural Hardship Intensifies: Peasants face rising taxation, famine, and administrative corruption, eroding confidence in the Confucian order and fueling grassroots unrest.
1853	Commodore Perry arrives in Japan, signaling the opening of East Asia to Western influence and serving as a warning to Korea.
1860	Founding of Donghak (Eastern Learning): Choe Je-u launches a spiritual-social reform movement calling for equality under "Heavenly Lord," directly challenging Confucian hierarchy.
1863	Death of King Cheoljong and Rise of the Daewongun (Yi Ha-eung): Acting as regent for his young son Gojong, the Daewongun embarks on centralizing reforms to restore royal power.
1864	Execution of Choe Je-u: The Daewongun suppresses Donghak as heresy and sedition, driving the movement underground and strengthening its anti-elite identity.
1865-1867	Reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung Palace: Symbolic revival of royal authority, orchestrated by Dowager Queen Jo [Queen Shinjeong] and implemented by Daewongun, financed by heavy taxation and corvée labour, which alienates peasants and local elites.
1866	Byeong-in Persecution: Massive crackdown on Korean Catholics and French missionaries reinforces Confucian orthodoxy and marks the height of religious repression.

1866	Battle of Ganghwa: Daewongun's forces repel the French punitive expedition, celebrated domestically as a victory defending national sovereignty. <i>General Sherman</i> Incident: Daewongun's forces destroy an American ship demanding trade, the <i>General Sherman</i> .
1868	Oppert Incident: A failed attempt by a foreign trader to desecrate the Daewongun's father's tomb deepens isolationist resolve and anti-foreign sentiment.
1873-1876	End of the Daewongun's Regency and Treaty of Ganghwa: Queen Min's faction rises, the Daewongun is dismissed, and Korea's forced treaty with Japan ends isolation—closing a turbulent era of internal reform and conservative resistance.

Key Terms

Sedo politics	A system of factional rule in the late Joseon dynasty, where powerful in-law families dominated the royal court, weakening the king's authority.
Joseon dynasty	The ruling dynasty in Korea from 1392 to 1897, known for its Confucian bureaucracy and long-lasting cultural influence.
Donghak (Eastern Learning)	A Korean religious and social movement founded in the 1860s that blended Confucianism, shamanism, and nationalism, opposing both corruption and foreign influence.
Heungseon Daewongun (hereafter referred to as the Daewongun)	A title meaning "Prince of the Great Court"; it refers to Yi Ha-eung, father of King Gojong, who ruled as regent from 1864 to 1873.
Anachronism	The act of attributing a custom, event, or idea to a time period where it does not belong—often seen as a knowledge issue in historical interpretation.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA



I. Sedo Politics and the Decline of Royal Authority (c. 1800–1860)

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the rise of Sedo politics present a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

In the early 19th century, Joseon Korea was governed not by strong monarchs, but by the powerful families into which the royal family married. This system, known as *sedo jeongchi* – translated as “in-law government” – was a defining feature of the political landscape from the late 18th century into the mid-19th century. Rather than the monarch himself exercising power, it was often his queen’s family – especially her father or brothers – who dominated court politics and administrative appointments. This period witnessed the rapid decline of royal authority and the emergence of oligarchic factional rule, led by entrenched aristocratic (yangban) clans.

The most dominant of these were the Andong Kim and Pungyang Jo clans, who alternated control over the state apparatus through strategic marriage alliances with the royal house. These families ensured their daughters married into the royal family, allowing them to place relatives in key positions throughout the court and bureaucracy. Once their power was established, they actively excluded rival families from meaningful political participation, thereby monopolising civil and military offices. The *Andong Kim* clan, in particular, exerted nearly unbroken control from the reign of King Sunjo (r. 1800-1834) through to the reign of King Cheoljong (r. 1849-1863), with figures such as Kim Jo-sun and his descendants effectively running the state behind the throne.



Portrait of King Cheoljong, 1861



King Heonjong's Wedding Ceremony, 1844

Factionalism under *sedo jeongchi* was not new to Joseon – it had long been a feature of court life – but the *sedo* system differed in its extreme consolidation of power within in-law families and its near complete marginalisation of the monarch. The balance that had once existed between scholars and officials had broken down, replaced by hereditary oligarchy. This marked a departure from earlier periods when the king could act as a final arbiter among rival Confucian factions, but it is also worth noting this is not a period of extended feudalism. By the 19th century, the king was increasingly a figurehead, and factional power was rooted in family networks rather than ideological or scholarly rivalries.



TOK Connection

In the Confucian framework of Joseon Korea, legitimate power was supposed to derive from moral virtue and scholarly learning. But in the *sedo* era, these ideals were hollowed out. The people who controlled access to knowledge—such as interpretation of the classics, exam results, and royal communication—also controlled access to power.

This raises TOK questions:

1. Is all knowledge equally valued in society? Why might some knowledge (e.g., political connections) outweigh others (e.g., classical education)?
2. Can historical knowledge ever be neutral, especially if it is recorded by elites?

OR

During the *sedo jeongchi* period, power was held not through formal legal authority but through control of networks, appointments, and access to the king. The dominant clans acted as gatekeepers of both political information and institutional memory, shaping decision-making and ensuring continuity of their power.

1. How does this challenge the idea that "knowledge is power"? In this case, was power more about restricting knowledge and access rather than disseminating it?
2. To what extent did Confucian ideology, which emphasizes rule by the morally upright and learned elite, mask the reality of corruption and nepotism?
3. How important is it to understand the context in which knowledge is created?

Consequences for Governance

The political domination of a small number of clans had serious consequences for governance. One of the most damaging effects was the widespread sale of offices (*maegwan*), where official posts were purchased rather than earned through the traditional *gwageo* (civil service exam) system. This undermined the meritocratic ideals of Confucian governance and allowed unqualified individuals to occupy critical roles within the bureaucracy. Provincial governors, military officers, and magistrates could buy their positions, then used them to extract wealth through corruption, heavy taxation, and local exploitation.

These abuses fed into broader administrative inefficiencies. Taxation, which relied on accurate land surveys and household records, became erratic and exploitative. Many yangban evaded taxes entirely, forcing greater burdens on commoners. As the central government failed to ensure fair distribution of tax responsibilities or protect its subjects from abusive officials, public trust in the state diminished sharply. Peasant unrest and banditry increased in the countryside, and the state lacked both the will and the means to respond effectively.

The weakness of the monarchy during this period exacerbated these trends. With real power held by in-law clans, kings such as Sunjo and Cheoljong were unable to discipline corrupt officials or enact significant reform. Cheoljong, in particular, was selected for the throne because he was perceived as a powerless figurehead. He was a distant relative from the royal line with little education or political experience, chosen by the Andong Kim clan to ensure their continued dominance. The erosion of royal powers was not only symbolic but also structural – key decisions were made in royal councils dominated by the in-laws, while the king was increasingly sidelined.

These conditions generated growing cynicism toward the Confucian ideals of just rule and virtuous government. The social contract at the heart of Joseon political ideology – that the state would protect the people in exchange for their loyalty and labor – was breaking down. Disillusionment with officialdom laid fertile ground for the spread of heterodox ideologies, such as Catholicism and later Donghak, both of which challenged the authority of the state and the legitimacy of its Confucian moral order.

Attempts at Central Control

Despite the dominance of the in-law factions, there were attempts – though mostly short lived and unsuccessful – by some monarchs to reassert central authority. King Jeongjo (r. 1776-1800), the last truly powerful Joseon monarch before the onset of *sedo jeongchi*, made significant efforts to reform the bureaucracy and curb the influence of factional politics. He established the Kyujanggak royal library as an institution for scholarly reform and recruited talented officials from outside the main factions, including individuals from seo (secondary status) families. Jeongjo also attempted to centralise military command and improve governance in the provinces.

However, Jeongjo's death in 1800 marked the end of these reform efforts. His successor, Sunjo, was only 10 years old at his accession, leaving the door open for Kim Jo-sun, his maternal grandfather, to dominate court politics. The trend continued with Cheoljong, whose reign was essentially controlled by the Andong Kim faction. Unlike Jeongjo, these kings lacked the political leverage or personal capability to challenge the existing power structure.

Indeed, what reformist movements did occur were often undone by entrenched clan interests. Even when public sentiment and elite reformers demanded change, the lack of an independent monarch with sufficient political base made it impossible to implement structural reforms. In many cases, attempts at central control were reactive rather than proactive – meant to suppress unrest or consolidate clan power rather than to fundamentally improve governance.

Internal Politics and Korea's Response to External Threats

Korea's response to the mounting external threats of the mid-19th century was not simply reactive; it was deeply shaped by internal political dynamics and long-standing ideological commitments. Within the royal court – firmly dominated by the Andong Kim clan – foreign affairs were interpreted through a distinctively Korean neo-Confucian lens, rooted in the kingdom's self-conception as the last bastion of moral governance and ritual orthodoxy. Korea's tributary relationship with Qing China was not only a diplomatic framework but a pillar of Joseon's own legitimacy. For many within the ruling elite, Qing weakness in the face of Western aggression during the Opium Wars (1839-42) was less a call for reform than a cautionary tale: foreign engagement was seen as corrosive to Confucian values, social hierarchy, and the moral order on which Joseon society was built.

Rather than opening the door to external influence, Korean leaders actively reaffirmed their ideological and political isolation. Western imperialism – especially British incursions into China – was framed in Korean discourse not as a geopolitical reality to confront but as a civilisational threat to resist. The fear was not merely of military invasion but of cultural contamination, moral decay, and the potential breakdown of Korea's carefully maintained social order. In this context, the maintenance of strict isolationism became not a failure to modernise, but a conscious expression of national sovereignty, internal stability, and elite control.

Within Korea's ruling class, divergent perspectives began to appear as Qing authority declined. A handful of court officials quietly questioned the wisdom of continued isolation, especially in light of Russia's growing presence in the northeast. These figures – often marginalised or lacking clan backing – proposed limited diplomatic engagement with Russia as a means of protecting Korea's northern frontier. However, these proposals were repeatedly suppressed by the dominant Andong Kim faction, who feared that any shift in foreign policy might invite not only foreign demands but domestic political rebalancing. In this way, foreign affairs remained inseparable from internal court politics: foreign contact was viewed not as a matter of statecraft, but as a potential destabiliser of the existing domestic power structure.

For Korea's ruling elite, the transformation of Japan, a neighbour who was also historically isolated, into a state succumbing to Western influence following the arrival of the United States in 1853, served as a stark warning. Unlike some Japanese leaders, Korean officials did not see the West as a source of opportunity or technological progress. Instead, Japan's example reinforced a growing sense that isolation was a shield – however fragile – against internal upheaval and foreign domination. Joseon's position became paradoxical: increasingly surrounded by states undergoing forced transformation, Korea remained committed to defending its autonomy by refusing to change.

Amidst this atmosphere of mounting uncertainty, Yi Ha-eung – the Daewongun – emerged in the 1860s as a powerful regent seeking to restore royal authority. Though briefly open to pragmatic diplomacy with certain European powers such as France, his primary objective was not engagement but internal consolidation. His early overtures were calculated, aimed at strengthening his position rather than opening the kingdom. Ultimately, he aligned with Korea's dominant conservative consensus: that sovereignty could best be preserved through cultural purification, restoration of Confucian discipline, suppression of heterodox beliefs, and military self-reliance. (There will be more on this later in the chapter.)

The Daewongun's hostility to foreign intrusion was most vividly displayed during the 1868 Oppert Incident, when the German trader Ernst Oppert, with the covert support of French missionaries, attempted to desecrate the Daewongun's father's tomb in an effort to blackmail the court into opening Korea to outside influence. The raid was clumsy and ultimately failed, but it deeply shocked Korean society. For the Daewongun, this was not just an affront to security but a sacrilegious violation of filial piety and Confucian order itself. His response was uncompromising; he intensified crackdowns on Catholicism, denounced Westerners as cultural vandals, and doubled down on isolationist policies. In Korean eyes, the incident epitomised the moral corruption of the outside world and justified the conviction that isolation was not weakness but virtue.



Perspectives

During the regency of Daewongun (1864–1873), numerous monuments were erected across Korea. Constructed in 1871, these monuments were intended to discourage contact with foreigners and were placed at more than 200 major transport hubs. Each bore an inscription in Chinese characters that read: “The Western barbarians have invaded. To refuse to fight is to advocate peace. To advocate peace is to betray the country.” Beneath this, in smaller characters, appeared a final admonition: “Let this serve as a warning to our descendants for the next ten thousand years.”

Discussion Prompt

In 1870s Korea, the anti-Christian steles conveyed a powerful political message. How might peasants, officials, Confucian elites, Christian converts, and foreign missionaries have interpreted this message differently? To what extent do these varying interpretations reveal the broader tensions within Korean society during the Daewongun's regency?

Yet even in this climate of retrenchment, not all Korean thinkers agreed with the Daewongun's uncompromising line. Pak Gyu-su, a respected official and scholar, argued in the 1860s that Korea could not indefinitely shield itself from the global transformations underway. Drawing on earlier *silhak* (practical learning) tradition, he suggested that limited engagement – particularly in trade and diplomacy – might strengthen Korea's defenses rather than weaken them. In his famous "Treatise on Avoiding Barbarian Ships," Pak warned that Western military and commercial power posed a direct threat to Korea's security and urged the court to learn from China's humiliations. While he remained committed to Confucian governance, Pak's proposals revealed a distinctly Korean reformist vision: cautious adaptation in order to preserve sovereignty. His voice was a minority one, sidelined by the dominant Andong Kim faction and eclipsed by the Daewongun's ascendancy, but it foreshadowed the debates that would erupt in the 1870s and 1880s.

The Daewongun's strategy did not simply reject reform – it reasserted a Korean-centred vision of order, one in which stability, hierarchy, and ritual propriety were paramount. From this perspective, foreign threats were not challenges to be adapted to, but temptations to be rejected. In choosing retrenchment over reform, the Daewongun acted not out of ignorance, but out of a deliberate conviction that Korea's strength lay in preserving its own civilisational integrity. Yet this inward turn, while ideologically coherent, left the state increasingly unprepared to confront the accelerating imperialism of the late 19th century.

II. Spread of Christianity

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the spread of Christianity pose a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

Catholicism as an Internal and External Threat

The spread of Christianity in Korea, particularly Catholicism, emerged as one of the most potent ideological and political challenges to the monarchy in the mid-19th century. Unlike many other regions, Christianity did not first arrive via European missionaries but through scholarly contact with Catholic texts from Qing China. In the late 18th century, Korean scholars such as Yi Seung-hun – a pivotal early convert – played a foundational role in the faith's initial spread. Yi, along with other members of the *Silhak* (Practical Learning) movement, had encountered Western scientific and religious writings through diplomatic and scholarly exchanges with Beijing and brought Catholic ideas back to Korea. By the early 19th century, however, foreign missionaries – especially from the French Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris – began arriving clandestinely through China, providing institutional support and religious leadership. As missionary activity expanded, Catholicism posed an increasingly visible challenge to the Joseon monarchy – not only as a foreign faith, but as a direct ideological affront to the Neo-Confucian political and cultural orders.

Catholicism and Court Responses, 1830s-1860s

The court's response to Catholicism was uneven, and it fluctuated based on internal political alignments and broader concerns about foreign influence. Even before the 1830s, Catholics had already faced periodic repression, with early converts – including prominent scholars and laypeople – persecuted for their beliefs. Between 1834 and 1849, there was a more sustained and systematic ban on Catholicism, during which its adherents were subjected to severe persecution. The most notorious of these crackdowns occurred in 1839 during the *Gihae Persecution*, when dozens of Korean Catholics and several French missionaries were executed. To the Joseon monarchy, Catholicism appeared deeply subversive: its rejection of ancestral rites, its emphasis on salvation, and its loyalty to a foreign Pope all directly undermined Confucian principles of filial piety and political hierarchy.

A brief period of toleration emerged under King Cheoljong (1849-1863), who reversed these persecutions. Whether driven by political calculation or genuine openness, his reign witnessed the near doubling of Korea's Catholic population, from approximately 11,000 to around 20,000. Foreign missionaries operated more freely, and Korean converts grew bolder in practicing and spreading their faith. This toleration, however, did not reflect a broad-based acceptance within the court. Rather, it was a fragile detente, subject to reversal based on internal power dynamics and shifting external threats.

Foreign Invasions and the Politics of Religion

The destruction of Beijing by Anglo-French forces during the Second Opium War in 1860 reverberated deeply in Korea. For the Korean court, the humiliation of Qing China – long regarded as the centre of regional order – raised alarm questions about Korea's own vulnerability. If the Qing could be subdued by Western powers, what chance did Joseon have? Within the elite, debate emerged over how best to avoid a similar catastrophe. Some officials argued that tolerating Catholic communities in Korea might soften Western hostility, using religion as a buffer against intervention. Others, however, viewed Catholicism as a dangerous threat to Confucian orthodoxy and social order. As a result, Korea's Catholic population – both foreign missionaries and Korean converts – became enmeshed in larger struggles over how to confront the new world of Western imperial pressure and shifting power in East Asia.

In this volatile context, the rise of the Daewongun (Yi Ha-eung) to the regency in the 1860s brought initial signs of pragmatism. He appeared amenable to maintaining relations with French missionaries, seeing them as a potential counterweight to Russian advances on Korea's northern border. For a brief period, the presence of Catholic missionaries was tolerated, particularly because France could be useful as a geopolitical buffer. However, this could be seen as a tactical move rather than a sign of ideological shift.

Other factions within the court, notably those led by Dowager Queen Jo [Queen Shinjeong], remained vehemently opposed to Catholicism. They regarded it as a dangerous and foreign-influenced cult that undermined state legitimacy. Their fears were seemingly confirmed in early 1866, when two Korean Catholic converts bypassed official channels and approached the Daewongun directly – an extraordinary breach of court protocol. On 9 January, 1866, the court issued orders for their arrest on charges of treason, marking a dramatic reversal in policy.



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skills

Source A:

From W.E. Griffis, *Corea: The Hermit Kingdom* (1911)

"The year 1866 is phenomenal in Korean history. It seemed as if the governments and outlaws alike, of many nations, had conspired to pierce or breach the walls of isolation at many points. Russians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Americans, Germans, authorized and unauthorized, landed to trade, rob, kill, or, what was equally obnoxious to the regent and his court, to make treaties.

In January the Russians, in a war-vessel, again appeared in Broughton's Bay, and demanded the right of trade. At the same time they stated that some Russian troops were to pass the frontier of Ham-kiung to enforce the demand. The usual stereotyped response was made, that Corea was a vassal of China, and could not treat with any other nation without permission of that Power, and that a special ambassador charged with the matter would be immediately despatched to Peking, etc."

Source B:

From Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game* (2013)

"The notion of 'opening' Korea was in standard use by diplomats and historians during the nineteenth century. Scholars, travelers, and observers of this period referred to Korea as the 'hermit kingdom' in need of being 'opened.' Such terms are rarely used in academic circles today, as they are considered both ahistorical and anachronistic. Ahistorical in the sense that Korea's political culture and economy were opened in all sorts of ways before the 1860s, and anachronistic in the sense that the portrayal of Korea as being in the waiting room of history to be acted upon by the Great Powers is simply not accurate."

Questions:

1. What assumptions or values are embedded in **Excerpt A**?
2. How does **Excerpt B** challenge the narrative in **Excerpt A**?
3. What does this tell us about how historical knowledge is constructed?

Can history ever be written without bias? Why or why not?

TOK connection: Can two contradictory historical accounts both be considered valid? Why or why not?

Suppression and Retaliation: The 1866 Persecutions and The French Expedition

The 1866 Korean Catholic Persecution, known in Korea as the Byeong-in Persecution, was a large-scale campaign of religious suppression carried out by the Joseon government, lasting approximately four years. It specifically targeted Catholics, including over 8,000 laypeople as well as numerous French missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society. This persecution arose from both religious and political concerns: the Korean regent, Heungseon Daewongun, viewed Christianity as a subversive influence that threatened the Confucian social order, particularly in the context of increasing Western presence in East Asia.

Initially, the Daewongun had exhibited a degree of tolerance toward Catholics, but this soon gave way to a severe crackdown. By the end of March 1866, nine of the twelve French missionaries operating in Korea had been hunted down, tortured, and executed. The systematic targeting of foreign clergy was not only a religious purge but also a political statement: the Joseon state sought to assert its sovereignty and resist foreign encroachment, even at the risk of provoking international retaliation.

Paper 1 Practice

Inquiry Question: How did fears of Western imperialism influence the Daewongun's persecution of Christians in Korea?

Source A:

Context: 1866: *The French Come to Korea*, edited by Brother Anthony of Taizé, compiles primary documents related to the 1866 French expedition, including French naval reports, missionary letters, and Korean records. The collection provides insight into the political, religious, and diplomatic tensions between Korea and Western powers, particularly highlighting the complex interactions between French missionaries, the Korean state, and neighboring China.

Content: The 1860s saw rising conflicts between French Catholic missionaries and Chinese authorities. Attacks on missionaries occurred for multiple reasons: following the 1860 treaty, bishops, priests, and sisters had established missions across China in ways that often provoked local hostility. While many attacks were of popular origin rather than official policy, disputes also arose over land and church property. French diplomats grew frustrated with China's refusal to settle such matters, leading to the belief that "gunboat diplomacy" was necessary—not only to enforce treaties but also to intimidate anti-Christian populations. As China's provinces were largely inaccessible, France sought to deliver a "lesson" nearby, in Korea, which could serve as a warning to Chinese anti-Christian mobs. Henri de Bellonet later explained that Roze's expedition was intended less to punish Korea and more to demonstrate French power to potential enemies of the Church in the region.

Source B:

Context: Claude Charles Dallet (1829–1878) was a French missionary of the Paris Foreign Missions Society who served in India and later compiled missionary reports in Korea, publishing *Histoire de l'Eglise de Corée* in 1874. His writings reflect the perspective of European missionaries in East Asia and provide insight into the Korean court's reaction to Christianity.

Content: At the time, the Korean court, largely hostile to Christianity, resolved to abolish it completely. The regent and officials, emboldened by the absence of Russian forces and reports of European deaths in China, saw an opportunity to enforce persecution. A letter from the Korean embassy in Beijing in December 1865 reporting European executions across China intensified fears. The four chief ministers condemned the regent's leniency toward bishops, urging the execution of all Christians. Although the regent warned of possible French or British reprisals, his ministers cited previous European killings, such as Bishop Imbert and Fathers Maubant and Chastan in 1839, without retaliation. Ultimately, the regent signed death warrants for all European bishops and priests and decreed strict enforcement of anti-Christian laws, marking a turning point that led directly to the mass persecution in early 1866.

Source C:

Context: Michael J. Seth, a professor of history at James Madison University, specializes in Korean and East Asian history. His works, including *Korea at War* (2023) and *North Korea: A History* (2018), aim to provide broad surveys situating Korean developments in regional and global contexts. Seth's perspective emphasizes state-society interactions and foreign influence, making his account useful for understanding the Catholic Persecution of 1866 and the French punitive expedition, although his work is oriented toward informing students and general readers rather than presenting new archival discoveries.

Content: Initially, the Daewongun tolerated the Christian community. However, foreign crises in East Asia fueled fears that Christianity, as a Western ideology, could destabilize Korea. Officials linked Catholic missionary activity to potential French aggression, prompting the regent to launch major persecution in 1866. In March, nine French priests illegally in Korea were ordered to leave; six were executed, while three escaped. Forty Korean converts were also killed. Warnings from the Qing government did little to deter the regent, whose fears were reinforced by the U.S.S. General Sherman incident, in which a U.S. ship attempted to force trade, attacked civilians, and was subsequently destroyed. Further persecutions resulted in thousands of deaths. In October, France sent a punitive expedition, capturing a fort on Kanghwa Island but eventually retreating. Tensions persisted, as seen in 1868 when German merchant Ernest Oppert desecrated the Daewongun's father's grave in an unsuccessful bid to negotiate trade concessions. Seth frames these events as the outcome of domestic anti-Christian sentiment, perceived foreign threats, and the interplay of state and society in Korea during the mid-19th century.

Questions:

1. Explain how the content of both Source A and Source B can be relevant to addressing the inquiry question. (6 marks)
2. Analyze how context influences how Source C can be used to address the inquiry question. (6 marks)
3. Examine how the perspectives presented in all the sources can be used to address the inquiry question. (12 marks)

That retaliation came swiftly. Outraged by the execution of its nationals, France launched a punitive expedition later that year under the command of Rear Admiral Pierre-Gustave Roze. French forces captured parts of Ganghwa Island and demanded accountability from the Korean monarchy. At the same time, French diplomatic representatives in Beijing, including Henri de Bellonet, increased pressure on Korea, framing the incident as requiring a firm response.

Despite the French offensive, Korean forces successfully resisted. In the Battle of Ganghwa (1866), the French were repelled, an outcome celebrated domestically as a major victory. Following this confrontation, the Korean government intensified its persecution of Catholics, framing it as both a religious and patriotic duty. Catholicism was increasingly associated not only with theological dissent but also with treason, foreign collaboration, and disloyalty to the state. This period, therefore, represents a complex intersection of religion, politics, and nationalism in mid-19th century Korea, lasting from 1866 and continuing in various forms for several years thereafter.

Why was Catholicism seen as particularly dangerous?

1. **Doctrinal conflict with Confucianism:** Catholic rejection of ancestral rites and loyalty to the Pope was seen as undermining core tenets of the Confucian social and political order.
2. **Subversion of hierarchies:** Catholicism's message of universal salvation and equality before God threatened Korea's rigid class structure and hierarchy.
3. **Encouragement of Foreign Intrusion:** Missionaries were often perceived as advance agents of imperialism. The pattern seen in China — missionary presence followed by gunboat diplomacy — only heightened Korean suspicions.
4. **Fear of Rebellion:** Korean converts were often accused of forming secret networks and were sometimes believed to be planning insurrections. While this was largely unfounded, it played into official paranoia.

While the number of Catholics remained relatively small compared to the broader population, their perceived threat was magnified by the geopolitical environment of the 1860s. The Daewongun's shift from pragmatism to brutal suppression reflected the pressures of maintaining sovereignty in a region increasingly dominated by Western imperial powers.



TOK Connection

Optional Theme: Knowledge and religion, Knowledge and politics

Knowledge Question: How does the perception of “foreign knowledge” influence whether it is accepted or rejected by a society?

Discussion Prompts

1. Was Catholicism rejected in Korea primarily because of its beliefs or because of its associations with foreign powers?
2. Can a belief system be judged independently of its political implications?
3. What role do authority figures (e.g., the monarchy, court officials) play in shaping whether certain knowledge is accepted or persecuted?

Paper 3 Practice

'The spread of Christianity posed the most serious ideological challenge to the Joseon state between 1840 and 1876. To what extent do you agree with this assessment?

"To what extent" questions ask you to:

- Evaluate the significance of a given factor or claim.
- Consider **other relevant factors** or perspectives.
- Make a **judgment** based on historical evidence.

Step-by-step planning:

1. Unpack the Question:

- a. Identify the **main claim** (e.g. Christianity was the most significant threat).
- b. Identify **key terms** (e.g. challenge, ideology, Joseon state, 1840–1876).
- c. Ask yourself: *What is the argument? What are the possible counterarguments?*

2. Brainstorm Factors:

- a. Make a list of causes, consequences, or competing influences.
 - ii. Donghak (Eastern Learning)
 - iii. Rise of Western secular ideas (e.g., Enlightenment-influenced diplomacy)
 - iv. Corruption and weakening of Confucian bureaucracy
 - v. Internal reformist ideas
 - vi. **What other factors can you add to this list?**
- b. Categorize them into **supporting** and **challenging** the claim.

3. Create a Judgment:

- a. Decide your argument: Do you **fully agree**, **partially agree**, or **disagree**?
- b. Your essay should lead toward this judgment, not just list information.

Possible paragraph themes

Argument	Evidence	Evaluation
Christianity as a major threat	• Perceived as heretical and anti-Confucian • Associated with foreign powers • Active persecution in 1839, 1846, and 1866 • Spread among <i>yangban</i> and commoners alike	Major cause of internal repression and xenophobic policy (Daewongun). Directly linked to Western intervention (French campaign 1866).
Donghak as ideological challenge	• Founded by Choe Je-u (1860s) • Synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and indigenous spirituality • Advocated social equality	Appealed to lower classes but was less organised/threatening during this period; greater impact post-1890s.
Corruption and Confucian hypocrisy	• Growing factionalism and inefficiency • Moral disillusionment with Confucian elite	Undermined confidence in the system but didn't offer an alternative ideology.
Western secular/modern ideas	• Diplomatic missions from the U.S. and France • Pressure to open ports • Technological superiority	Still mostly resisted by isolationist policy; less ideological, more geopolitical.

4. Write a strong introduction:

A good introduction should:

- a. **Set the context:** Situate Joseon Korea (1840–1876) in terms of politics, ideology, and foreign influence.
 - i. Example: “In the mid-19th century, the Joseon state remained a Confucian monarchy, largely isolationist and resistant to foreign influence.”

b. State your thesis: Answer the question directly.

- i. Example: "Christianity posed a serious ideological challenge, but it was not the only challenge facing the Joseon state during this period."

c. Outline the essay structure: Mention the key factors you will analyse.

- i. Example: "This essay will evaluate the impact of Christianity, as well as the challenges posed by Donghak, Cofucian corruption, and Western ideas, to determine the extent of Christianity's influence."

5. Student Writing Instructions:

- Write 3–5 lines.
- Include context + thesis + factors.
- Use evaluative phrases like: *this essay argues that...*, *it can be argued that...*, *while significant....*

You may find the following useful to include in your essays:

Purpose	Examples/Phrases
Introduce argument	This essay argues that.../It can be argued that.../The spread of Christianity represented...
Show causation	Led to/resulted in/contributed to/triggered/provoked
Compare/contrast	In contrast/whereas/alternatively/on the other hand/however
Weigh significance	Was more significant than/less influential than/to a greater extent/ultimately
Evaluate/qualify	although/while/nonetheless/it could be argued/this suggests that
Link evidence to argument	This demonstrates that/this illustrates/as evidenced by/which shows that
Conclude/summarise judgement	In conclusion/therefore/overall/thus/the evidence suggests that

III. Donghak Learning and its Challenge to the Joseon Monarchy, c. 1850-1876

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the threat of Donghak learning challenge the Korean monarchy?

Origins and Ideological Foundations

Donghak (Eastern Learning) emerged in the 1860s as an indigenous response to social injustice, foreign influence, and the perceived failures of the Joseon state. Founded by **Choe Je-u** (also known by his pen name Su-un), the movement fused spiritual ideas with a radical critique of the existing order. Central to Donghak thought was the concept of Sicheonju (Heavenly Lord), a divine presence inherent in all people, which Choe claimed had been revealed to him through mystical experience.

The Joseon Dynasty's legitimacy rested on Neo-Confucianism, which emphasised a hierarchical, ordered society governed by moral virtue. Yet by the 1850s, the ruling yangban aristocracy had become widely viewed as corrupt, self-serving, and morally bankrupt. Positions of power were often inherited or purchased rather than earned, and Confucian ideals of benevolence had decayed into nepotism, bribery, and apathy.

Peasants and commoners saw Confucian officials failing to uphold their responsibilities. Corrupt magistrates and tax collectors imposed arbitrary levies, demanded illegal tribute, and sold government offices, all in direct violation of Confucian ethics. In this context, Donghak's call for moral reform and egalitarian spiritual awakening offered a compelling alternative rooted in lived reality.

How was Korea's rural population affected by the economic instability?

Korea's rural population bore the brunt of economic instability:

- **Land tenure and taxation:** Most peasants worked land they did not own. They were burdened by high land rents, often owed to absentee landlords, and frequently fell into debt. Despite laws meant to regulate taxation, many were forced to pay multiple times: to the state, to local officials, and to private landowners.
- **Mismanagement of relief systems:** Famine and drought were frequent, but grain relief systems had collapsed due to embezzlement. During famines, food was hoarded by officials and sold at inflated prices, further deepening peasant misery.
- **Military service and labour exploitation:** The poor were conscripted for military corvée labour or public construction projects, often without fair compensation. In contrast, the *yangban* used their influence to avoid service.

Social Alienation and the Crisis of Faith in the State

This period also saw increasing disillusionment with the monarchy itself, especially under the shadow rule of royal in-laws (see above: Sedo politics) and ineffective kings. The concept of the king as “father to the people” was hollow when the state appeared indifferent or hostile to common suffering.

Donghak reframed the spiritual world: rather than relying on ritualistic Neo-Confucian hierarchy, it taught that all humans were equal under Sicheonju. This doctrine dissolved distinctions between the elite and commoners, empowering the disenfranchised with a sense of dignity and cosmic justice. It echoed earlier Korean traditions, promising a moral transformation of society and divine punishment of corrupt elites.

The Daewongun, ruling as regent for his son King Gojong, perceived Donghak as a domestic threat. In 1864, he ordered the execution of Choe Je-u, charging him with heresy and sedition. Yet the movement did not die. Instead, it went underground, with followers organising secret meetings and transmitting Choe’s teachings orally and through clandestine writings such as *Yongdam Yusa*.

After Choe Je-u’s execution, Choe Si-hyeong (Haewol) took leadership. Under his guidance, the movement became increasingly structured, forming networks of *poe* (cells or gatherings) across the southern provinces. These groups were not only spiritual communities but also proto-political organisations, laying the groundwork for future collective action.

By the 1870s, Donghak had evolved beyond a spiritual message. It had become a grassroots movement for justice, combining spiritual renewal with political protest, calls for land reform, and demands for fair governance. It is no surprise that secret societies began to form under the Donghak banner, eventually laying the groundwork for open rebellion in the 1890s.

Although Donghak opposed Christianity and Western imperialism, it also rejected Qing China’s dominance, advocating for Korea’s independence and spiritual sovereignty. Its ideology reflected xenophobic nationalism, which gained popularity among Koreans who believed that the Joseon court was failing to defend Korea’s autonomy. This positioned Donghak as a multi-directional resistance movement: it rejected Western intrusion, Chinese suzerainty, and the Joseon elite’s complicity with both.



Conceptual Connections: Perspectives

Historiography of Donghak

Historians have offered a range of interpretations of Donghak, reflecting different priorities, methods, and historical contexts. Understanding these debates helps students evaluate arguments from diverse perspectives:

James Palais sees Donghak as part of a larger *crisis of Confucian legitimacy*, describing it as a “moral response to systemic collapse.” His focus is on intellectual and moral dimensions, highlighting how societal values shaped responses to systemic pressures.

Kim Yong-seop emphasises *economic factors*, portraying Donghak as a class-based movement reacting to material exploitation rather than religious zeal. This interpretation prioritises social and economic structures over ideology.

Choi Jang-jip views Donghak as a *proto-nationalist movement*, rejecting both Chinese and Western interference. His analysis aligns with 1960s Korean nationalist historiography, which often framed 19th-century developments as precursors to modern Korean nationalism, emphasising indigenous agency.

These differing perspectives show that historical interpretations are shaped by the questions historians ask, their theoretical frameworks, and the context in which they write.

Questions for students to consider:

- How do the priorities and contexts of each historian shape their interpretation of Donghak?
- What evidence do each of these historians use, and how might their focus on moral, economic, or nationalist factors limit or strengthen their arguments?
- If you were constructing your own interpretation of Donghak, which perspective(s) would you prioritise, and why?



TOK Connection

In the Confucian framework of Joseon Korea, legitimate power was supposed to derive from moral virtue and scholarly learning. But in the *sedo* era, these ideals were hollowed out. The people who controlled access to knowledge—such as interpretation of the classics, exam results, and royal communication—also controlled access to power.

This raises TOK questions:

1. Is all knowledge equally valued in society? Why might some knowledge (e.g., political connections) outweigh others (e.g., classical education)?
2. Can historical knowledge ever be neutral, especially if it is recorded by elites?

OR

During the *sedo jeongchi* period, power was held not through formal legal authority but through control of networks, appointments, and access to the king. The dominant clans acted as gatekeepers of both political information and institutional memory, shaping decision-making and ensuring continuity of their power.

1. How does this challenge the idea that "knowledge is power"? In this case, was power more about restricting knowledge and access rather than disseminating it?
2. To what extent did Confucian ideology, which emphasizes rule by the morally upright and learned elite, mask the reality of corruption and nepotism?
3. How important is it to understand the context in which knowledge is created?

IV. Daewongun's Reforms (1864 to 1873) and Isolation Policy

Inquiry Question

To what extent did Daewongun's reforms address the challenges facing Korea in the mid-19th century?

As we have seen, Korea faced a deepening political, social, and external crisis in the 1860s. Internally, the Joseon state was plagued by corruption, aristocratic dominance, and weakening central authority. Externally, Western imperialism loomed large, and Korea's military and diplomatic isolation left it increasingly vulnerable. As France expanded into Indochina, Britain colonized India, and the United States ventured into the Pacific, Korea's leadership was forced to respond. The traumatic experiences of China during the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and Japan's forced opening by Commodore Perry's Black Ships loomed large in the Korean consciousness.

When Heungseon Daewongun (Yi Ha-eung) assumed de facto rule during his son Gojong's minority, he launched an ambitious programme of reforms aimed at restoring the strength and dignity of the monarchy. His policies addressed some of Korea's most urgent problems – but they also sowed new divisions and left the state ill-prepared for the challenges of the modern era.

Reforms to Restore Royal Power and Stability

One of Daewongun's first priorities was to reduce the power of the entrenched yangban aristocracy, which had long dominated Joseon's politics through sedo (factional) alliances. Influential families such as the Andong Kim and the Pungyang Jo had manipulated court appointments and policy for decades, often prioritizing their clan's interests over those of the state. Daewongun purged many of these powerful figures and sought to restore meritocracy in the bureaucracy. Officials were appointed based on Confucian civil service examinations rather than lineage, which weakened the grip of traditional power brokers but also created lasting enmity among the elite.

To reinforce the legitimacy of the monarchy and in cooperation with Dowager Queen Jo [Queen Shinjeong], Daewongun undertook the ambitious reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung Palace (1865–1867), which had been destroyed during the Imjin Wars of 1592. The palace symbolized a revival of royal authority, but the project came at great cost. It was funded through heavy taxation and the forced labor of peasants, contributing to widespread resentment. Daewongun's tax reforms included the abolition of the hopoje (military cloth tax), a deeply unpopular levy on commoners. He also sought to revise the corrupt grain loan system (Daedong Law), which had long burdened rural populations.

Recognizing the growing threat from Western powers, Daewongun also attempted limited military reforms. He reorganized command structures and modernized fortifications, especially around strategic locations such as Seoul and Ganghwa Island. These efforts were defensive rather than transformative, as Korea still lagged far behind Western nations and Japan in terms of military modernization.

Socio-Economic Reforms and Military Readiness

Aware of growing economic unrest, the Daewongun attempted to tackle some of the systemic issues facing rural Korea. He abolished the military cloth tax (*hopoje*), a highly unpopular levy often misused by corrupt officials. He also revised the grain loan system to prevent the hoarding and embezzlement that had long plagued famine relief efforts. These reforms improved state oversight and addressed some popular grievances, though they did not fundamentally alter Korea's deeply unequal landholding system.

The Daewongun also reorganised and strengthened the military, recognising the growing threat posed by Western powers and regional rivals. New fortresses were constructed around Seoul and major ports, and efforts were made to modernise key defensive positions. Yet these military reforms remained relatively modest and were not accompanied by broader technological or institutional modernisation.



Source Activity Two

ATL: Thinking Skills

Gyeongbokgung Palace: Power, Memory, and Tension

Rising above the bustling streets of Seoul, Gyeongbokgung Palace was more than an architectural masterpiece; it was a statement of royal authority. Built on a grand scale and carefully arranged along a central axis, the palace conveyed order, hierarchy, and the enduring power of the Joseon monarch. During the mid-19th century, however, its grandeur existed alongside profound social tension. Peasants endured famine, heavy taxation, and widespread corruption, eroding confidence in the Confucian order that the palace symbolized. For ordinary Koreans, the imposing gates and elevated throne hall might have inspired awe—but also highlighted the distance between the king's court and their own daily struggles.



Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul

At the same time, the Daewongun's reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung in the 1860s was a deliberate political act: by restoring the palace, he sought to reaffirm central authority in a time of internal instability and growing foreign pressure. The palace served as a visible claim to sovereignty and cultural identity, yet its meaning was contested. For officials, it projected continuity and order; for peasants, it could symbolize inequality and exclusion; for foreign observers, it reinforced the "Hermit Kingdom" image of a society resistant to contact.

Over the following decades, the palace's role shifted repeatedly. Colonial destruction and neglect during the 20th century stripped it of much of its political authority, while modern reconstruction projects transformed it into a space of collective memory and national heritage, a symbol not just of monarchy, but of Korea's resilience and evolving identity. Gyeongbokgung thus embodies the tensions of 19th-century Korea: the desire for stability and sovereignty, the realities of social inequality, and the complex ways power, culture, and memory intertwine in the built environment.

Questions:

1. Think about the peasants living under heavy taxation and famine. How might the grandeur of the palace have felt to them?
2. Why might the Daewongun have invested in rebuilding Gyeongbokgung at a time of social unrest and foreign pressure?

The Isolationist Policy: Preservation through Exclusion

Daewongun's reforms were accompanied by a staunch isolationist policy designed to preserve Korea's Confucian identity and political autonomy. He enforced a strict Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, banning foreign books, missionaries, and technology. Diplomatic overtures from Western nations were flatly rejected. Daewongun believed that engagement with foreign powers would lead to Korea's cultural and political ruin, as seen in neighboring countries.

This policy reached its apex in 1866, when Daewongun ordered a large-scale persecution of Catholics. Seen as a threat to Confucian social order due to their rejection of ancestral rites and loyalty to foreign powers, an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 Korean Catholics were executed. Among them were nine French missionaries. The crackdown provoked the French military expedition of 1866, which attacked Ganghwa Island but failed to compel Korea to open.

That same year, the *General Sherman* incident occurred. The American merchant ship, seeking trade, sailed up the Taedong River near Pyeongyang. When the crew refused to leave and reportedly attacked civilians and took a Korean official hostage, local authorities and civilians burned the ship and killed all on board. Daewongun celebrated the destruction of the *General Sherman* as a victory against Western imperialism. However, the event led to the 1871 U.S. expedition, Shinmiyangyo, which again failed to secure concessions from Korea.

Korea's strict closed-door policy contrasted sharply with Japan's embrace of modernization after 1853. Whereas Japan used Western trade and technology to rapidly develop its military and economy, Korea stagnated. Korea's foreign investment, technological advancements, and diplomatic leverage were all affected by isolationist policies. Internally, Daewongun's policies alienated progressive officials, especially Queen Min and her supporters, who saw modernization as essential for survival. The eventual rise of her faction in 1873 marked the end of Daewongun's regency and a shift in court politics.

How did the Shinmiyangyo reinforce Korea's isolationist policy while shaping future intervention in Korea?

The Shinmiyangyo ("Western disturbance of the Sinmi year") was a brief but significant conflict in 1871, when the United States sent a naval expedition to Korea. Officially, the mission aimed to secure a trade treaty and investigate the fate of the *General Sherman*, the American ship destroyed in Korea in 1866.

When Korean officials refused negotiations and fired warning shots as the Americans advanced up the Han River, U.S. forces launched a military assault on Ganghwa Island. Over several days of fighting, U.S. troops captured key fortresses, killing hundreds of Korean defenders. Despite their superior firepower, the Americans withdrew after failing to secure a treaty.

For Koreans, the incident reinforced the policy of isolation (*soeguk jeongchaek*), confirming suspicions of Western aggression. For the United States, the clash was remembered as a demonstration of naval power but largely forgotten compared to later imperial adventures.

Significance: Shinmiyangyo symbolised Korea's early resistance to Western intrusion. It also foreshadowed Ganghwa's later role in 1876, when Japanese gunboats forced the Treaty of Ganghwa, ending Korea's isolationist policy.

Consequences and Legacy

Daewongun's legacy is complex. On the one hand, his reforms temporarily strengthened the monarchy and limited the power of corrupt elites. On the other, his isolationist stance contributed to Korea's long-term vulnerability. The lack of modernization, growing dissatisfaction among peasants, and political infighting at court weakened Korea as foreign threats mounted. The forced reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung and associated tax burdens added to rural unrest, laying the groundwork for the rise of popular religious and political movements such as Donghak, which would erupt in rebellion by 1894.



Source Activity Three

ATL: Thinking and Communication Skills



The Map of the Great East (Daedongyeojido), completed in 1861 by the Korean geographer and cartographer Kim Jeong-ho, is one of the most remarkable achievements in Korean cartography. It is a massive woodblock-printed map, originally produced in multiple folding panels, depicting the entire Korean peninsula in extraordinary detail.

How it was made: Kim Jeong-ho reportedly travelled extensively throughout Korea, personally surveying landscapes, coastlines, and mountain ranges, then engraving the information onto woodblocks for printing.

Why it was important: The map was not simply a geographical tool; it was a statement of Korea's territorial integrity and cultural pride at a time of growing foreign pressure. It reflects an advanced understanding of scale, proportion, and local geography, as well as a desire to consolidate knowledge of the land for administrative, educational, and national purposes.

What it tells us about Korean identity in the 1860s:

1. **National Consciousness:** the detailed depiction of Korea's borders underscored the peninsula's unity and sovereignty.
2. **Scholar-official culture:** the map reflects the Joseon elite's tradition of scholarship and commitment to Confucian governance, where geographical knowledge was tied to good administration.
3. **Technological skill:** the sophisticated woodblock printing process shows both craftsmanship and Korea's own technological capabilities — important in an era when Western powers were claiming technological superiority.
4. **Defensive mindset:** its precision would have been useful for defence and internal control, reflecting Joseon's concerns about security in a rapidly changing East Asia.

Classroom Activity

Using a high-resolution image (or sections) of the *Daedongyeojido*, students should spend 3-5 minutes identifying the following features:

- Physical geography (mountains, rivers, coastlines)
- Settlements and place names
- Borders or boundary markers
- Routes (roads, paths, waterways)

In pairs: Discuss the following questions:

1. What does the map suggest about how Koreans saw their land in the 1860s?
2. How might the emphasis on certain features (e.g. mountains, rivers) reflect Korean cultural values or strategic concerns?
3. Why might producing such a detailed map be important at a time of foreign encroachment?

Connection: As a whole class, connect your observations to broader 19th century contexts:

- The rise of Donghak and Korean intellectual self-strengthening
- The influence of the Daewongun, who valued national sovereignty and defence
- Growing awareness of external threats (Western imperialism, Japanese expansion)

Extension/Paper 2 link:

Compare the *Daedongyeojido* to maps produced by other states under authoritarian leaders (e.g. Bismarck's Germany, Meiji Japan) to see how cartography can serve as a political tool.

Conclusion: The Shifting Foundations of the Joseon Order

By the late nineteenth century, the political and social foundations of the Joseon dynasty were under mounting strain. Sedo politics had reduced kingship to a contested symbol, while powerful in-law families dictated policy and patronage. New ideas, from Catholic missionaries and indigenous *Donghak* thinkers alike, introduced challenges to the dominance of Confucian orthodoxy. The Heungseon Daewongun briefly reasserted royal power through reform and isolation, but his departure from office left Korea without a clear path forward.

The dynasty was thus neither timeless nor immobile – it was already in motion, pulled in different directions by court factions, social change, and external pressure. These tensions would become impossible to contain once Korea was drawn more directly into the geopolitical rivalries of the region. Chapter 2 explores this next phase: Korea's uneasy opening to foreign powers, the competing strategies of King Gojong and Queen Myeongseong, and the reformist and conservative responses that culminated in crises like the Imo Incident and the Gapsin Coup.

Paper 3 Practice

Themes: Sedo politics • Christianity • Donghak • Daewongun's reforms (1864–1873)

It is likely that Paper 3 questions for this chapter will focus on the internal challenges to royal authority in the mid-19th century and the attempts of the Heungseon Daewongun to respond to them. Consider drafting essay plans for the following prompts, written in the style of IB Paper 3 questions.

1. "The rise of Sedo politics fatally weakened the authority of the Korean monarchy." To what extent do you agree with this argument?
2. To what extent did the spread of Christianity pose a challenge to the Korean monarchy?
3. "Donghak Learning represented a direct and dangerous threat to the Korean monarchy in the 1860s." To what extent do you agree with this statement?
4. How effectively did the Heungseon Daewongun's reforms address the political, social, and ideological challenges facing Korea in the mid-19th century?
5. "The Korean monarchy in the mid-19th century was more threatened by internal forces than by external ones." To what extent do you agree with this argument?
6. To what extent did the Daewongun's isolation policy strengthen the monarchy?

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

Instability, Ideological Crisis, and Foreign Pressure in Korea (1840-1875): Laying the Foundations for Division

Between 1840 and 1875, Korea entered a period of profound internal strain, ideological challenge, and mounting external pressure. While the Korean War would not erupt until 1950, many of the underlying fractures that made such a conflict possible – external threats and intrusions, social division, political illegitimacy, and deep ideological polarisation – can be traced back to these decades. This was not a time of foreign domination, but one of dangerous stagnation, in which Korean leaders struggled to hold a fragmented society together in the face of both internal decay and a rapidly changing world beyond their borders.

At the centre of Korea's political malaise was the system of **sedo jeongchi** (in-law government), which saw real power concentrated in aristocratic clans like the Andong Kim, who ruled by manipulating royal succession and monopolising state appointments. The monarchy became increasingly symbolic, unable to check corruption or address local grievances. Officials frequently purchased their posts, leading to misrule in the provinces, especially in the countryside where heavy taxation, exploitation, and disregard for the law drove deep resentment. The state, once guided by Confucian ideals of moral leadership and public duty, had become a tool of self-enrichment for the elite.

This vacuum of legitimacy opened space for ideological alternatives. One challenge to the Confucian state was the rise of Donghak learning in the 1860s – a distinctly Korean religious and political movement that fused spirituality with a direct critique of social injustice and corrupt officialdom. Though labelled heretical and brutally suppressed, Donghak's appeal reflected a growing rejection of the existing order by Korea's rural population, especially in the southern provinces. It signalled that the social contract between state and people had fractured, and that an alternative Korea – morally grounded and socially just – was imaginable.

Externally, Korea's elite faced mounting pressure from Western and neighbouring powers. Catholicism, which had begun spreading in the late 18th century, gained momentum among commoners seeking spiritual equality and moral clarity. The Opium Wars and the subsequent decline of Qing China, long seen as Korea's civilisational model, unsettled the court. Rather than reform, dominant factions doubled down on isolation, seeing foreign contact as a threat to Confucian order and elite control. The arrival of Western ships, Russia's encroachment in the northeast, and the forced opening of Japan in 1853 all raised alarms – but instead of adapting, the court viewed these events as justification to close ranks. Korea's response to foreign pressure thus became deeply internal matter, driven less by strategy than by fear of losing ideological and political control.

The brief regency of Yi Ha-eung, the Daewongun, from 1863, attempted to restore royal power and Confucian authority. His reforms — tax restructuring, suppression of heterodox beliefs, reconstruction of palaces, and persecution of Catholics — sought to rebuild a stable and sovereign Korea. But his rule, too, was shaped by contradictions of the time: isolation at all costs, resistance to reform, and reliance on repression rather than renewal. His vision of Korea as morally pure and sovereign proved unsustainable in an imperialist world — and deepened the divide between state and people.

By the mid-1870s, Korea remained formally independent and ideologically rigid, but socially fractured and politically brittle. The crises of this period were not resolved — they were merely deferred. The discontent, distrust, and competing visions of Korea's future that emerged in these decades would later resurface in more explosive form. In this sense, the roots of Korea's 20th-century divisions lie not only in colonialism or the Cold War, but in the internal instability and contested legitimacy of the 19th century itself.

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

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)**.

The rule of the Daewongun in mid-19th century Joseon Korea (c. 1864-1873) provides a valuable case study of how authoritarian leaders use **legal reform, violence, propaganda, and popular support** to **consolidate and maintain power**. By examining his suppression of internal dissent — especially **Catholicism, Donghak learning**, and the role of regional elites — students can draw meaningful comparisons with other authoritarian rulers across different regions and time periods, such as Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, or Mussolini.

In the context of Joseon Korea's long-standing dynastic tradition, the regency of Yi Ha-eung, the Daewongun, from 1864 to 1873, marked a sharp and deliberate attempt to restore centralised, authoritarian rule after decades of sedo factionalism. As regent for his young son, King Gojong, the Daewongun exercised near-absolute power. His rule, though brief, was characterised by a systematic effort to **reassert royal authority** through a mixture of **legal reform, coercive force, ideological purification, and appeals to public sentiment**, demonstrating the means by which he maintained authoritarian rule. His repression of Catholicism, emerging reformist ideologies like Donghak, and broader dissent among different factions of society reveals the mechanics of authoritarian rule in Korea during a period of internal fragility and external threat.

1. Legal and Administrative Control: Centralising Power

The Daewongun's first move was to dismantle the entrenched sedo jeongchi (in-law politics) system. For decades, powerful aristocratic clans such as the Andong Kim had controlled the court by placing child kings on the throne and ruling as regents. The Daewongun reversed this by removing these families from key posts and recentralising the appointment of officials. He prohibited the sale of government offices – a common corrupt practice – and attempted to revive the civil service examination system as a meritocratic institution. While not entirely successful in eliminating corruption, these legal changes were part of a broader effort to monopolise state power in the hands of the royal house.

He also imposed legal restrictions on regional power-holders, curtailed aristocratic tax privileges, and attempted to strengthen the authority of local magistrates under central control. These efforts to purify the bureaucracy reinforced authoritarian rule by weakening rivals and creating an appearance of moral reform – restoring, in theory, a Confucian state of order.

2. Use of Force: Religious Persecution and Social Control

While administrative reform helped consolidate power, the Daewongun relied more heavily on violence and repression to silence ideological and religious dissent. His use of force was most visible in his aggressive persecution of Korean Catholics, whom he viewed not only as heretics but as agents of foreign corruption and disloyalty. Catholicism had been spreading since the late 18th century, and by the 1860s it had a small but significant following, particularly among marginalised peasants and women. Catholic doctrine, which taught spiritual equality, loyalty to Rome, and rejection of ancestral rites, directly challenged both the Confucian moral order and the political sovereignty of the Joseon court.

In 1866, the Daewongun orchestrated the Great Persecution, during which approximately 8,000-10,000 Korean Catholics were executed. Foreign missionaries, including French priests, were captured and killed. This was followed by the burning of churches, seizure of property, and the deployment of government troops to suppress Christian communities in the provinces. These actions were justified as defensive measures against foreign intrusion, but they also served as a clear message to domestic dissenters; loyalty to the throne was non-negotiable, and heterodox beliefs would be punished without compromise.

Similarly, the Daewongun began surveilling and restricting the activities of Donghak followers. Although the Donghak Rebellion would not erupt until 1894, its founder, Choe Je-u, was executed in 1864, only months into the Daewongun's rule. The decision to eliminate Choe – whose teachings blended Confucian ethics, Buddhist cosmology, and nationalist ideas – reflected deep anxiety about the social disruption posed by grassroots religious political movements. The swift use of legal charges (heresy, sedition) and public execution was designed to prevent Donghak from gaining traction and to signal the state's readiness to act against future threats.

3. Propaganda and Ideological Purification

Beyond law and violence, the Daewongun worked to control the ideological environment of Korea. He viewed Confucianism not just as a moral code but as the ideological foundation of political legitimacy. To that end, he undertook a campaign of Confucian revival and anti-Western propaganda. The most symbolic project was the reconstruction of Gyeongbok Palace, the main royal palace in Seoul, which had been in ruins since the Imjin War (1592–98). The rebuilding effort – financed through new taxes and contributions from yangban elites – was meant to visibly reassert royal prestige and present the Joseon dynasty as the rightful, unshaken centre of Korean civilisation.

The Daewongun also ordered the burning of seowon (private Confucian academies), which had become strongholds of local aristocratic power and were often tied to corruption and tax exemption. By destroying over 600 seowon, he eliminated ideological rivals under the guise of Confucian purification. In effect, he was using Confucianism selectively, as a tool of legitimisation and a weapon against other elites.

At the same time, the regime promoted anti-foreign sentiment through slogans, proclamations, and government edicts. Christianity, foreign trade, and Western science were denounced as morally corrupting, socially destabilising, and culturally alien. Propaganda reinforced the idea that Joseon Korea must remain a “small but righteous country,” morally superior to Western and neighbouring powers, and therefore justified in closing itself off from the outside world.

4. Popular Support and Nationalism from Above

Unlike earlier regents who ruled primarily through court factions, the Daewongun sought to cultivate support among the common people. His rhetoric emphasised defence of the nation, protection of Confucian values, and resistance to foreign domination. In this sense, he attempted to generate a form of “top-down nationalism,” appealing to popular anxieties about Western imperialism and the breakdown of moral order.

His handling of foreign incursions – including the French Campaign against Korea (1866) and the American expedition (1871) – positioned him as a protector of Korean sovereignty, even when militarily outmatched. Though Korea’s isolationist stance ultimately left it vulnerable in the long term, in the short term it strengthened the Daewongun’s popular image as a leader who resisted foreign aggression and defended traditional values.

This combination of anti-elite reform, anti-foreign propaganda, and Confucian revival allowed him to frame authoritarianism as virtuous governance. Although peasants continued to suffer under heavy taxation and famine, many viewed the Daewongun more favourably than the corrupt yangban families he displaced. Authoritarianism under the Daewongun was thus maintained not only through repression but through the crafting of a populist-authoritarian image.

Conclusion

The Daewongun's regency exemplifies how authoritarian rule in mid-19th century Korea was actively maintained through a multi-pronged strategy: legal reform to centralise state power, violent suppression of ideological threats, Confucian propaganda to monopolise moral legitimacy, and the selective cultivation of popular nationalism. His authoritarianism was not merely inherited – it was constructed and reinforced at every level of state and society. Yet his rigidity also sowed seeds of future resistance. By silencing reformist voices and rejecting foreign engagement, the Daewongun ensured the state's temporary stability – but at the cost of long-term vulnerability.

Other Paper 2 Connections

You may want to explore parallels with these other authoritarian states, who offer a range of useful comparisons and contrasts to Korea under the Daewongun:

- **Qing Dynasty — White Lotus Rebellion Crackdown** (China, 1796–1804): Used legal repression and mass violence against a heterodox religious movement seen as a threat to imperial authority—similar to Daewongun's targeting of Catholics and Donghak.
- **Nicholas I's Autocracy** (Russia, 1825–1855): Centralised bureaucratic control and enforced ideological conformity through censorship and police surveillance under the slogan "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality."
- **Spanish Colonial Rule and the Gomburza Execution** (Philippines, 1872): Suppressed reformist priests and restricted religious activity to maintain colonial dominance, paralleling Joseon's repression of foreign-linked religious groups.
- **Porfirio Díaz's Military-Backed Regime** (Mexico, 1876–1911): Centralised authority by weakening regional elites and used the rural police (rurales) to crush dissent and enforce order.
- **Fidel Castro's Early Revolutionary Government** (Cuba, 1959–1965): Eliminated rival power bases, controlled the press, and repressed religious organisations while promoting nationalist, anti-imperialist propaganda.

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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?

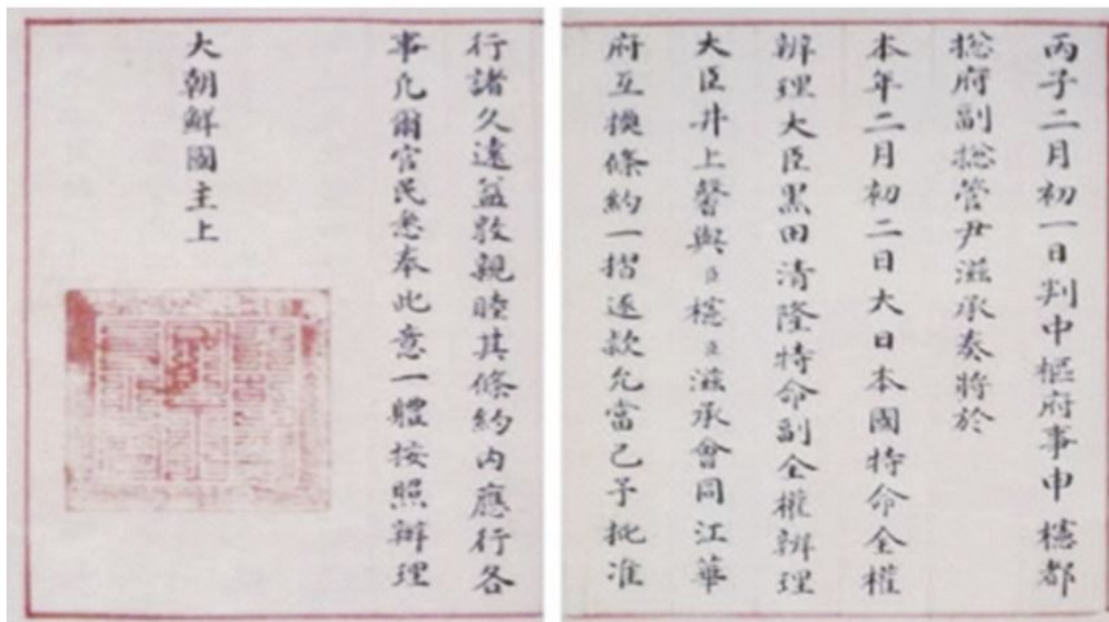
The Gaehwa reformers, however, were beginning to argue that Korea must engage with the outside world to preserve sovereignty. For them, the humiliation of the Shinmiyangyo (1871) and the technological imbalance it revealed showed that stubborn isolation would only invite conquest. King Gojong and Queen 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.

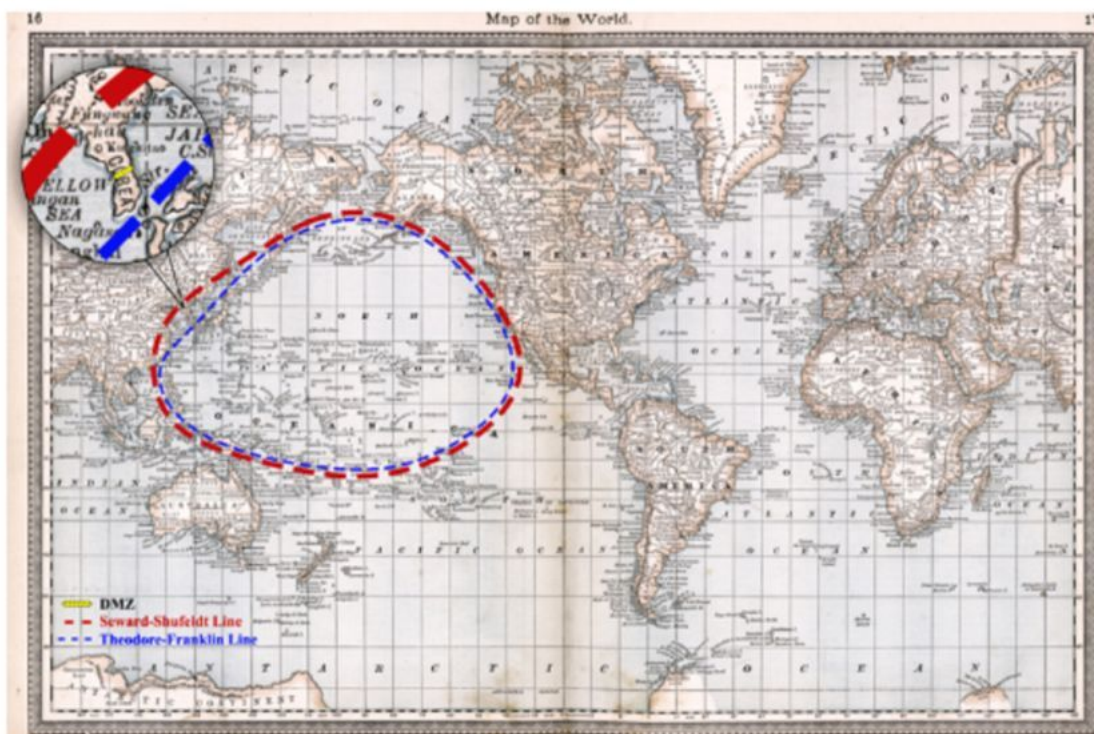
Terms of the Treaty

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.

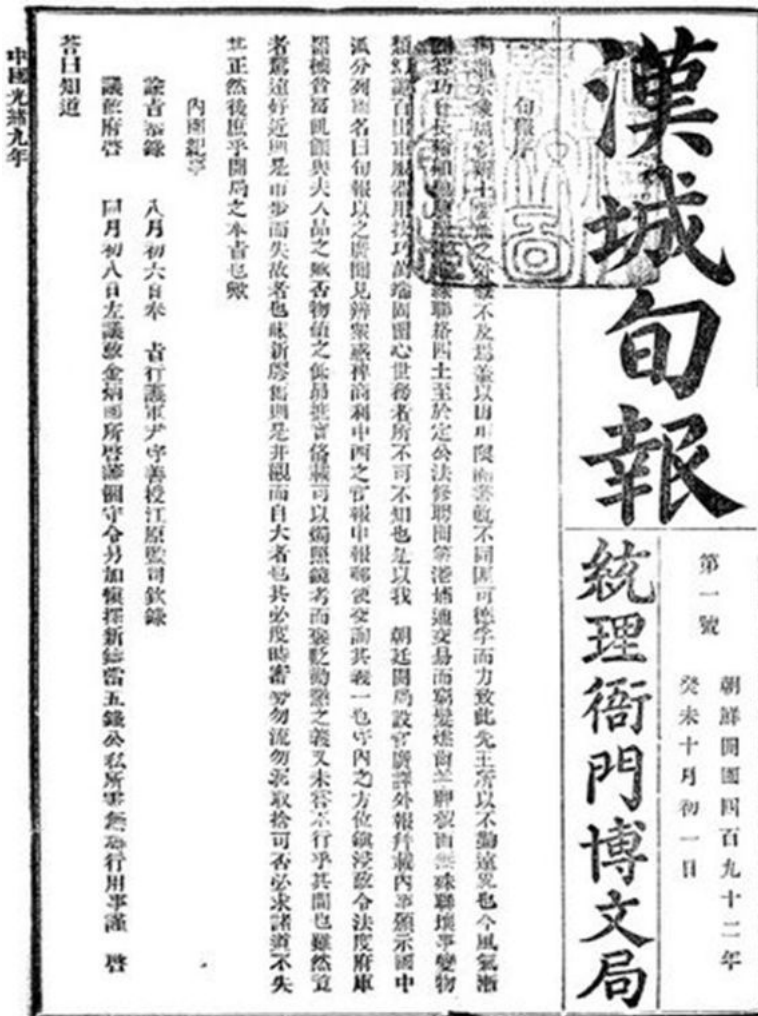
Universities and technical academies also began to emerge as a key feature of Korea's modernisation drive. The *Dongmunhak* (Bureau of Translation), established in 1883, trained interpreters in foreign languages such as English, Japanese, and Chinese, equipping them to negotiate treaties, read foreign 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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03

Impact on Regional Rivalries

IB Lines of Inquiry

Inquiry Questions

Donghak Peasant Revolution

To what extent did the Donghak Peasant Revolution bring about significant change to Korea?

First Sino–Japanese War and Treaty of Shimonoseki
Triple Intervention and Russian influence

To what extent did the conflict between China and Japan during the First Sino-Japanese War affect Korean interests and the regional balance of power?

Gabo reforms (1894–1896)

To what extent were the Gabo Reforms transformative in their aims for Korea?

Introduction

This chapter considers the role of regional rivalries in Korea between 1894 and 1897. It examines the circumstances in the middle part of the 1890s where Korea experienced domestic uprisings, reform programmes and regional rivalry and conflict. This provides the context for understanding the developments which would lead to the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910. The focus of the chapter therefore is centered on the influence of **regional rivalries** and how this affected Korean politics, economy and society. However, the role of Korea itself is central to the narrative, especially in regard to how individual Koreans responded to the challenges at a time of external imperial interests in Korea and a need to modernise the structures of the Joseon Dynasty. The mid 1890s were a transformative period, and this chapter will examine the interactions between shifting societal change within Korea and external threats and influences.

Sequence of Events

- The Donghak Peasant Revolution (January 11, 1894 – December 25, 1895) was caused by renewed interest in the ideas of the movement combined with social and economic problems affecting Korea in the early 1890s.
- Unrest in Korea as a result of The Donghak Peasant Revolution created the conditions for conflict across the peninsula and sparked warfare between China and Japan in the First Sino-Japanese

War from 1894–1895. The Treaty of Shimonoseki, which formally concluded the war, ended Korea's status as a tributary power and shifted the regional balance of power in favour of Japan.

- A radical modernisation program was implemented in Korea in the mid 1890s. Known as the Gabo Reforms (1894-1896), it sought to transform the political and social relationships of Korean society.
- After 1895, Korea was subject to further regional rivalry – exemplified by Russia's role in the Triple Intervention of 1895, which took away some of Japan's gains made at the Treaty of Shimonoseki. This began a period of increasing rivalry between Japan and Russia over Korea.
- In October 1895, Queen Min was assassinated. This tragic event spurred moves for full independence and the creation of the Korean empire in 1897.
- In the years leading up to the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905), Korea would continue to be affected by Russo-Japanese rivalry as well as European and American interests. This occurred alongside the considerable programs of modernisation which were taking place in Korea during the late 19th and early 20th century.

Timeline

January 1894–December 1894	The Donghak Peasant Revolution
July 1894–April 1895	The First Sino-Japanese War
April 17, 1895	The signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki
April–November 1895	The Triple Intervention by Russia, France and Germany
July 1894–November 1895	The Gabo Reforms are introduced and implemented
October 8, 1895	The assassination of Queen Min
1896	Flight of King Gojong to the Russian Legation
1897	Declaration of Korean Empire by King Gojong

Key Terms

Donghak Learning	Intellectual movement that began in 1860 under the leadership of Choe Je-u that brought together aspects of religious, philosophical and spiritual traditions including Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism.
Donghak Peasant Revolution	Large scale peasant uprising which occurred throughout 1894 and created the conditions for the First Sino-Japanese War to break out.
Yangban	Ruling class of the Joseon Dynasty.
The Battle of Uguemchi	Decisive battle of the Donghak Peasant Revolution which led to their eventual defeat.
Pyeongyang hat	Traditionally worn by the Yangban class and was a mark of their social position and privilege.
Sundry Taxes	These contributed to peasant unrest, they were small local taxes that were imposed upon people often by corrupt officials.
Cheondogyo	The successor religion from the Donghak movement, it still has a following in Korea today.
Convention of Tientsin	Following the Gapsin Coup this was an agreement between China and Japan to notify each other before any future intervention into Korea.
Ito Hirobumi	Leading Japanese statesman who signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, he was formerly Prime Minister of Japan between 1885–1888.
Gyeongbokgung	The main royal palace of the Joseon Dynasty.
Treaty of Shimonoseki	Signed in April 1895, this treaty brought the First Sino-Japanese War to an end. It ended Korea's status as a tributary toward China.
Suzerainty	Describes the relationship between China and Korea prior to 1895 – Korea and China had a suzerain-vassal relationship which involved Korea paying to tribute to China at different points in exchange for their protection in the region.
Taels	Traditional form of currency used in East Asia during the 19th century.
Open Door Policy	Passed in 1899, this was an American proposal that all nations should have equal trading rights in China and there was a commitment to protect China's territorial integrity.
Gabo Reforms	Between 1894 and 1896, these reforms were radical measures to bring about change in Korea, they included the abolition of slavery and the Confucian civil service examinations.
Russian Legation	The Russian embassy in Seoul where King Gojong took refuge shortly after the assassination of Queen Min.

Key People

Choe Je-u	Founder and influential figure of the Donghak movement, he was executed in 1864.
Cho Pyeong-gap	A corrupt magistrate in Gobu county whose actions sparked the Donghak Peasant Revolution in 1894.
Jeon Bong-jun	One of the principle leaders of the Donghak Peasant Revolution, his actions were especially important in the first phase of the revolution.
Choe Si-hyeong	After the death of Choi Je-u, he became the second leader of the movement, based in the north of the peninsula he favoured spreading the teachings of the movement but joined the Donghak Peasant Uprising in response to the presence of Japanese troops in Korea in 1894.
Ito Hirobumi	Leading Japanese statesman who signed the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, he was formerly Prime Minister of Japan between 1885–1888 and later assassinated by Ahn Jung-geun.
Kim Okgyun	Member of the Gaehwa party who also took part in the Gapsin Coup of 1884. His assassination by Hong Jong-woo sparked tension between Japan and China.
Li Hongzhang	Chinese statesman and moderniser who was present at the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki.
Daewongun	Father of King Gojong, often viewed as more conservative and resistant to reform movements in Korea.
Kim-Hong Jip	Reformist politician who served as prime minister during the Gabo Reforms.
Park Young-hyo	A leading Korean politician during the Gabo Reforms.
Queen Min	Wife of King Gojong and influential figure in the Joseon royal court. She was assassinated in October 1895.
Inoue Kaoru	Japanese diplomat and politician who worked in Korea during the Gabo Reforms and led the assassination of Queen Min.



Conceptual Connections

Change and Continuity

Although all of the four history concepts will be touched upon through this chapter, there is a clear focus on the role of change and continuity. How Korea changed or retained continuity as a result of far reaching upheaval is a good way to focus your thinking as you study the information in this chapter. Things to consider:

- The role of uprisings and revolution seen in the Donghak Peasant Revolution
- The role of conflict across the peninsula seen in the regional war between China and Japan
- The role of modernisation and the direction that this was heading towards

Remember to connect your understanding back to the focus of previous chapters concerning the mid century challenges to Joseon considered in Chapter 1 and the move away from isolation examined in Chapter 2.

I. The Causes of the Donghak Peasant Revolution

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the Donghak Peasant Revolution bring about significant change to Korea?

The Donghak movement, dating back to the 1860s, was an intellectual movement that brought together aspects of religious, philosophical and spiritual traditions including Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism. Traditionally standing in opposition to Seohak – ‘Western Learning’ – which had been associated with the growing influence of Catholicism in Korea, followers of the movement also saw Japanese economic interests as a major challenge facing Korea by the early 1890s. Concerns over the role of foreign merchants and the existence of the treaty ports created calls for greater resistance in the light that this furthered the pressure on the agrarian populations of Korea. These concerns had increased following the agreements and unequal treaties made with foreign powers during the 1870s and 1880s. Agrarian concerns were especially centred on the levels of export of rice to Japan leading to higher prices and food shortages as well as the control of the fishing industry by Japanese companies. By the early 1890s, therefore, the Donghak movement was increasingly centered around these concerns.

Across the preceding decade, more conservative Korean politicians working with Qing officials sought to reduce the power of reformist factions such as the Gaewha Party (Enlightenment Party). Some of them saw the success of Japan's Meiji Restoration as a possible model for Korean development. This decade saw Korean modernization efforts being sidelined in favour of Chinese economic interests; between 1884 and 1894, Korea had been subject to increasing controls and influence from the Qing Dynasty, a time known as the ‘Chinese Decade,’ discussed in the previous chapter. This increasing control can be seen in the role played by Yuan Shikai in Korea, who acted as an advisor to King Gojong at this point, as well as maintaining the suzerain-vassal relationship between China and Korea.

The socio-economic conditions in Korea therefore contributed to the resurging interest in the Donghak movement, or 'Eastern Learning' that had been prevalent in the 1860s. A range of factors contributed to a series of uprisings in 1894 including unfair trading practices by Chinese and Japanese merchants and increases in taxation. Politically, the high ranking status of the yangban elites, and the Donghak's emphasis on advocating for greater levels of equality increased the calls for more far reaching change. Further widespread accusations of corruption against local magistrates stimulated this renewed interest and demand for change.

The Yangban Elite – Within the Confucian hierarchy of the Joseon Dynasty, the Yangban were afforded elite status across Korea and experienced a range of privileges as a result. A sign of their status was seen in the wearing of the Pyeongyang hat – pictured here. The Donghak reformers wanted to see an end to those privileges and to bring about greater levels of equality to people of Korea, especially the agrarian populations who suffered under the class system. The late Joseon dynasty saw increasing calls to bring new forms of governance to Korea that would modernise the state and the provision of privileges based on class and birthright.

Photo Credit

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yangban#/media/File:Koreans_oldest_pic_3.jpg



By 1892, the movement was gathering momentum, as Donghak members had created a petition which sought the posthumous rehabilitation of Choe Je-u, the movement's founder. He was executed in 1862 due to accusations of heresy. The new leadership of the movement presented their demands to King Gojong, who was troubled by the increasing support for the movement and the growing levels of rebellion, especially in the South West of Korea.

It was the actions of a local magistrate named Jo Byeong-gap in Gobu County, however, which ignited these long standing economic and political concerns into a mass movement. A member of the Yangban class, Jo Byeong-gap had been carrying out unfair taxation practices on the local population in Gobu, as well as demanding the building of a reservoir which was then subject to a rice tax for locals to use. These actions stimulated a response from Jeon Bong-jun, who led around 1000 peasants in action. This included the destruction of the reservoir and the distribution of food to the local population.

The revolution that had begun in February 1894 spread across the South West (Jeolla Province) of Korea, and the town of Jeonju was captured. As they gained strength, the Donghak leadership, including Jeon Bong-jun and Kim Gae-nam, proposed twelve reforms which articulated their aims for the movement. At



« Major sites of the Donghak Peasant Revolution 1894.

this stage of the revolution, these reforms were chiefly concerned with changes to the social and economic structures of the Joseon dynasty, and the emphasis was on providing greater levels of equality and social justice. By May 1894, a truce was negotiated between the Donghak leaders and the Joseon government. This brought the first phase of the revolution to a temporary halt, and some promises were made to enact some of the suggested reforms.



« Donghak Army Capturing Jeonju Fortress in 1894
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Jeonju_Fortress#/media/File:Occupation_of_Jeonju.jpg.



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skills

The Donghak Religion and Uprising: Twelve Reforms Proclaimed by the Donghak Overseer's Office

1. The ill will that has long persisted between Donghak believers and the government shall be eradicated. There should be cooperation in all aspects of governance.
2. Crimes committed by greedy and corrupt officials shall be investigated and severely punished.
3. The wrongdoers among the rich and powerful shall be severely punished.
4. The wicked among the Confucian literati and the yangban class shall be ordered to mend their ways.
5. Slave registry documents shall be burned.
6. There shall be improvements in the treatment of the seven classes of lowborn (ch'ilban ch'önin), and butchers shall no longer be required to wear the "**Pyeongyang hat.**"
7. A young widow shall be allowed to remarry.
8. Improper levies of **sundry taxes** shall be completely terminated.
9. In recruiting officials, regionalism shall be eliminated, and talented persons shall be appointed irrespective of their birthplace.
10. Persons who are in league with foreign enemies shall be severely punished.
11. All past debts, private or public, shall be declared null and void.
12. Farmland shall be equitably redistributed for cultivation

Tasks

Review the twelve reforms – these were made by Donghak Reformers in 1894.

1. What examples can you find to understand the aims of the members of the Donghak movement at the time of the uprising under the following categories:
 - Targeting corruption
 - The practice of slavery
 - Land ownership
 - Role of foreigners in Korea
 - The rights of women
 - Economic policies including taxation
 - Nationalism
2. Write a summary to express the key ideas of the Donghak reformers in your own words – aim to include at least three specific examples to explain what they were trying to achieve.
3. **Causation Review** – Consider all of the information in this section. What are the major causes of the Donghak Peasant Revolution? Link back to your understanding from previous chapters. Create three arguments in response to the question:
 1. Why regional rivalries contributed to the Donghak Peasant Uprising
 2. Domestic political and economic problems contributed to the Donghak Peasant Uprising
 3. Short term events and actions were critical to the outbreak of the Donghak Peasant Uprising

Extension Study the historians' viewpoints in the next activity section, and integrate any of these views into your arguments to build up a more robust case and to consider more deeply the importance of perspectives to this question.

The Nature of the Donghak Peasant Revolution

It should be noted that the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1894 exhibited regional variations, shaped by both geography and local leadership. The southern uprising, centered in the Jeolla region and led by Jeon Bong-jun, was prominent during the first phase of the revolution in the spring of 1894. Later that year, in the autumn, a second wave of uprisings occurred in other regions, with Donghak religious leader Choe Si-hyeong playing a significant role in mobilizing followers, particularly in the central and northern provinces.

A key distinction between the southern and northern branches of the Donghak movement lies in Choe Si-hyeong's emphasis on its spiritual foundations, contrasting with the militant approach led by Jeon Bong-jun in the south. Despite these regional differences, they were united in their opposition to increasing Japanese military presence as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War, leading to renewed uprisings in late 1894. The **Battle of Ugeumchi** of November 1894, fought close to Gongju, resulted in heavy casualties for the Donghak rebels against a more well-equipped and combined force of Joseon Dynasty and Japanese troops. This marked the decisive suppression of the movement. Following this defeat, Donghak forces were unable to sustain further resistance or advance their political and economic demands.



Jeon Bong-jun

Jeon Bong-jun was a key figure in the Donghak Peasant Revolution. Sometimes referred to affectionately as General Mung Bean, he was born in 1855 in

Gobu in Jeolla Province in the South West of Korea. He was a follower of the intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Donghak movement that had emerged during the 1860s. Jeon Bong jun was instrumental in leading the revolution against a local magistrate in January 1894. He secured early victories, including the Battle of Hwangryong River, and established localised governments called Jibgangs in areas across Southern

Korea. These provide clues about the early roots of Korean democracy, as they were new forms of political organisation when contrasted with the ruling system of the Joseon dynasty. After the intervention of China and Japan, the Donghak movement was suppressed by late 1894, notably at the Battle of Ugeumchi. Jeong Bong-jun was later captured and executed in April 1895. His statue can be seen in Seoul today and he is celebrated by many as a hero of resistance. The ideas of the Donghak movement can be connected to the far-reaching modernisation efforts that took place during the Gabo reforms as well as contributing along the path to modernisation and democratisation in the 20th century. The religious ideas of the Donghak can also be seen in Cheondoism, which has a number of followers across Korea today.

The Consequences of the Donghak Movement

By the end of 1894, even though the Donghak movement had largely been suppressed, its role during this time period provides a lens for understanding the intellectual movements that were influential at the time. These movements would continue to influence Korean identity into the 20th century and beyond. Many Donghak leaders were arrested and executed in the months following their defeat, including Jeon Bong-jun, who was arrested and later executed on April 24, 1895. A statue of him stands in Seoul today, and the influence of the Donghak movement has been discussed, examined and debated by scholars throughout the subsequent decades. These debates center around the interpretations of what the movement stood for, the short term and long term impact, their importance in subsequent modernisation efforts, future uprisings, how they reflect Korean national identity and how they should be remembered. Below are three historians' viewpoints on both the consequences and significance of the Donghak Peasant Uprising.



Source Activity Two

ATL: Thinking Skills

Historians' Viewpoints on the Significance of the Donghak Peasant Uprising

Perspective 1

"Although the 1894 rebellion was ultimately unsuccessful, it helped spark developments that helped reform much of the corruption in government. It also provoked events that led to the introduction of those institutions and ideas that led to profound changes to the structure of the state and started a debate concerning the direction of the nation in an increasingly unstable East Asia. Ironically, these changes were initiated by a government that was supported by the Japanese, the exact opposite of what the Donghak rebels wanted. In spite of this, immense changes resulted from the rebellion and Korea would never be the same again. As a result, the 1894 rebellion proved a watershed which helped to open up a new era in Korean history."

Seth, M. et al. (2016) Routledge Handbook of Modern Korean History. 1st ed. Routledge

Perspective 2

One of the political effects of the Donghak rebellion was the implementation of the Gabo reforms in 1894, which were considered an attempt at modern reforms, and which led to the "dismantling of the Confucian order", and eventually Korea's historically close, but subservient relationship with China (Park 2015: 42). This also opened up a space for new modes of spirituality, including the further development of Cheondoism itself, as well as the other religions... The threat to Korean identity was taken very seriously, especially with the Sino-Japanese War bringing disaster to the Korean peninsula, as well as a deepening sense of doom, menacing Korean sovereignty. New religions emerging in this context of antagonism and antipathy would draw upon the nationalistic currents of the time, that sought to continue the work of overturning feudal Korea and its corrupt government, prompting many millenarian aspects, hoping to usher in a new world order.

Cawley, Kevin. (2019) 2019. Religious and Philosophical Traditions of Korea. 1st ed. Routledge.
<https://www.perlego.com/book/1569896>.

Perspective 3

But more than the high death toll, the most consequential outcome of the Sino-Japanese War was its impact on the future stability of the Korean Peninsula. Lots of blood had been spilled, and divisions between groups had hardened. The fault line appeared not only between the Donghak rebels and the Korean government officials and yangbans who had fought with the Japanese; deep fissures were also present within the Donghak movement itself. Jeon Bong-jun and other advocates of violent revolutionary tactics had split the movement by launching the Second Donghak Uprising. Sickened and disappointed, Choe Si-hyeong, and his protege, Son Pyong-hui, pledged that the Donghak movement would return to its original non-violent ways. The Sino-Japanese war had thus pulled Korean society even further apart, opening up wider rifts that other Great Powers – namely Russia – would use to their own advantage. The stage was set for increased turmoil in East Asia.

Sheila Miyoshi Jager 'The Other Great Game – The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia'

Questions:

1. What is meant by the expression '1894 proved a watershed' in Viewpoint 1? What reasons are given for this position?
2. How does Viewpoint 2 explain the spiritual and intellectual consequences of the Donghak Peasant Uprising?
3. In Viewpoint 3, what regional consequences for Korea are explained as a result of the upheaval of the Donghak Uprisings? Why could the actions of the Donghak leaders be viewed more negatively according to this perspective?

Paper 3 Practice

Choose one question to respond to:

1. To what extent do you agree with the claim that the Donghak Peasant Revolution brought about significant change to Korea?
2. To what extent do you agree with the claim that the Donghak Peasant Uprising of 1894 provided a basis for modernisation and reform across Korea?

Construct an essay plan for a question which considers the consequences of the Donghak Peasant Uprising. You will need to consult information from this section and also the sections on the Gabo Reforms as well as the subsequent chapter.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

As you have encountered in the reading above, there were multiple consequences of the Donghak Peasant Revolution.

Evaluating Arguments

Historians write accounts which take account of these varieties of interpretations whilst also building their own arguments. When considering diverse perspectives it can help to consider the types of perspectives which are present within your area of focus. These might include:

1. National perspectives
2. Perspectives from people at the time of the event – how people responded to the events across different sections of society
3. Perspectives across time – how views of an event may shift according to new developments in the history of a country or a region
4. Thematic perspectives which may focus on social, economic, political or environmental factors
5. Perspectives of experts, most notably historians and historiographical discourse

From your study of the Donghak Peasant Revolution – what types of perspectives have you encountered so far? How have they helped you to build your understanding of the topic? What further perspectives would help to build your understanding?

II. First Sino–Japanese War and Treaty of Shimonoseki

Inquiry Question

To what extent did conflict between China and Japan during the First Sino-Japanese War affect Korea and the regional balance of power?

Although the Donghak resurgence was the spark that brought troops from China and Japan to Korea in 1894, tension had been increasing between the two countries in the years running up to the First Sino-Japanese War. Since the Gapsin Coup (see Chapter 2) of 1884, the Qing dynasty had exerted more direct rule over Korea and the spark for increased tension came about in March 1894 with Hong Jong-woo's assassination of Kim Okgyun. A Korean moderniser who had taken part in the Gapsin coup, he was killed enroute to Shanghai because he was viewed as a traitor to his country for ushering in Japanese troops and later seeking refuge there. His death stirred up anger in Japan; the Qing authorities had allowed both the assassin and the remains of Kim's body to be transported to Korea, where the body was mutilated and put on display. Anger towards China from the Japanese standpoint increased as a result of this incident with calls for a program of reform to be brought to Korea and with some calls to remove the Qing dynasty and thus upend the regional balance of power.

Because of the widespread scale and challenge of the Donghak uprising, on June 3, 1894, King Gojong called for Chinese military assistance to suppress the movement. Under the Convention of Tientsin, signed in April 1885, China was obliged to notify Japan about military action in Korea. Subsequently, by the summer of 1895, an increased number of troops from both China and Japan had moved to Korea. Despite initially calling for assistance, Korean authorities had managed to take control of the uprising and then asked both sides to withdraw their troops, including a request for mediation from European powers.

At this point, Japanese actions became more aggressive. War against China was now seen as their objective as well as creating the conditions for a program of reform across Korea. A key step in escalating tension came on July 19 when Japanese troops seized control of the Gyeongbokgung, the royal palace. This move was shortly followed by a naval battle on July 25th which led to the sinking of the chartered British ship, the *Kowshing* and the beginning of warfare between China and Japan. The nature of the war meant that there were both engagements at sea and at land, and in fact some of the key battles involved both forms of fighting.

Japanese victory over China in the war was decisive, and there were a number of pivotal battles which brought this about. The first two led to Japanese control over the Korean peninsula while the second two led to incursions into Chinese territory. This gave Japan a strong position in the negotiations which would eventually bring the war to an end.

Major Battles of the First Sino-Japanese War

It is useful to be aware of the chronology and course of the First Sino-Japanese War, as this can help with other regional studies for IB Paper 3. As you examine the battles below, reflect on how they would have affected the Korean peninsula and the changing balance of power in the region.

The Japanese military strategy throughout the First Sino-Japanese War followed a calculated progression that began with the Battle of Pyeongyang on September 15, 1894. Although not the first engagement, victory here brought important consequences as Japanese troops launched a successful surprise offensive from the north to overcome approximately 13,000 Qing Dynasty troops. This led to the surrender of the city and paved the way for complete Japanese control of the Korean peninsula.

Two days later, on September 17, a significant naval engagement occurred in the border areas of the Yalu River. Naval historians regard this Battle of the Yalu River with attention due to the effectiveness of the modernized Imperial Japanese Navy in the Yellow Sea. This decisive victory saw the Chinese fleet retreat to Port Arthur and cleared the way for a Japanese advance into the Chinese mainland of Manchuria.

The campaign then shifted to Chinese territory with the Battle of Port Arthur on November 21, 1894. Port Arthur held strategic importance for the entire region, and the Japanese were able to occupy it in a single day through a combined land assault and naval encirclement. However, this victory was followed by a massacre of residents witnessed by Western observers, including the mutilation of bodies and casualties ranging from hundreds to thousands. Despite these horrors, the victory gave Japan a very strong bargaining position in upcoming negotiations.

The conflict reached its final stage between January 18 and February 10, 1895, at the Battle of Weihaiwei. Across the water from Port Arthur, the Japanese took control of this safe haven for the remaining ships of the Beiyang fleet despite difficult winter weather. By the end of the battle, the Chinese Admiral Ting Ruchang scuttled his ship and committed suicide in an act of defiance. With the defeat of the Beiyang fleet at Weihaiwei, the stage was finally set for the peace negotiations.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA



Major Battles of the First Sino-Japanese War.



TOK Connection

The Battle of Pyeongyang in Korean Literature

Although the Battle of Pyeongyang formed part of the war between China and Japan, it has been reflected on by Korean writers in different ways. Most famously, it is featured in the early 20th century novel 'Tears of Blood' by Yi Injik, part of a literary movement known as the New Fiction genre in Korea. The book focuses on the lives of a family directly affected by the Battle

of Pyongyang, and reflects upon how this battle revealed the fragility of Korean society in the context of the destructive force of newly modernised militaries, calling attention for the need for national strengthening. Therefore, this battle can be viewed as a rallying call for the efforts of reformers in the late 19th and early 20th century.

Theory of Knowledge Connection – Literary and artistic movements can reveal contemporary thoughts and concerns in different societal settings. When we study history there are many opportunities to look at how contemporary writers and artists comment on the time and place in which they are living. In this way, literary and artistic movements can provide a window into the thought and culture of a time period.

From your studies of history – what examples of literature and art can you see as responding to challenges facing different societies. For example, *1984* by George Orwell is clearly a response to the rise of totalitarianism in the world in which he was living and experiencing at the time of writing. In this way, the creative work of writers and artists can be viewed as responsive to contemporary challenges.

What are the implications of this? Can the arts ever be disconnected from the time and location in which they were created?

To what extent can art and literature convey historical knowledge?

Concluding the War

The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki on April 17, 1895. Signed by Li Hongzhang of China and Ito Hirobumi of Japan, it was an unequal treaty that provided punitive terms towards China for the conclusion of the war. Unfortunately, no Koreans were present at the signing of the treaty, despite the consequences that it would bring about.

The terms of the treaty can be outlined as follows:

- Recognition of the independence of Korea by China, ending the tributary system and Chinese suzerainty
- Japan to be given control of the Pescadores Islands, Taiwan, and the Liaodong Peninsula
- China to pay indemnities to Japan in the form of 200 million taels
- Japan to receive improved trading rights across multiple cities in China

The Consequences of the Treaty of Shimonoseki

The Treaty of Shimonoseki significantly changed the regional balance of power which affected all of the powers involved. The traditional hierarchical suzerain-vassal relationship between China and Korea, which had been in place for centuries, came to an end. Korea's position as a nominally independent state by this point would lead to nation building efforts, which are discussed in the next chapter. China's loss

in the war was seen as humiliating, and it has been acknowledged as a turning point in the regional balance of power which China traditionally dominated. The loss of war would encourage further territorial acquisitions in China by different European powers in an event known as ‘the scramble for concessions’ during the late 1890s, a move that would bring about an increased role of the USA in the pursuit of an ‘Open Door Policy’ regarding China. China’s decline can be viewed in parallel with Japan’s ascendancy, increasing prestige and laying the foundations for the country’s transition into a colonial power. Japan’s territorial acquisition of Taiwan would last until 1945. This elevated position after the Treaty of Shimonoseki in terms of territorial influence and regional power would contribute to the later annexation of Korea in 1910.

The Triple Intervention

After the signing of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in April 1895, the territorial acquisitions of Japan were challenged by Russia, France, and Germany in a move known as the Triple Intervention. This was primarily to do with the concerns that Japan had acquired the Liaodong Peninsula as a result of the treaty. It was thought that this would give Japan too much economic and strategic interest in the region. Russia sought to expand their regional interests into Manchuria and saw this as an opportunity to initially support China against Japan’s demands. This would create the conditions to expand the use of railways into the region, part of the expanding Trans-Siberian railway at the time. The initial demand for Japan to renounce claims to the Liaodong Peninsula came on April 23, but it was not until November 8 that this revision was accepted by the Japanese government. The revision stipulated the return of the Liaodong peninsula to China but an additional 30 million taels was also to be added to the indemnities bill. Russia and France loaned the funds for this to China. France’s support for the Triple Intervention can be connected to the alliance system in place in Europe at the time; France and Russia had agreed to an alliance in 1892 and were diplomatically tied. Germany had her own colonial interests at the time and perhaps saw this as an opportunity to be more engaged in the region. By 1898, Germany had gained colonial control of Shandong Province. The Triple Intervention provides a reminder of the European colonial interests in the region, which had been growing throughout the 19th century, but especially the increasing rivalry between Russia and Japan. From the Korean perspective, the weakening of Japan’s presence through the loss of the Liaodong peninsula would have been welcomed by many and there was an increased interest in Russia at this point.

Review Activity – To what extent did conflict between China and Japan during the First Sino-Japanese War affect Korea and the regional balance of power?

When considering the consequences of the First Sino-Japanese War, we can consider its effects both on Korea and the region. Therefore this question would invite a discussion of all of the sections provided in this chapter:

- The second phase of the Donghak Peasant Uprising
- The Gabo Reforms
- The Treaty of Shimonoseki
- The Triple Intervention and increased Russian influence

Remember to focus your arguments on how the war affected Korea.

Paper 1 Practice

Inquiry Question: To what extent do you agree that the consequences of the First Sino-Japanese War would bring about tremendous change for Korea?

Source A – Extracts from the Treaty of Shimonoseki

Context – The First Sino-Japanese War brought important consequences for the region, especially in regard to the position of Korea. The war alongside the Donghak Peasant Revolution and Gabo Reforms occurred at a time of tremendous change in Korea. The treaty of Shimonoseki was signed in Japan on April 17, 1895 – no Koreans were present at the signing of the treaty. It was overseen by Ito Hirobumi of Japan and Li Hongzhang of China.

ARTICLE I.

China recognizes definitively the full and complete independence and autonomy of Corea, and in consequence, the payment of tribute and the performance of ceremonies and formalities by Corea to China in derogation of such independence and autonomy, shall wholly cease for the future.

ARTICLE II.

China cedes to Japan in perpetuity and full sovereignty the following territories, together with all fortifications, arsenals, and public property thereon:

- A. The island of Formosa, together with all islands appertaining or belonging to the said island of Formosa.
- B. The Pescadores Group, that is to say, all islands lying between the 119th and 120th degrees of longitude east of Greenwich and the 23rd and 24th degrees of north latitude.

ARTICLE IV

China agrees to pay to Japan as a war indemnity the sum of 200,000,000 Kuping taels; the said sum to be paid in eight installments.

ARTICLE X

All offensive military operations shall cease upon the exchange of the ratifications of this Act.

Source B – Extract from 'Korea's Place in the Sun' by Bruce Cumings

Context – Bruce Cumings is an American historian who specialises in the history of East Asia and has published a number of texts on Korean history.

The rebellion was over, and soon, so was the Sino-Japanese War. Japan was completely victorious, China's age-old relationship with Korea was severed for the next fifty years, Japan now occupied Taiwan and made the island its first colony, and China ceded rights to Port

Arthur and the strategic Liaot'ung peninsula, in Manchuria. This was too big a bite by pilot fish Japan in the eyes of the other imperialist sharks, so the Tripartite Intervention (Russia, France, Germany) forced it to give up Liaot'ung. The Tonghak lived on in the Ch'ondogyo (Heavenly Way) religious movement, which influenced Korean peasants for decades thereafter and was an early stimulant of Korean nationalism. This massive rebellion also cleared the way for Korea's first truly modern reforms, as commercial and industrial efforts began and semifeudal restrictions on Korea's multitude were lifted. Although the reforms came under Japanese auspices, it is from 1894 on that we can speak of Korea's modern period. It came a couple of decades after Japan got off the mark, however, a dangerous and ultimately fatal lead time.

Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. Updated edition ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.

Source C — Extract from 'The Making of Modern Korea' by Adrian Buzo

Context — Dr Adrian Buzo was a scholar, diplomat and ground breaking pioneer in the field of Korean studies, who passed away in 2025. He worked as a diplomat which included a posting to Pyongyang in North Korea during the 1970s. He founded and worked alongside the National Korean Studies Centre in Australia and held a number of academic positions at universities including Monash and Macquarie. His book, 'The Making of Modern Korea' is a one volume history of Korea.

'Pressing home their advantage, Japan enforced a harsh settlement on China through the Treaty of Shimonoseki in April 1895. While their annexation of the strategic Liaodong Peninsula met with a veto from Russia, France and Germany, who pronounced this as inimical to their interests in a move known as the Triple Intervention, a move which was to be remembered bitterly and vengefully in Japan, the major outcome stood: Choson was fully independent. Less apparent to most people at the time was that along with this victory came a growing note of Japanese aggression and triumphalism, perhaps best captured by the leading Japanese thinker (and mentor to many of the 1884 Choson progressive coup makers) Fukuzawa Yukichi, who in 1894 provided the following rationale for the war: 'We only intend to develop world civilisation and only intend to defeat the people who disturb it.'

Buzo, Adrian. (2022) 2022. *The Making of Modern Korea*. 4th ed. Routledge.

Question 1: Explain how the content of both Source A and Source B can be relevant to addressing the inquiry question. (6 marks)

Question 2: Analyze how context influences how Source C can be used to address the inquiry question. (6 marks)

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

III. Gabo Reforms (1894–1896)

Inquiry Question

To what extent were the Gabo Reforms transformative in their aims for Korea?

Whilst the war was carried out between Japan and China and internal conflict caused by the Donghak uprising lingered, the mid 1890s also saw an attempt by reformers to introduce a wide variety of policies that aimed to modernise Korea. The Gabo reforms were introduced shortly after the palace coup by the Japanese military, which brought changes to the Korean court. The palace coup returned the Daewongun into power, sidelining the Queen Min clan. The Gabo Reforms (named after the calendar year Gabo of 1894) were a comprehensive series of legislative changes that contained both influences from the reforms of the Meiji era in Japan and specific Korean concerns for modernization. A major focus of the reforms was changing the traditional forms of government organization including the abolition of the Confucian civil service examinations as well as remnants of the feudal hierarchy held by the Yangban class. Therefore it is fair to claim that the Gabo reformers brought across some of the ideas presented by the Donghak rebels as well. The new system was intended to move towards meritocracy with a focus on legal equality, ending social hierarchies and privileges. New systems of governance were introduced, including a prime minister and cabinet government. In total, over 200 reforms were passed, covering multiple areas of economic, political and social life. A selection of these are outlined below:

- Removal of Confucian civil service examinations
- Formal ending of slavery
- New taxation laws not based on class distinction or privilege
- Currency reform
- Promotion of Korean written language, Hangeul
- Creation of a judicial system influenced by Western models
- Fairer systems of law and order including the abolition of corporal punishment
- Removal of yangban privileges
- Efforts to modernise the military
- Promotion of education initiatives

The Gabo Reforms were influenced by the social, political and economic changes that had occurred within Korea and in the region. For example, the demands for reform made during the Donghak Peasant Revolution can be linked to some of the changes that were brought about. The Gabo Reforms should also be seen in the context of the changing balance of power in the region as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War. Of particular note is the weakening influence of the Qing Dynasty and subsequent ending of the Suzerain – Tributary relationship after the Treaty of Shimonoseki. Influences from Japan can be seen when making comparisons with the Meiji era since 1868 which had brought a number of economic and political changes to Japan. The Korean reformers at this time wanted to establish the legitimacy of Korea as a newly independent state. In this way the Gabo Reforms, as expressed by historian Kyung Moon Hwang, could be viewed as a “blueprint” for a modern state.



Source Activity Three

The Gabo Reforms

ATL: Thinking Skills

When we examine the Gabo Reforms, it is important to see them as overlapping with both the Donghak Peasant Revolution and the First Sino-Japanese War. This informs us that this was a chaotic time across Korea due to the impact of rebellion, civil conflict and regional war.

Historian's Perspectives

VIEWPOINT 1

"Only very few in Korea questioned the spirit of these reforms, but many wondered about the way the Japanese interfered in the reform process. Fearing a conservative backlash against the reforms, the Japanese first appeased conservatives and then the Donghaks by installing the aging King Daewongun as the nominal head of the new government...The government enacted laws that established a separate hierarchy of courts, issued decrees outlawing the torture of suspects and proposed punishment of the criminals. The new administration formally ended social distinctions. Yangban were stripped of their legal status, outcast distinctions were also abolished and equality before the law enacted. Under these reforms all positions were thrown open to the public regardless of social class. The most important reform from the council was the abolition of the civil service exam that was at the core of Yangban elitism. The Deliberative Council issued over 200 reform measures."

Jitendra Uttam, *The Political Economy of Korea: Transition, Transformation and Turnaround* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) p68

VIEWPOINT 2

"With the various Western and Japanese imperialist powers lying in wait, as well as the recent events surrounding the Donghak peasant uprising, it was clear the government needed to implement measures that would resolve the underlying social problems, and also garner popular support for the government. Since it was apparent that the commoners were less than satisfied with the performance of the government and its officials, it was necessary to legitimise the current governmental system, and to cultivate a sense of pride and patriotism in the people."

In Defense of the State: The Gabo Reforms, Education, and Legitimacy – by Leighanne Yuh

VIEWPOINT 3

"By the time the Deliberative Assembly gave way to a cabinet-based government at the end of 1894, it had passed over 200 such bills, systematically overhauling patterns of Korean government, society, and economy that had been in place for centuries. With the exception of those concerning the governing structure, most of these resolutions were not immediately implemented into practice, but they provided a blueprint and impetus for reform that would continue for decades."

Kyung Moon Hwang, *A History of Korea: an Episodic Narrative*
(Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)

Discuss the following questions to consider the significance of the Gabo Reforms. Remember to use the historian's viewpoints to support your thinking.

1. What influences do you consider to have shaped the Gabo Reforms? Consider the role of the following: the Donghak movement, Japan, Korean reformers, and modernisers.
2. The nature of the Gabo Reforms were far reaching, and over 200 measures were passed by the Deliberative Council. Examine some of these measures. What do they suggest about the aims and intentions of the reformers?
3. What do the historian's viewpoints suggest were the consequences of the reforms?

Japan's influence can be seen through the arrival of Inoue Kaoru, who brought further reforms, including the creation of a constitution. Concerns over the growing influence of Japan, seen in their victory over China and a suspicion that they were looking to eventually take over Korea, prompted opposition to the Gabo Reforms as being closely aligned to the interests of Japan.

The Assassination of Queen Min

The Joseon court, ruled by King Gojong, had initially supported the reforms, but as they shared these concerns, Japan's role in the reforms was increasingly questioned. Queen Min was especially opposed to what was occurring across Korea as a result of the Gabo Reforms. She had been shifting politically towards Russia in a way to counterbalance this increased Japanese presence across Korea.

Seeing her as an obstacle for their aims in Korea, a group of Japanese criminals and Korean collaborators attacked the Gyeongbok palace. She was brutally stabbed multiple times and her body was set aflame; this atrocity was shocking and occurred on October 8th 1895. This created instability, considerable grieving, and increased resistance to Japan across Korea. This development is known as the Eulmi Incident. Reluctance to accept the increased influence of Japan through the Gabo Reforms as well as views of reform and modernization that led to the Eulmi Incident can be seen in Source Activity Five.



Source Activity Four

ATL: Thinking Skills



Key Profile – Queen Min

“On each occasion I was impressed with the grace and charming manner of the Queen, her thoughtful kindness, her singular intelligence and force, and her remarkable conversational power even through the medium of an interpreter. I was not surprised at her singular political influence, or her sway over the King and many others.”

Isabella L. Bird, *Korea and Her Neighbors*, 255

1. What does this source suggest about the character of Queen Min?
2. How might the perspectives of Victorian travel writers be of use to historians studying Korea at this point?

The words of Isabella Bird provide a window into the powerful personality of Queen Min, whose death in 1895 can be seen to be instrumental in bringing changes to Korea and the eventual declaration of the Korean empire in 1897.

You will have encountered the life and actions of Queen Min in both Chapters 1 and 2 of this book. She played a pivotal role in Korea during this period.

Tasks

1. Conduct a biographical research project into the life and work of Queen Min.
2. Why can she be viewed as such a significant individual from this period of study?

Queen Min's brutal assassination would lead to the repeal of the Gabo Reforms and in the wake of increased threats to the monarchy, her husband moved to the Russian legation. Interest in Russia across Korea had increased after the Triple Intervention and their increasing involvement in the region. The move by King Gojong to seek refuge in the Russian legation in February 1896 created the conditions for the temporary withdrawal of Japan from Korea and brought an end to the Gabo Reforms. From this point, increased moves to establish the independence of Korea and to bring about further modernisation would be carried out, which is discussed in Chapter Four.



Source Activity Five

ATL: Thinking Skills

Viewpoints on Gojong and Reform

Perspective 1: Letter to the British Foreign Office, March 1895

"The King of Korea has reluctantly agreed to accept that Japanese reforms forced upon him, and has sworn at the tombs of his ancestors to renounce all allegiance to or dependence on China... the persistent and often unnecessary interference of the Japanese with Korean customs cannot fail to keep alive the hatred of the Koreans for their traditional enemies and all the changes, improvements and reforms introduced will have to be forced on a reluctant people."

A Letter to Under Secretary of State, Foreign Office. Various. Volume 2. Diplomatic. March-May 7, 1895. MS FO 17 Foreign Office: Political and Other Departments: General Correspondence, China FO 17/1252. The National Archives (Kew, United Kingdom). China and the Modern World.

Perspective 2: Homer Hulbert was an American missionary to Korea where he also served as a close personal advisor to King Gojong. This excerpt comes from "His Majesty, the King of Korea," an article in *The Korean Repository* published in November 1896.

"His Majesty is progressive and is evidently not imbued with the ideas – may we say prejudices – which are prevalent in most parts of the East, against western people, institutions and customs. He is much interested in educational matters, and material advances have been made in this direction within the last few years. There is a Minister of Education as well as a Vice-Minister and these are influential members of the Cabinet. Public schools where reading and writing, in both Chinese characters and native Unmun, as well as geography, arithmetic, history and so forth are taught... There is also a school of Law connected with the Law Department and Normal school where teachers are fitted for their work. The establishment and maintenance for the last ten years of the Royal Government Hospital in the Capital under the sole supervision of foreign physicians and to which people resort from all parts of country..."

Hulbert, Homer. His Majesty, the King of Korea. Published in *The Korean Repository*, 1896.

Questions

1. What might explain the reluctance of the King and the people as stated in the letter to the British Foreign Office?
2. To what extent do the two perspectives on King Gojong and reform agree with each other?



Kim Hong-jip

Kim Hong-jip served in the newly created position of Prime Minister during the Gabo Reforms. During the 1880s, he had studied the consequences of many of the reforms carried out in

Japan during the Meiji era. He was involved in many of the diplomatic agreements of the 1880s created with Japan, Britain and the United States and can be seen as a figure who was looking outwards for different models of development for Korea. During 1894, he collaborated with Japan in the request to suppress the Donghak Uprising and he was appointed Prime Minister shortly after the seizure of the Gyeongbokgung by

the Japanese military. As Prime Minister he pushed through many of the Gabo Reforms alongside other Korean modernisers, including Park Young-hyo. The wide ranging reforms have been debated in terms of whether they set the foundation for future modernisation and nation building efforts or whether they reflected increasing Japanese influence and control across the peninsula. Kim Hong-jip was opposed by Queen Min, who was concerned about the increased influence of Japan and sought to collaborate more closely with Russia. After Queen Min was killed by pro-Japanese agents, Kim Hong-jip's position became increasingly exposed and vulnerable. In 1896, when King Gojong sought refuge in the Russian legation, an arrest warrant went out to pro-Japanese officials and Kim Hong-jip was killed by members of the public.

The Expansion of Russian Interests in Korea and the Region

The flight of King Gojong to the Russian legation in February 1896 is indicative of the growing influence of Russia in the region as a counterbalance to Japan. Following the Triple Intervention and the assassination of Queen Min in the previous year, Japan's position in Korea had diminished, which created the conditions for the independence of Korea in October 1897. Russia's role, however, continued to expand in the region. Sergei Witte, the Russian finance minister at this time, played an important role in advancing Russian interests in the region. In 1896, Russia signed a treaty with China which allowed for the building of railways in Manchuria that could be connected to the existing Trans-Siberian railways. China agreed to provide protection to these railways lines from robbery.

A number of Korean officials had viewed Russia as a counterbalance to Japanese influence in Korea during the 1890s. During the time when King Gojong was based in the Russian legation, there were a number of changes which were indicative of this increased Russian influence. These included:

- The presence of Russian advisors in the Korean court
- Russian acquisition of economic concessions into Korea
- Russian influence into the organisation of the police and military

The International Context

Russian influence in the region expanded further in 1898 with the lease of Port Arthur, which effectively gave them control of the Liaodong peninsula. It is important to note that at this point China was experiencing an increased European colonial interest and that a 'scramble for concessions' had occurred,

which expanded British control over the New Territories in Hong Kong and German control of Shandong Province. China's position was subject to European 'spheres of influence' while Russia's position was becoming more and more firmly established in Manchuria. Competing interests over Korea with Japan were therefore a consistent presence.

At this point, the role of the United States should be considered. By the late 19th century, and in response to increased European colonial expansion in the region, the USA embarked on the 'Open Door Policy.' The policy came from the work of US Secretary of State John Hay, and it sought to establish equal trading rights to China and to maintain their territorial integrity. This came as a response to European colonialism but it was also aligned to US economic interests at the time in gaining access to China's markets. Thus by the end of the 19th century, the regional picture did show increasing influence of Russia into Manchuria, and continued interest in Korea from Japan. However, there was some mediation of this process through the existence of the Open Door policy, which sought to discourage 'spheres of influence' and support the sovereignty of different countries.



TOK Connection

History as an Area of Knowledge – Methods and Tools of the Historian



⚡ **US cartoon from 1899:** Uncle Sam (center, representing the United States) demanding Open Door access to trade with China while European powers plan to cut it up for themselves. From left to right: Kaiser Wilhelm II (Germany), King Umberto I (Italy), John Bull (Britain), Tsar Nicholas II (Russia) and President Emile Loubet (France). Emperor Franz Joseph I (Austria) is in the back.

This cartoon above is indicative of the types of stereotypes and representations which occurred in the late 19th century. Often the cartoons exaggerate existing stereotypes through the use of national characters (for example Uncle Sam for the USA or John Bull for the United Kingdom), animals and symbols. There is typically a satirical message based on current events from the time. Often the cartoons produced at this time were produced in publications from the UK, France and the USA and can be critiqued in their representations of events. Historians therefore need to exercise caution when using these sources both in terms of the potential simplification of the issues at hand and also in the nature of representation. It should also be noted though that there is clear value in the use of these sources for a number of reasons. Firstly, they present contemporary opinions and political views from the time, often presented in popular magazines or journals. Secondly, the types of images present in the work can provide a window into the nature of representation despite issues with colonial attitudes and at times racist imagery.

Consider the following questions in response to this cartoon

1. How is the role of the USA in East Asia represented in this cartoon? How does this connect to the 'Open Door Policy'?
2. What do you see as the ethical implications of using political cartoons for historians working on this area of history?
3. Is it possible that political cartoons may reinforce dominant narratives and simplify the complexity of historical events?
4. What consideration should be given to using sources published in countries that were colonial powers at the time? What are the implications of this?

TOK Question: When historians study political cartoons produced by colonial powers, how should they balance the value of these sources with the risk of producing a one-sided representation?

The Russo-Japanese War 1904-05

The Russo Japanese War began after a surprise attack by the Japanese on Port Arthur in February 1904. Russia's refusal to recognise Japanese interests in Korea and with the confidence of the agreement made in the Anglo-Japanese alliance gave Japan the confidence to launch this attack. Russia had held control of Port Arthur since 1898, which was strategically important as a warm water port, and the choice to attack could be viewed as revenge for Russia's actions in the Triple Intervention. The Russo-Japanese War held the hallmarks of the modern war with its use of new forms of military technology, to the extent that it has been discussed in terms of it being 'World War Zero', a precursor to the new forms of warfare that would shape the 20th century. However this claim has been disputed by those who see the war primarily as a regional conflict.

The Korean peninsula was used by Japanese troops to ferry troops into Manchuria where much of the fighting took place. Occurring from February 20 to March 10, 1905, the battle of Mukden was an important land battle in Manchuria, incurring high casualties on both sides. Both Russia and Japan lost approximately

30% of their troop size in this battle, but overall it was the Japanese who were victorious and this marked a turning point in the war. The higher profile military victory came in May 1905 with the defeat of Russia's Baltic fleet. In the earlier stages of the war, Japan had blockaded Port Arthur and sank ships from Russia's Pacific fleet. After they took Port Arthur, it became very difficult for Russia to utilize the remaining ships. Subsequently the Baltic Fleet was deployed, and after a seven month voyage to reach East Asia, they were comprehensively defeated in the Straits of Tsushima between Korea and Japan. Russia experienced heavy casualties, including the loss of around 4800 sailors and the destruction of much of their fleet. Defeat at Mukden and Tsushima provided the conditions for peace negotiations to begin. This was mediated by US president Theodore Roosevelt and was signed on September 5, 1905. It brought the war to an end and brought about Russian recognition of Japan's political, economic, and military interest in Korea. Japan also gained the lease to the Liaodong peninsula as a result of the war. The treaty led to multiple consequences for the region, but when focused on Korea it should be seen that this was a critical step in what would lead to full annexation in 1910. US President Roosevelt would later gain a Nobel Peace Prize for his work in mediating this peace deal but neither Russia nor Japan were satisfied with the outcome. Britain essentially recognised Japan's interests in Korea as a result of this alliance, this was agreed in 1902.

Conclusion

During the mid 1890s, Korea's domestic and international position changed tremendously as a result of the Donghak Peasant Revolution, the Gabo Reforms, and the First Sino-Japanese War. These events created the conditions to declare the Korean Empire in 1897. Koreans were shaping their own responses to these changes whilst also recognizing the external challenge of regional rivalries as a continued threat to their sovereignty.

Paper 3 Practice

Essay Skills Builder

ATL – Critical thinking skills – developing and evaluating arguments

'The Gabo Reforms brought about the most far reaching change to Korea during the 1890s.'
To what extent do you agree with this argument?

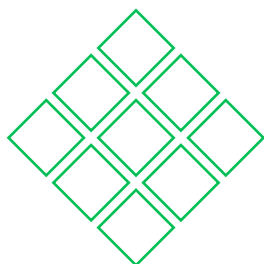
Considering the importance of different factors

The argument that you are looking to unpack consider the importance of the Gabo Reforms. Therefore you will need to consider a number of reasons for why these held importance. Alongside the Gabo Reforms, it is also feasible to consider the relative importance of the First Sino-Japanese War and the Donghak Peasant Revolution.

Consider the following nine factors that could be brought into a discussion of this question.

1. Abolition of the class system and slavery
2. Modernization of government structure
3. Introduction of a modern legal and taxation system
4. Women's rights and education reforms
5. End of the tributary relationship with China
6. Increasing influence of Japan
7. Donghak Peasant Revolution
8. Assassination of Queen Min
9. Increasing influence of Russia following the Triple Intervention

Making a wide-ranging list of points in your planning allows you to build complexity into your thinking. You also begin to identify some of the different perspectives which could be addressed in your response.



To Do – Using the above nine factors – complete a Diamond Nine Activity in a small group where you sort and arrange the factors to consider their relative importance to each other.

Once you have done this, begin to consider the way that analytical and evaluative language can be used to acknowledge the relative importance of the factors. Consider using connectives and analytical / evaluative phrasing to help develop your writing style. Some ideas are placed in the table below.

Alternatively, a view which should also be considered...

This was of critical importance due to...

Far reaching change was brought about by these developments...

An often overlooked view on this though can be seen in the role of...

There are a variety of ways that the xxx can be seen as important

This highlights how...

This demonstrates a shift from...

The immediate effect of this can be seen

Making a judgement

At the end of a written essay for Paper 3 you will need to make a judgement. This can also be called a conclusion. This shorter section of writing should bring your overall response to a close by making an overall judgement on the question. Therefore you should look to identify what you consider to be the strongest argument, a judgement that you have come to through the process of writing the essay. Here are some Dos and Do Nots of writing a judgement in a history essay.

Do

- Make a decision, be clear on what your overall position is. What argument (or combination of arguments) do you consider to be the most convincing?
- Explain your thinking – justify the overall argument that you are advancing – why have you reached this position?

Do Not

- Sit on the fence – it is better to reach an overall judgement, this shows more independent thinking.
- Just summarise the information – you should be reaching a judgement which is different to a summary.
- Suggest it is impossible to answer the question – this is too defeatist and does not communicate well in an academic response.
- Introduce new examples and evidence into the response at this stage.

Working on this Chapter – Paper 3 Skills

It is likely that the Paper 3 focus on this chapter will invite discussion of regional rivalries in the context of the events of the 1890s. Consider creating essay plans for the following prompts which are written in the style of Paper 3 questions.

1. 'Rivalry between China and Japan was the most significant factor in bringing about the Donghak Peasant Revolution.' To what extent do you agree with this perspective?
2. 'The First Sino Japanese War fundamentally changed Korea's position in East Asia.' To what extent do you agree with this claim?
3. 'The Gabo Reforms were too ambitious to succeed.' To what extent do you agree with this argument?
4. 'To what extent do you agree with the claim that the assassination of Queen Min brought about increased Korean interest in Russia during the late 19th century?'

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

The events of the mid 1890s are critical when examining the long term conditions which led to the Korean War between 1950–1953. It could be said that the year 1894 especially was a turning point in Korean history due to the events that occurred and their lasting consequences.

Competing Visions and Ideas

The mid 1890s saw the resurgence of the Donghak movement into a type of revolution which was the largest of its kind in the history of Korea. These spearheaded efforts at reform and modernisation later but also provided the future seeds for different visions of the state. Alongside the Gabo Reforms, new ideas for the future of Korea were prevalent in the 1890s and thus would have likely impacted the thoughts and ideas of Koreans living under Japanese rule in the years leading up to the end of the Second World War and the Korean War from 1950–1953.

Loss of Sovereignty

More pressingly, the loss of sovereignty of the Korean state by 1910 has clear connections to the Korean War later on. The factors that led to this loss of sovereignty are seen at this time through the regional rivalry and competition over Korea and the actions of these actors in both conflict and diplomacy. Perhaps the turning point was Japan's victory over China in 1895, as this changed what essentially had been an established system of governance and rule for centuries – the tributary system. With this upended, it created the conditions for new approaches to reform and modernisation within Korea but also created the conditions for colonization.

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

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)**.

How do wars create the conditions for the emergence of authoritarian rule?

In 1910, Japan formally annexed Korea, and this became the official date that colonial rule began over Korea until 1945. The years prior to 1910 therefore can be studied to examine the causation behind how this authoritarian rule was implemented. You should consider how the information across Chapters 1–4 can be used together to consider the factors that allowed this process to occur.

In this chapter, there are a number of examples which place emphasis on the role of **conflict** for the emergence of authoritarian rule. Conflict occurred both domestically and internationally across the 1890s and 1900s and can be examined in their importance to the onset of colonial rule. The key conflicts therefore that can be considered as follows:

- The Donghak Peasant Revolution
- The First Sino-Japanese War
- The assassination of Queen Min - The Eulmi Incident
- The Russo-Japanese War (see information box at the end of this chapter)

All of these conflicts created the conditions which would eventually lead to Japan taking over Korea in 1910. The details and importance of these conflicts vary though. Consider this practice question:

**‘To what extent did conflict lead to the emergence of authoritarian rule?’
Use examples from at least two regions to support your response? (15 marks)**

This question explicitly requires a consideration of the role that **conflict played in the emergence of authoritarian states**. When examining the emergence of Japanese colonial rule therefore the case studies of conflict can be discussed and causally connected to highlight the importance of conflict. Consider the questions in the table below – either write up responses to these questions or discuss them with a study partner.

The Donghak Peasant Revolution 1894	• What aspects of Joseon Dynasty were the Donghak rebels challenging? • How did the Donghak Peasant Revolution create the conditions for increased regional rivalry over Korea? • In what ways did the continued influence of the Donghak movement shape intellectual movements and reform movements?
The First Sino-Japanese War 1894–1895	• How did the status of Korea change as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War? • In what ways did the ‘balance of power’ change as a result of the First Sino-Japanese War – why is this important? • What other powers increased their presence in Korea as a result of the war?
The Assassination of Queen Min 1896	• In what ways can this brutal assassination by the Japanese be viewed as a turning point in Korean history? • How did the assassination lead to a diminished role for Japan over Korea at the end of the 19th century?
The Russo-Japanese War 1904–05	• Why was this conflict connected to the annexation of Korea by Japan in 1910? What were the results of the war?

Subsequently there are a number of conflicts in Korean history that can be used for consideration on this question. Further to this, examples from Chapter 2 can also be used in response to this question – though more focused as long term causes of the eventual annexation. This includes the Gapsin Coup and the Imo Incident.

In a response to the above essay question, you are also able to bring in a comparative discussion point – this could include a discussion of one of the following: the role of ideas, social factors, economic factors. Other chapters in this coursebook can be used alongside this one to build a bigger picture for the emergence of authoritarian rule.

Questions to consider as you think about this theme

1. In what way does a conflict increase the power of one group to exert authoritarian rule?
2. How might conflict create a power vacuum which can be exploited by authoritarian rulers?
3. How might a conflict create regional instability and change the political standings of different states?
4. How might authoritarian rule come across as appealing to those seeking stability in the aftermath of a conflict?

Making Comparisons

Alongside Korea you should also discuss at least one other case study for the emergence of authoritarian rule which demonstrates the importance of conflict. There are many examples of other historical case studies which could work well here. A few suggested examples are named below:

- The emergence of Francisco Franco's authoritarian rule after the Spanish Civil War
- The establishment of authoritarian states in Eastern Europe as a result of the Second World War

Remember that your other case study should be drawn from a different region. You are encouraged to make points of comparison so creating planning diagrams, mindmaps and tables is a useful approach here for developing revision resources.

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04

Nature and Impact of Reforms under the Korean Empire

IB Lines of Inquiry

Inquiry Questions

- Gwangmu Reforms (1897–1904)
- Modernization of the state

To what extent did the Gwangmu Reforms (1897–1904) lead to change in Korea?

Independence Club (1896–1898)

To what extent did the Independence Club impact Korean politics and society?

Korean resistance to Eulsa Treaty

To what extent did Korea resist Japanese efforts to establish a protectorate?

Introduction

As seen in Chapter 3, by 1896 Queen Min had been assassinated, the period of Gabo Reform had come to an end and King Gojong had sought refuge in the Russian Legation. He re-emerged in early 1897, and within a matter of months, Korea had been transformed from a kingdom into an empire. In this period of transition, concern about the interests and influence of foreign powers in Korea continued to preoccupy its leaders.

This chapter will explore the rise and fall of the Korean (**Daehan**) Empire at the turn of the 20th century. It will investigate the impacts of another series of reforms, the **Gwangmu Reforms**, which were instituted to establish a new political system and modernise Korea. By examining the extent to which these efforts to **modernise** the state were successful from various **perspectives** – including from political, economic, social and cultural standpoints – it will become clear that this period encompassed both **continuity and change**.

The chapter will then introduce a key actor in calls for modernisation: the **Independence Club**. This organisation promoted greater democracy and challenged the authoritarian power of **Emperor Gojong**, ultimately contributing to its demise after just two years. Despite its brief period of existence, many would argue that the Independence Club remains historically **significant**.

In the final part of the chapter, the path to the eventual downfall of the **Daehan Empire** will be explored with consideration of **cause and consequence**. Increasing Japanese encroachment on Korean independence, in particular through the 1905 **Eulsa Treaty**, prompted resistance efforts from Emperor Gojong and other elements within Korean society. Despite this resistance, Emperor Gojong abdicated his throne in 1907 and, with the Japanese annexation of Korea in 1910, the Daehan Empire would cease to exist.

Timeline

1895	King Gojong announces the Education Edict.
1896	King Gojong goes into internal exile in the Russian legation after the assassination of his wife Empress Myeongseong.
1896	The Independence Club is established.
1897 (October 13th)	Korea is declared an Empire (Daehan jeguk) and Gojong performs the Rites of Heaven to become an emperor. The Gwangmu Reforms begin.
1898 (December)	Emperor Gojong definitively outlaws the Independence Club and arrests many of its key members. This included Syngman Rhee, who would later become President of the Republic of Korea.
1899 (August 17th)	The State Law of the Daehan Empire is enacted, affording Emperor Gojong absolute power.
1904–1905	The Russo-Japanese War is fought, in which Japan will emerge victorious. In the early stages, the <i>Japan-Korea Protocol</i> and <i>The First Japan-Korea Agreement</i> form key steps in formalising Japanese domination of Korea.
1905 (June)	The Taft-Katsura agreement pledges US support for Japanese interests in Korea in exchange for Japanese recognition of US interests in the Philippines.
1905 (November)	The contested Eulsa Treaty makes Korea a Japanese Protectorate.
1906–1907	Emperor Gojong tries to gain international support in opposition to the Eulsa treaty including sending many letters to foreign powers and three emissaries to the Hague Peace Convention.
1907 (July 19th)	Under duress, Emperor Gojong declares that he will abdicate the throne and pass power to his son, Sunjong.

Key Terms

Gwangmu Reforms	A wide range of political, economic and social reforms enacted from 1897-1904 associated with the establishment of the new Korean Empire. These reforms mostly aimed to modernise Korea, though many also served to increase the power of the Royal House.
Daehan jeguk (The Great Han Empire)	The new name given to the Korean state as it established itself as an empire rather than a kingdom in 1897.
Independence Club	A club of political and social activists who sought a strong, proud, modern, and independent Korea as well as a reduction in authoritarian rule.
Eulsa Treaty	Also known as the Second Japan-Korea Agreement by the Japanese and the <i>Forced Treaty of the Eulsa Year</i> by many Koreans, this treaty officially made Korea a protectorate of Japan.
memorialise	A process within the Korean monarchy's system wherein the Korean people could make formal requests or petitions to the king.
hangeul	The Korean alphabet. Most documents and publications used the Chinese alphabet throughout the 19th century rather than this one.
modernisation	A process which involves movement away from traditional social, political, economic, and cultural structures towards greater urbanisation, industrialisation, and systematisation. In this period, modernisation was also typically associated with Westernisation and integration in an increasingly globalised world.

Key People

Emperor Gojong	As of 1897, Korea's monarch became known as Emperor Gojong. His reign would end with his abdication in 1907.
Prince Sunjong	Emperor Gojong's son and heir. Prince Sunjong became Emperor following his father's abdication. Some contemporary observers described him as having cognitive or developmental difficulties, though historians remain uncertain about this.
Philip Jaisohn	A prominent political figure involved in the failed coup of 1884. Jaisohn later became an advisor to Emperor Gojong and founded the Independence Club in 1896.
Syngman Rhee	A student and active member of the Independence Club from 1896, Rhee would later become the first President of the Republic of Korea.
Ito Hirobumi	Japan's lead envoy, responsible for the signing of the Eulsa Treaty. Ito would become the first Resident-General of the Japanese Protectorate in Korea, later assassinated by Ahn Jung-geun.



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skills

Map of the Korean Empire's Telegraph System in 1905



The map beside shows the extent of the Korean Empire's telegraph network by the end of the modernising Gwangmu Reforms in 1905. The first telegraph line was set up in 1885, and by 1902, there were approximately 23,000km of telegraph lines in Korea.

« **Source:** Map of the Imperial Telegraphs of Korea, by J. de Moidrey, 1905. Illustration *La Géographie*, a French Geography Society bulletin, volume 12, 1905.

Question

1. How could you use the map as evidence to show both the successes and limitations of modernisation efforts up to 1905?

I. Context: From Kingdom to Empire

Inquiry Question

Why did Korea become an Empire in 1897?

Demands for the establishment of an Empire had begun in the immediate aftermath of Queen Min's assassination by the Japanese. In 1895, Gojong's cabinet had **memorialised** (petitioned) the king and urged him to take on the role of emperor. They argued that establishing Korea as an Empire was necessary in order to demonstrate the shift in its relationship with China from that of a tributary state to an equal counterpart. Advocates showed a strong desire to avoid Korea being seen as inferior to its powerful neighbours, Japan and China, both of which were Empires at this time. By repositioning itself in this way, Korea could also show the rest of the international community that it was moving out from under China's sphere of influence and taking a more active role as a player in the modern world.

It is clear that the establishment of a Korean Empire was closely tied up with Korea's concerns about maintaining its independence from growing external threats to its autonomy. Supporters used the slogan "No Emperor, No Independence" to advocate for the change. Once Gojong eventually agreed to take on this role, he stated that he was accepting it in order to "lay the groundwork for accomplishing the country's complete independence and to exercise its autonomous rights."

Some Korean political commentators, on the other hand, were critical of the idea of Gojong's elevation to Emperor. Politician Yun Chi-ho, for instance, was a reformer who advocated for greater democratisation. He argued that too much national energy was being spent on a measure that was essentially symbolic rather than being channelled towards more meaningful change in the management of the country's affairs both domestically and internationally.

Nonetheless, on October 12, 1897, in a lavish and highly ritualised ceremony, Gojong was crowned emperor. He performed rites and adopted yellow, rather than red, robes, which had previously been reserved for Chinese emperors. Korea was no longer to be known as Joseon wangguk (The Kingdom of Korea) and would henceforth be called **Deahan jeguk (The Great Han Empire)**. Emperor Gojong announced the beginning of a new era, Gwangmu, meaning 'Glorious Military.'



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Considering Diverse Perspectives: Identify the perspectives of those that supported and opposed the move to establish a Korean Empire in the text.

1. What reasons do they give to support their perspective?
2. Do you find one perspective more compelling than the other? Why?



« A portrait of Emperor Gojong wearing yellow robes created sometime after 1902, now housed in the National Museum of Korea.



Source Activity Two

AtL: Research Skills

This is an official portrait of Emperor Gojong. Using the information from the text above and a close inspection of the image itself, consider the following questions.

Questions:

1. What impressions does the official portrait give the viewer of Emperor Gojong?
2. How does it create these impressions? Give specific examples.
3. Why do you think the Emperor would have wanted his official portrait to convey these impressions in particular?
4. What are the limitations of this source for a historian?

II. The Gwangmu Reforms & Modernisation the State

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the Gwangmu Reforms (1897–1904) lead to change in Korea?

Shortly after the creation of the Great Han Empire, Gojong introduced a series of reforms. These reforms had two main goals: to strengthen the position of the royal house and to move the Korean state towards **modernisation**. Modernisation was viewed by its advocates as critical to strengthening Korea economically, militarily, socially, and geopolitically in order to maintain its independence. More radical efforts to modernise had been proposed under the Gabo Reforms (see Chapter 3) but had received significant backlash from conservative elements. This new initiative, which would be known as the **Gwangmu Reforms**, therefore took a more restrained approach. Emperor Gojong's edict of October 20, 1897 announced a focus on "adopting the new on the basis of the old." This phrasing seemed designed to reassure more conservative leaders within the empire that Korean tradition was not being abandoned. The edict, nonetheless, marked the launch of a series of changes, many of which were designed to help bring Korea into the modern age.

Political Changes

Absolute Power

In the first year of his reign as Emperor, Gojong appeared to oscillate between the idea of pursuing a semi-democratic model of government, closer to that of a constitutional monarchy, and an approach in which he would hold absolute power. Ultimately, the Emperor decided to establish an absolute monarchy. This was cemented with the introduction of a new central legal document – the State Law of the **Daehan Empire** – in 1899. While this did serve to markedly expand the powers of the monarch, some historians such as Hyunmo Park suggest that this decision was also driven by a belief that it would improve the efficiency of the system of government.

The State Law granted the Emperor the ability to have laws enacted and enforced, to reorganise the civil service, and to decide on all Korean military matters and foreign affairs. Gojong not only increased his personal power in this period, but his reforms also empowered the ministry that supervised the affairs of the royal family as well. By 1907, there had been 150 legal amendments giving new powers to the Royal Household Ministry.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Articles 1-5 of the State Law of the Daehan Empire 1899

Context: The State Law was enacted almost two years after the establishment of the Daehan Empire. After an initial period of consultation with a People's Assembly, Emperor Gojong decided against pursuing a constitutional monarchy and instead sought a system of absolute rule. This document was drafted by the Legislation Correction Board. They deliberately chose not to call it a 'constitution' but rather a 'state law' because its power drew directly from the Emperor, not a process of parliamentary approval. Emperor Gojong promulgated this law on August 17, 1899.

ARTICLE 1: The Daehan Empire is an autonomous, independent empire, officially recognized by all nations in the world.

ARTICLE 2: The Daehan Empire is an autocratic monarchy, which has continued over the past 500 years and will continue unchanged forever.

ARTICLE 3: The Great Emperor of the Daehan Empire shall have infinite imperial authority. This is, as in international law, an establishment of the polity of his own exertion.

ARTICLE 4: Any citizen who makes any attempt to violate the Great Emperor's imperial authority shall be regarded as being devoid of citizenship, regardless of whether he actually committed the act or not.

ARTICLE 5: The Great Emperor of the Daehan Empire shall have supreme command of the military and naval forces, decide the formation of the forces, and may have the power to proclaim or terminate martial law.

Source: Cited in Park Hyunmo, 'How and when the Gyeongjuk daejeon System Dismantled?: A Study on Political Meaning of the Daehan Empire's Birth', *The Review of Korean Studies* Volume 12 Number 3 (September 2009): 197-221. P. 205-6.

Tasks

1. Summarise each of the articles above in your own words.
2. What do you think is the main goal of each article? Why has it been included?
3. Using this source, describe the political system of the Korean Empire.

Considering Diverse Perspectives

Consider the demands voiced by supporters of the Donghak Peasant Revolution and the Gabo Reforms (Chapter 3). How do you think they would view this 'state law'?

Voices of the People

Gojong's power was subject to fewer checks and balances than under the Joseon kingdom. Furthermore, while previous kings had put measures in place to allow the people to voice their opinions to the monarch through formal processes like **memorials** and *petitions*, these were removed in the Empire. Some argue that the lack of opportunity for direct communication between the people and the Emperor caused many to turn against him.

Political Classes

Traditionally, ministers and members of the civil service had all come from yangban families (see Chapter 1). As the Gabo Reforms had done away with the requirements to pass the traditional entrance exam to enter the civil service, Emperor Gojong increasingly favoured ambitious members of the lower classes during the imperial period. He viewed the members of these classes as being more adaptable to Western ideas and technologies than their yangban counterparts and therefore more aligned with his modernising efforts. This marked a significant shift in political power and brewed tensions between conservative and progressive elements within the government.

International Relations

One of the key political developments as a result of the Gwangmu Reforms was a significant increase in Korea's international engagement. The Korean Empire signed a treaty of commerce with China which was an important step in establishing itself as an equal rather than a tributary state, particularly in comparison to previous agreements such as the 1882 treaty which had put Korean trade under Chinese control. They also established an embassy there in 1899 and, over the course of the late 19th century, Korean legations were set up in the USA, Russia, France, England, and Germany. Notably, Korea became a signatory to the Geneva Convention, a set of international humanitarian laws, in 1903. Korea also joined the Universal Postal Union in 1899, while the expansion of the telegraph network allowed 1000 messages to be sent internationally in 1902 alone.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Considering Diverse Perspectives

1. Which groups might have viewed these political changes positively? Why?
2. Which groups might have viewed these political changes negatively? Why?
3. Why might removing avenues for public petition have fuelled opposition to Emperor Gojong? Can you think of parallels in other historical contexts?

Military Changes

The Gwangmu Reforms focused heavily on growing and modernising the military in order to protect Korea from foreign threats. Prior to the establishment of the Daehan Empire, ministers of the King's government had greater control of military affairs, but the State Law of 1899 gave Gojong direct command of the military and navy. He established a Supreme Military Council, which acted on his orders rather than those of other government bodies such as the Supreme Council and the Ministry of War. A new military academy was created to train soldiers and 40% of the government budget was allocated to acquiring modern weaponry. Foreign advisors were brought in to train Korean soldiers in the use of the new technology and their presence was sometimes cause for protest (see Independence Club section below).



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Source A

Context: The source is a photo of Korean soldiers training in archery. The photo was taken in 1904 towards the end of the Gwangmu Reform period for a book written by British journalist, Angus Hamilton, about Korea.



« Hamilton, Angus. En Corée. Translated by Léon Bazalgette. Paris: Félix Juven, 1904.

Source B

Context: The source is a photo of Korean soldiers of the Imperial Army holding modern rifles in the guard barracks in front of Gwanghwamun Gate in Seoul. The exact date and origin of the photograph is unknown but it is archived within the Gwangmu period by the National Institute of Korean History.

» **Source:** National Institute of Korean History (국사편찬위원회). "한국사 이미지 자료." Accessed November 23, 2025. https://contents.history.go.kr/front/ki/list.do?pageIndex=7&pageUnit=20&blockSize=10&sortColumn=A.LEVEL_ID&sortDir=ASC&listType=card&periodCode=ki_age_60&typeCode=&fieldCode=#self.



Analysing Concepts: Continuity & Change

1. How can the photographs in Sources A and B be used to argue that there was both continuity and change in the Korean military during the Gwangmu period?

Using Evidence

1. What might explain the different impressions each photograph gives of the nature of the Korean military during the Imperial era?
2. Evaluate each source's usefulness to a historian studying the modernisation of the military in the Gwangmu period.

Despite a significant proportion of government spending being directed to the military, an overall lack of funds seems to have prevented the realisation of further reforms. This included the failure to fully implement a plan to establish conscription in 1903. When the Japanese landed thousands of troops in Korea in 1904 as part of their preparations for war with Russia, Korean military officials could mount little resistance to their demands. This episode appeared to suggest that efforts at reform had failed to create the 'Glorious Military' for which the Gwangmu period had been named. This would have far reaching consequences for Korea's ability to maintain its independence.

Economic Changes**Land Ownership**

In order to modernise the system of land ownership, two new institutions were created: the Bureau of Land Survey and the Bureau of Land Ownership. Land ownership in the late Joseon era had been complex and sometimes inconsistent; multiple people could all claim partial ownership of overlapping areas of land and ownership documents were privately managed without state control. Moreover, it had been 180 years since a national land survey had been carried out in Korea. Western experts in surveying supported Korean officials to create more accurate measures of land holdings and to issue standardised private land title documents to landowners.

These improved and formalised land ownership records strengthened the state's control but were also designed to ensure that land tax was applied more consistently throughout the country. Approximately two thirds of Korea's land was successfully recorded in this way.



Source Activity Four

ATL: Thinking Skills

GDP/person, Major East Asian Countries

(Gear-Khamis dollar, calculated by the average prices of dollar in 1990)

	1700	1820	1850	1870	1911	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916
Korea		600		604	815	843	869	902	1,048	1,018
China	600	600	600	530			552			
Japan	570	669	679	737	1,356	1,384	1,387	1,387	1,430	1,630
India	550	533	533	533	691	689	673	673	691	710
Indonesia	580	612	637	578	839	838	874	874	866	870
Philippines		584		624	913	911	938	938	875	1,003
Thailand		570		608			841	841		

Source: Angus Maddison. 2012, "Historical Statistics for the World Economy: 1-2008 AD," (<http://www.ggdc.net/MADDISON/oriindex.htm>). Angus Maddison is an economic historian, publishing historical global economic data with the OECD Development Centre (Yi, 2025).

Caption: Hwang Tae-yeon (2017) argues that Korea's economic rise until 1915 was driven by the success of the Gwangmu land reforms, a modernizing initiative by the Daehan Empire that stabilized land ownership and boosted agricultural productivity. However, this growth was halted and eventually reversed by the Japanese Land Survey Program (1910–1918), discussed in Chapter 5. By dismantling the Gwangmu reforms and implementing predatory administrative changes, the Japanese colonial government effectively expropriated the achievements of the Korean empire, shifting the economic benefits away from the Korean population and toward the colonial administration, resulting in the per capita income decline observed starting in 1916 (Yi, 2025).

Questions:

1. What does this data suggest about the impact of the Gwangmu land reforms and other modernization efforts led by Emperor Gojong?
2. What are the strengths and limitations in using data to identify causal relationships?
3. What does the 1916 drop suggest about the long-term impact of colonial land policy changes compared to the original Gwangmu reforms?

Currency

Another feature of the Gwangmu reforms was the effort to standardise the currency being used in Korea. This was done with the goal of strengthening the Empire's position in global trading and to stabilise the economy. One key change was to move away from using the yang which was based on silver and instead implement the Korean won, a currency that would align with the global gold-standard. The 1901 Ordinance on Currency actioned this change and was followed by an ordinance to establish a Central Bank in 1903 that would oversee all minting and the issuance of bank notes.

Despite these important steps, by 1905 it was clear that the creation of the Central Bank proved difficult to fund and, while the groundwork had been laid, the Empire had been unable to successfully standardise the currency. This process was also made challenging due to the ongoing dominance of Japanese banking systems in Korea (see page 131).

Government Monopolies

A number of different government-owned companies were created in the Gwangmu period. For example, the Samjeongsa corporation was founded to maintain a monopoly of Korea's ginger industry. The Royal Household Ministry also strengthened the economic power of the Emperor's family by securing control of mining and fishing rights, the national mint, the production of red ginseng, and the rail sector.

Industry & Infrastructure

Traditional cottage industries and handicrafts were increasingly replaced by manufactured goods as modernisation picked up pace. Factories and plants were established for iron and brass products, pottery, and paper, as well as for the processing of consumables such as rice, beer, and tobacco. Prominent politician and moderniser Yi Yongik was one of many Koreans who played a key role in these efforts. He established factories for glass, porcelain, weaving and arms as well as advancing coalmining and railways projects.

Major infrastructure projects such as these created considerable transformation in various aspects of Korean life. This included the significant expansion of services such as the postal and telegraph systems (see map on page 119). Emperor Gojong established the Hanseong Electric Company with his own funds in 1898 and entrusted to it major projects in electricity, plumbing, and telephone networks.

The company was also responsible for the construction of new tramlines. The first of these opened in 1899 and was the second tramline in Asia, behind only that of Kyoto. By 1904, at least 16km of electric streetcar lines had been constructed. In 1898, the government established a railroad company, and Korea's first ever train line was constructed between Incheon and Seoul in 1899. At the same time, electric streetlights began to illuminate the city of Seoul, and an emphasis was placed on the development of energy industries such as oil and coal to fuel the introduction of widespread electricity use in Korea.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

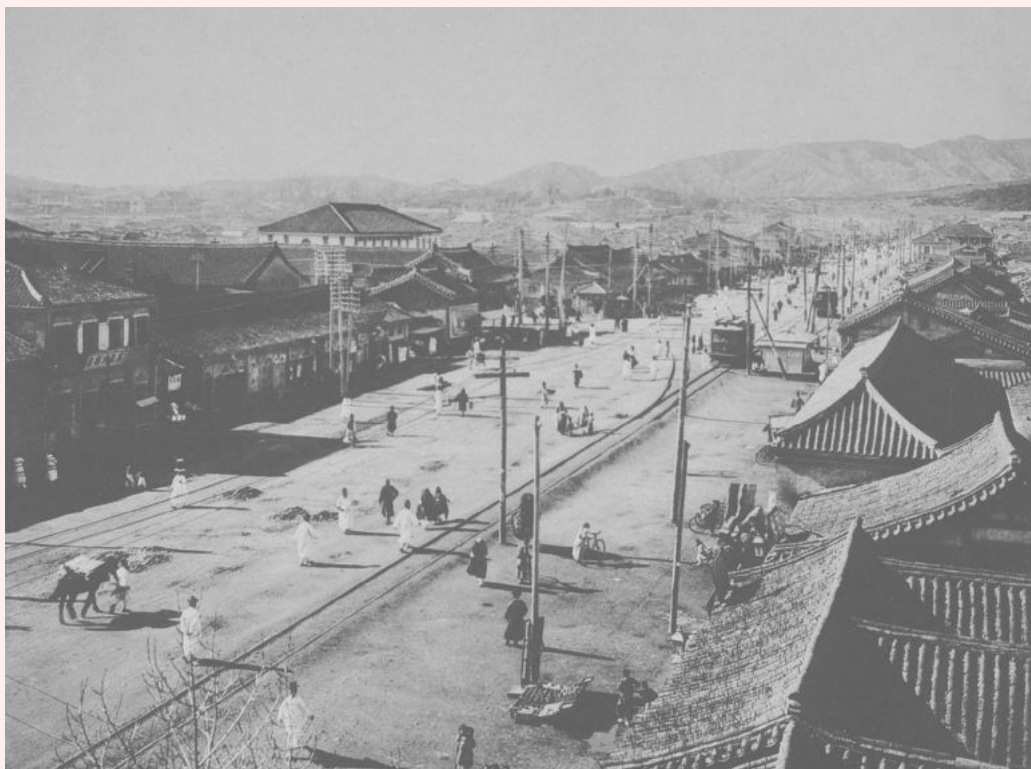
Source A: Description of Seoul (1904)

Context: Angus Hamilton was a British journalist who spent several months working as a correspondent in Korea. During his stay, he wrote a book simply entitled 'Korea' which was published in 1904. In this excerpt he describes changes to the city of Seoul during the period of Gwangmu Reforms.

"Old Seoul, with its festering alleys, its winter accumulations of every species of filth, its plastering mud and penetrating foulness, has almost totally vanished from within the walls of the capital. The streets are magnificent, spacious, clean, admirably made and well drained. The narrow, dirty lanes have been widened; gutters have been covered, and roadways broadened; until, with its trains, its cars, and its lights, its miles of telegraph lines, its Railway Station Hotel, brick houses and glass windows, Seoul is within measurable distance of becoming the highest, most interesting, and cleanest city in the East. It is still not one whit Europeanised, for the picturesqueness of the purely Korean principles and standards of architecture has been religiously maintained, and is to be observed in all future improvements."

Source: Hamilton, Angus. Korea. London: W. Heinemann, 1904, p. 34.

Source B: Photograph of Seoul (1905)



Photograph of Jongno Street in Seoul taken in 1905.

Inquiry question: To what extent had the city of Seoul been modernised by the end of the Gwangmu Reforms?

Explaining Content from Historical Sources

1. Compare and contrast what the sources reveal about the **modernisation** of the city of Seoul in the early 1900s. Do they entirely corroborate one another? Can you suggest reasons for any points on which they differ?
2. What is different about what a historian can learn from a photographic source versus a written source? Support your thinking with examples from sources A and B.

Analysing Concepts

1. Emperor Gojong had stated that the objectives of the Gwangmu Reforms were “adopting the new on the basis of the old.” Using both sources A and B, look for evidence of change (modernisation) and continuity (tradition).

Create a T-Chart like the example below to record your examples.

Change (Modernisation)	Continuity (Tradition)

Paper 3 Practice

Imagine you are writing an essay on the following question:

To what extent do you agree with the view that efforts to modernise the Korean Empire had been unsuccessful by 1905?

Using Sources A and B as evidence, as well as your own knowledge, write one structured body paragraph for this essay with the city of Seoul as its main focus.

Foreign Trade and Investment

Many of these economic changes were brought about with significant intervention from foreigners. Emperor Gojong employed 200 foreigners who worked both as government advisors and technicians for the major industrialisation and infrastructure projects he had launched. As more foreign workers, missionaries, and diplomats arrived in Seoul, hotels and shops catering to an international market began to appear in certain areas of the city. Korea's formerly isolationist stance was also markedly changed as

foreign loans and investment were not only allowed but actively encouraged. Similarly, foreign trade, especially with Japan, began to impact the agricultural sector with farmers increasingly producing rice, soybeans and other products for export. While some viewed foreign economic involvement as important for modernisation in Korea, others were concerned about growing foreign influence and Korean dependency.

Examples of Foreign Investment

USA	Russia	England	Japan
Gold mines	Coaling stations on two islands	Coaling station on the island of Komun	Two coaling stations
Seoul's infrastructure: rail & tram lines, waterworks, telephone networks, electric power lines, and main power plant	Timber production rights in the northern forests Smaller gold mines	One gold mine, shared with a US company Small timber production concessions	Railway construction from Seoul to Pusan Daiichi Ginko bank with branches all over Korea
Near monopoly on kerosene for lamps	Smaller banks such as the Russo-Korean Bank	Smaller banks such as HSBC	More than 200 businesses operating in Korea
Hospitals and schools			

Social and Cultural Changes

Education

To meet the demands of a modern society, reforms in the area of education were also deemed necessary. Vocational and medical schools were established to train technicians and doctors, while a wider range of foreign language schools were created to improve the ability of young Koreans to engage in global networks. Gojong's government increased the number of primary and secondary schools and began producing modern textbooks to support an improved standard of education. Between 1895-1905, they published 106 different types of textbooks.

The government did not, however, support the establishment of educational institutions for girls. In 1898, a group of yangban women established an organisation which petitioned Emperor Gojong to allow them to create a school for girls by appealing to his commitment to modernity: 'It is time for us to eradicate old customs and to strive for enlightenment and progress. For this, we need to establish girls' schools and to send out daughters so that they can become a group of talented women like in other countries.' The emperor eventually allowed the group to establish a school using their own funds. This school, along with a handful of girls schools established in or near Seoul by US missionaries, remained the only institutions available for girls education in the Great Han Empire.

Cultural Changes

Western influences were felt in the fashions adopted under the Gwangmu reforms. Emperor Gojong and his male family members began to wear Western-style military uniforms more often than their traditional robes. Such uniforms were also to be used by the Empire's military forces. From 1900, civil servants were required to wear Western-style suits and hats on official business in an effort to reduce the visible influence of Confucianism in the political sphere. Western habits were also much more visible in other aspects of the Emperor's lifestyle, including the drinking of coffee and champagne and the hosting of banquets with Western-style foods.

While the Short Hair Act had originally emerged under the Gabo reforms, it was reinstated in 1900 to mandate that men cut off their traditional topknots. Emperor Gojong and Prince Sunjong had both been wearing their hair short since 1895, but now even some conservative leaders and military officials followed suit. Certain Confucian scholars and traditionalists continued to oppose the measure, however, and it was not heavily enforced.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian



« **Source:** Emperor Gojong in approximately 1907 in Western-style military dress with short hair.

Considering Diverse Perspectives

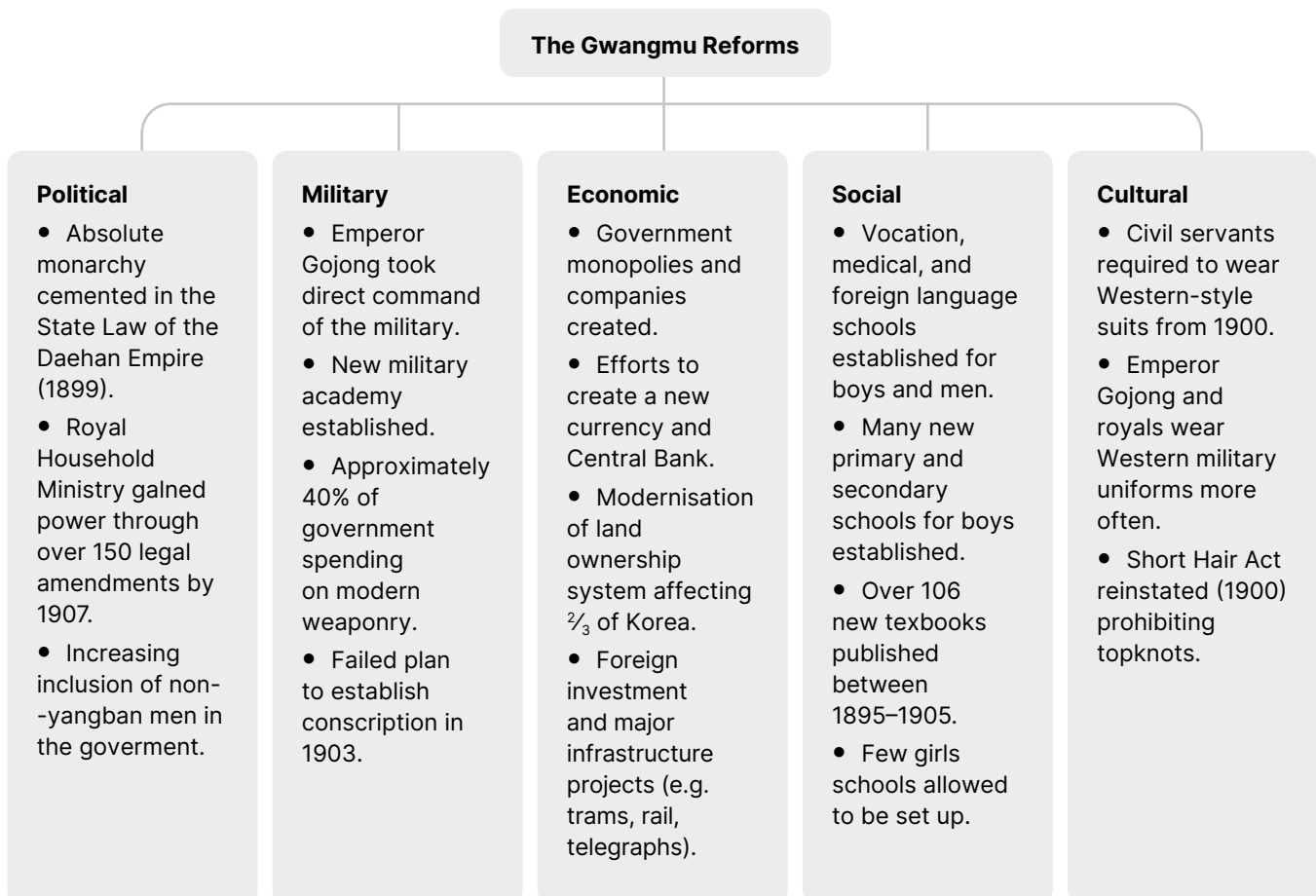
1. Why might some members of Korean society have felt so strongly opposed to changing their hair and clothes in the way Emperor Gojong had in the photo above?

End of the Gwangmu Reforms

The Gwangmu Reforms were brought to an end when Korea became a protectorate of Japan in 1905. Between 1897-1904, Emperor Gojong had pursued significant reforms that had seen changes in the government, military, economy and culture of Korea.

Historians disagree on how significant these changes were, given that many of the reforms had fallen short of their ambitious modernising goals by the time that Japanese intervention halted their progress. Despite advancement in many areas, there were notable limitations. Land surveys were incomplete, the currency had not been standardised, military reforms appeared to have limited impact, and infrastructure changes mainly affected the capital rather than the rest of the Empire. Moreover, while some changes in the government moved it more towards meritocracy than a class-based system, many others had strengthened the position of the royal family rather than shifting Korea towards modern democracy. Many at the time believed that Korea had not been strengthened as hoped during the Gwangmu period, with one Korean newspaper article describing the Empire as a “a flimsy ship crossing a raging river.”

There is little consensus on the reasons why the reforms were unable to fully achieve their aims. Scholars point to a variety of factors such as a lack of capital to fund the reforms, inconsistency in Emperor Gojong's leadership, resistance from local leaders, and limitations as a result of foreign influences.



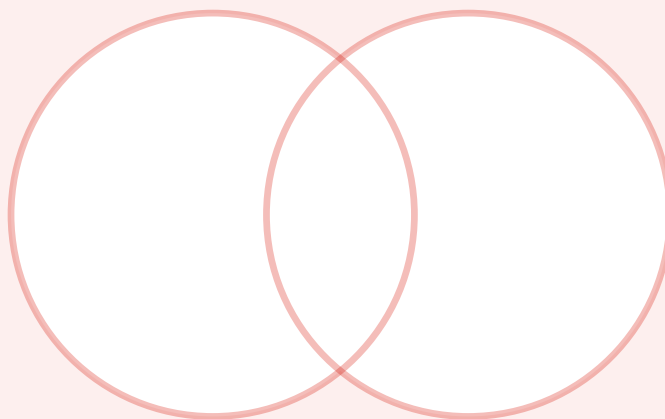


Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Check your Understanding

The two main objectives of the Gwangmu Reforms were to strengthen the position of the royal house and to modernise Korea with a view to maintaining its independence.

1. Review the various reforms mentioned in the text and decide where they belong in the Venn diagram below: did they strengthen the royal house, modernise the Korean state, or both?



Considering Diverse Perspectives

1. Were the reforms successful at achieving their goals or were they unsuccessful? Use evidence to evaluate these two perspectives.
2. Draw a line to represent a scale of success. Add specific examples of reforms from the text above where you believe they belong on the line.



Now read the arguments of two different historians below.

Secondary Sources (Historiographical Perspectives)

Source A

Context: Michael Seth is an American history professor specialising in the history of Korea. This excerpt is drawn from his book 'A concise history of Korea: from antiquity to the present.'

"Although many scholars have viewed the attempts by the state to carry out needed reforms in its late decades as pathetically inadequate or carried out only by Japanese intervention, some recent research has suggested that the late Choson state at times acted independently

to rationalize administration and carry out social change. The modernization that took place under Japanese colonial rule can be seen as a continuation of these earlier efforts. However, Chinese interference, Japanese expansionism, and Russian intrigue, along with the indecisive leadership of the king and the petty self-interest of many members of the elite all hampered these attempts to carry out reform and maintain sovereignty."

Source: Seth, Michael J, A concise history of Korea: from antiquity to the present, Lanham; Boulder; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p.273.

Source B

Context: Andre Schmid is a Canadian history professor with expertise in Korean and East Asian studies. This excerpt is drawn from his book 'Korea Between Empires, 1895-1919.'

"By 1907, when King Kojong was forced to abdicate, it was clear that in the last ten years of his reign, immense changes in both the apparatus and ideology of governance had taken place. That the designs for reform were often bolder than their implementation was a common critique. How effectively these changes were carried out by a state that could not confidently impose its will on the localities remains a question of much debate. The difficulty of extending reforms outside the capital is one reason that questions of local governance were discussed so widely in these years. Whatever the answer, it is clear that even in the more conservative Kwangmu reforms, the assumptions about governance had shifted as dramatically as the old balance of forces that had maintained the stability of the dynasty for more than half a millennium had been undermined."

Source: Schmid, Andre. Korea between Empires, 1895-1919. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 29-30.

Note: The romanised spelling in this source has been preserved from the original version. Current official romanisation would use the spelling 'Gojong' rather than 'Kojong' and 'Gwangmu' rather than 'Kwangmu'.

Understanding Arguments

1. Summarise the main argument about the success of the Gwangmu Reforms made by each historian in one sentence:

Michael Seth argues that...

Andre Schmidt argues that...

2. Identify at least 3 points made by each historian to support their argument.
3. Compare and contrast these two historians' arguments and reasoning about the success of the Gwangmu reforms. On which points do they agree and on which do they diverge?
4. Do you find one argument more convincing than the other? Why?
5. How do their ideas differ from or add to your own evaluation of the Gwangmu reforms in Activity 2? What would be your overall evaluation now?

Paper 3 Practice

1. "The Gwangmu Reforms (1897-1904) led to significant change in Korea." To what extent do you agree with this claim?
2. To what extent do you agree with the view that efforts to modernise the state of Korea were successful between 1897-1904?

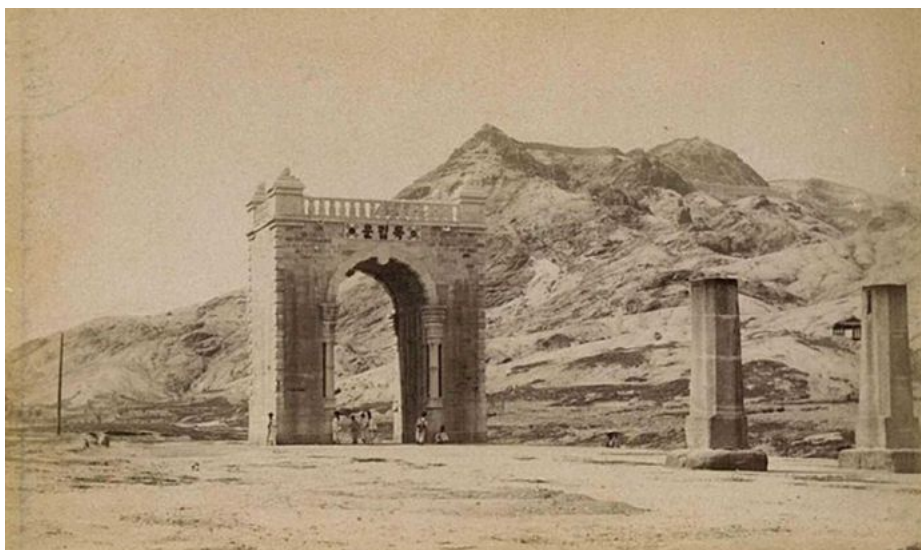
III. The Independence Club (1896–1898)

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the Independence Club impact Korean politics and society?

What was the Independence Club?

As Korea was experiencing a range of changes in its move towards Empire and modernity, some groups in particular sought to seize on the opportunities this change presented. The Independence Club was a nationalist organisation supported and funded by King Gojong and established in July of 1896 by Philip Jaisohn (Seo Jaepil) and Yun Ch'i-ho. Within approximately three months, the Club had attracted 10,000 members. The leadership was made up primarily of progressive politicians and activists, including many youths from the Baejae Hakdang, a school established by an American Methodist missionary in 1885. The group's first main focus was the removal of the Imperial Welcome Gate in Seoul, which had long been used as a point to welcome Chinese ambassadors to whom Korea had traditionally been subservient prior to the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895. Instead, they campaigned for the construction of the Independence Arch.



« The Independence Arch in the early 1900s. The Arch still stands in Seoul today.

Ideology

The club's activities and ideology quickly expanded far beyond the construction of this symbolic structure which had already begun in late 1896. Its main objective was to develop a strong sense of Korean national identity and a commitment to maintaining Korean sovereignty and independence. The official slogan of the Independence Club was "loyalty and patriotism."

The philosophy of the club was not always clear and consistent but some key threads emerged. In general, the club:

- supported the monarchy which they viewed as an institution to unify Korea
- criticised authoritarian rule, advocating for reform and wider political participation in some form of constitutional monarchy
- championed modernisation and showed great admiration for Western civilisation
- sought to bolster respect and pride for Korean traditions

Publications and the Hangeul Language

One of the main activities of the club was the regular publication of a newspaper. *The Independent* (*Dongnib Sinmun*) had been set up by Philip Jaisohn just prior to the establishment of the club in April 1896 and was disseminated in all eight provinces of Korea. As well as acting as an unofficial mouthpiece for the club's ideas, the newspaper sought to publish the views and works of everyday Koreans. It encouraged readers to submit patriotic songs and letters to the editor where they could express their concerns about the government.

Rather than using the Chinese script favoured by elites, as almost all publications did at the time, *Dongnib* was published using the more common Korean **hangeul** language as well as English. It was the first Korean newspaper to be published in these two languages. The use of the **hangeul** script was a deliberate effort to strengthen a sense of pride in Korean culture and identity. Club member Ju Si-gyeong went even further in advancing **hangeul** language by writing the first major grammar book in 1898.

Chinese dominance, not only in terms of language but also history, was a concern of the club. They believed that because Koreans traditionally studied Chinese history far more than their own, their ability to develop a sense of national identity had been limited. To combat this trend, Club members authored a five-volume Korean History entitled *History of the Great Eastern State* in 1896.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Source A: Editorial in the Dongnip Sinmun, 1897

Context: The following excerpt appeared in an editorial in the newspaper of the Independence Club, the Dongnib Sinmun, in April 1897. The editorial was written by Chu Si-gyong, the author of the first grammar book of the **hangeul** language.

"Independent nations unify their people with their own language and writing. When the nation's language which provides mutual understanding in daily life and the realm of ideas falls into disorder and is dominated by another people's language, then the thought and organization of the nation is disordered accordingly [...] The Korean alphabet, the work of our illustrious forefathers, can be learned in a day by our children. It is something all Koreans, men and women, have as a common gift. Learning and using the alphabet is the most urgent task before us, especially in this age of enlightened government."

Source: Dongnib Sinmun, April 7th 1897, cited in Robinson, Michael F., and Michael E. Robinson. "Nationalism and the Korean Tradition, 1896—1920: Iconoclasm, Reform, and National Identity." *Korean Studies*, vol. 10, 1986, pp. 35–53. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23718830>.

Check your Understanding

1. According to the source, what was the significance of using the hangeul language to forge an independent Korean identity?

Understanding Arguments

1. Summarise the main argument of Chu Si-gyong expressed in this passage. List all the reasons provided in the source to support this argument. Do you think this argument is well-justified? Why or why not?

TOK Connections (Knowledge & Language):

With reference to the ideas in the text above and Source A, consider:

1. How important is the role of language in creating a shared identity?
2. What is the relationship between language and power?

Political Action

A former guest house for Chinese diplomats was repurposed by the club into a headquarters known as the Independence Hall. Every Sunday, they would organise political lectures or debates in the hall on topics of 'national concern.' A key figure in the debating society of the club was a student at the Baejae Hakdang, a young Syngman Rhee.



Syngman Rhee

Syngman Rhee enrolled at the Baejae Hankdang school in 1894 and in 1897 became the leader of the student branch

of the Independence Club, known as the Mutual Friendship Debating Society. During this time, he worked closely with Philip Jaisohn and became a prominent figure in the club.

When Emperor Gojong outlawed the Independence Club in 1898, Rhee was arrested and imprisoned until 1904. During his imprisonment, Rhee was supported by the American missionary community and converted to Christianity. He authored a book entitled the 'Spirit of Independence' which was published in 1904 as a seminal work of nationalist literature. It called for greater self-reliance in Korea as well as **modernisation** and civic responsibility.

Rhee was released by the Japanese as they began to dominate Korea after the Russo-Japanese war and travelled to the USA where he earned a Master's degree

in international relations from Harvard University and a PhD in political science from Princeton University. From the United States, Rhee played a significant role in leading and supporting the March First movement in 1919, which sought an end to Japanese Rule (see Chapter 5). Also in 1919, he gained international attention for advocating Korean independence at the Paris Peace Conference, though ultimately failed to secure recognition. Rhee became President of the Korean Provisional Government – established in the same year – and continued to campaign for Korean independence. In his 1941 publication *Japan Inside Out*, Rhee warned the U.S. of Japanese militarism. After Pearl Harbor, he insisted it was America's moral duty to support Korean independence, citing past U.S. failures in 1882 and 1905.

After Korea's liberation from Japanese rule in 1945, Rhee was brought back by the US military government overseeing the region at the time. He became President of the Republic of Korea, a role in which he served from 1948-1960. Rhee's rule as President and his role in the Korean War remain controversial with differing perspectives on his impacts on Korea.

The Independence Club also played an important role in organising popular protest. For example, in March of 1897 the Club opposed a scheme in which Russian officers were given significant training responsibilities in the Korean military. They viewed this as a threat to Korea's independence and ability to defend itself. Following the Club's first 'People's Joint Association Assembly,' over 10,000 people gathered in front of the Emperor's palace to petition the Emperor to end the contract. After days of unrest, and despite threats from Russia of dire consequences, the Emperor eventually agreed to their demands.

At a debate in April of 1898, the Independence Club also proposed the creation of a legislative assembly for Korea. This was followed by an editorial published in the *Dongnip Sinmun* and, in July, a direct memorial to Emperor Gojong. The proposal put forward the idea of a form of constitutional monarchy in which an assembly of 'wise and erudite men' would debate and develop laws for the approval of the Emperor.

The proposed assembly was not designed to be a representative body of the entire Korean population, nor was it to be publicly elected. The club, however, suggested that by making the assembly's debates open to the public, wider Korean society would have more access to the political process.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Considering Diverse Perspectives

1. From a present-day perspective, would this be considered a democratic form of government?
2. How might our present-day perspective differ from the perspectives of Independence Club leaders in Korea at this time?

How did Korean rulers respond to the Independence Club?

Support

Gojong had initially supported club leader Philip Jaisohn. Whilst still in internal exile at the Russian Legation in 1896, he made Jaisohn an official advisor and even sponsored the creation of The Independent (*Dongnip Sinmun*) newspaper. In turn, some of the earliest campaigns of the club were advocating for the return of the king from exile and a change of title to Emperor.

Similarly, the Crown Prince Sunjong agreed to donate 1000 won to support the establishment of the Independence Hall and even agreed to write the signboard for the headquarters. Club leaders emphasised these acts to show royal support, in principle at least, for the concept of an Independence Club.

Although Emperor Gojong did not accept the club's proposal for a legislative assembly in 1898, he did eventually agree to update the role of the so-called 'Privy Council.' Many of the new responsibilities that this organization gained were similar to those requested for a legislative assembly and Independence Club members were ultimately given 17 seats on the council. These 17 members elected by the Club sat alongside 4 bureaucrats and 29 representatives of the Imperial Association, an organisation dominated by peddlers (traders) who typically sided with conservatives.

Opposition

Many conservative elements within the Korean government and imperial court were concerned by the club's reform agenda and its increasing profile. At times, they sought to limit the Club's actions. For example, while the Independence Club had planned to print 2000 copies of the *History of the Great Eastern State* (see *Publications and the Hangeul Language* above), this was never achieved. The Education Ministry blocked its dissemination in 1896, likely because it challenged traditional Confucian approaches, and the book would not be published until 1905.

The Korean government also used a ruse to remove the club's most influential leader, Philip Jaisohn, in May 1898. They sent a false telegram which said that Jaisohn's mother-in-law, an American, was gravely ill. Jaisohn and his wife quickly returned to the USA, only to find her in good health and to find themselves effectively in exile.



Philip Jaisohn

Philip Jaisohn was a progressive political figure who played a central role in the coup that took place in 1884 (see Chapter 2?). Following the coup's failure, Jaisohn spent a decade in exile

in the United States where he became a doctor and married an American.

Jaisohn returned to Korea in 1895 as a teacher at the Paichang Hankdang school run by US missionaries.

He became an official advisor of King Gojong during his time in the Russian Legation in 1896-1897 and the king funded the establishment of his newspaper, the *Dongnip Sinmun*. In mid-1896, King Gojong supported his cofounding of the Independence Club.

When Emperor Gojong disbanded the Independence Club under increasing Japanese influence in 1898, Jaisohn was removed from his role as advisor and tricked into returning to the United States (see above). Philip Jaisohn would never return to Korea but would continue his nationalist efforts by founding a range of organisations and publications.

Opposition escalated in November 1898 when anonymous posters appeared around Seoul claiming that "The Independence Club is attempting to change the state regime to a republic." Historians believe that the Imperial Association of conservative peddlers was behind the poster campaign. Emperor Gojong, fearing the claims to overturn the monarchy to be true or perhaps using them as a pretext, ordered the club to be dissolved and various leaders arrested. A period of protest and violence ensued between supporters of the club and the peddlers in the streets of Seoul.

Abolition of the Club

Described by some historians as 'fickle' or 'capricious', Emperor Gojong demonstrated his characteristic changeability throughout the club's existence, wavering between support and total opposition to it. While the Emperor gave in to pressure arising from the violent outbursts in November 1898 and briefly reinstated the club, by December 26th he had banned it once and for all. Gojong ordered the club's "strict suppression," brought in soldiers to clear the streets of protesters, and saw that many Independence Club leaders were imprisoned or punished.

Many historians still argue that, despite its short-lived existence and vague ideology, the Independence Club played a significant and symbolic role in spearheading Korean nationalism, cultivating a generation of new leaders and advocating for a more modern, democratic system of government and society.



Source Activity Five

ATL: Thinking Skills

The Demise of the Independence Club

Source A: Excerpt from the *Dongnip Sinmun* (English Version), November 10th, 1898

Context: This excerpt is drawn from an article published in the English language version of the Independence Club's newspaper, *Dongnip Sinmun* on the 10th of November 1898. The article recounts the accusations raised against the Club and the public protests that followed which had occurred a few days prior.

"In the meanwhile, the crowd grew in number and determination. Yu Kuiwhan, the Acting Minister of War ; Yi Kuitong, the Vice Minister of War ; Cho Pyengsik, the Acting Premier, and Minister of Law ; Nam Jungchul, Min Yongkui, etc., were busy in the Palace concocting all sorts of stories against the Club. They had the cheek to inform His Majesty that the Independents had planned to turn this little empire into a republic with Mr. Pak Jungyang for the President, and T. H. Yun the Vice President of the new regime. His Majesty seems to have believed the miserable but exceedingly convenient lies. On 6th Nov. counsels of the cabal so far prevailed that a violent dispersion of the multitude was ready to be ordered. The streets and approaches to the Police Station were strongly guarded by soldiers and none of the crowd was allowed to go out. The people, being informed of the infernal plot, became excited and said they would set fire to the whole city as they wanted to leave nothing for their persecutors. Fortunately, His Majesty, listening to the wiser advice of General Min Yongwhan and a few others, forbade any violence on the part of the Cabinet so-called."

Source: "In the meanwhile, the crowd grew in number and determination", Independent Newspaper (English), 18981110, National Library of Korea, "Korean Newspaper Archive" – <http://www.nl.go.kr/newspaper/>.

Note: The romanised spelling in this source has been preserved from the original version. Current official romanisation would use different spelling for the names of the people mentioned.

Source B: Historian Vipan Chandra on the demise of the Independence Club

Context: This excerpt is drawn from a peer-reviewed journal article written by Historian Vipan Chandra. Chandra was an expert on Korean history and wrote many journal articles focused specifically on the Independence Club.

"Enlisting the Korean monarch in the movement for change was a dangerous gamble. Monarchical cooperation could have become a durable prop only through reduction of the monarch's authority and status to a figurehead, but only a revolution could have accomplished

this goal. As the example of Japan illustrates, the institution of monarchy can serve as a force mediating the acceptance of change by a nation only when the forces of modernity are in firm command of the situation. The club's design essentially was to operate within the existing system, but what Korea needed most was an entirely new political system. The program of change was neither solidly anchored in effective grass roots organization, nor cemented by an integrative ideology, nor supported by a grand strategy and a resourceful and dedicated leadership willing to endure the worst. It gave no thought to revolution or forging an alliance between its supporters and the military in order to effect a firm takeover of the government. In consequence, it headed, unalterably, toward its own demise."

Source: Chandra, Vipin. "The Independence Club and Korea's First Proposal for a National Legislative Assembly." Occasional Papers on Korea, no. 4, Sept. 1975, pp. 19–35. Duke University Press, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41490135>.

Inquiry Question: What was the most significant cause of the Independence Club's demise?

Check your Understanding

1. In your own words, make a list of all the reasons Sources A and B suggest for the demise of Independence Club.

Analysing Concepts (Cause & Consequence):

1. Using the text above, identify any other causes you see as important and add them to the list you made in Activity 1.
2. Rank the causes from the one you think was most important to the one you think was least important in leading to the demise of the Independence Club. Justify your response.

Paper 3 Practice

1. To what extent do you agree with the argument that the Independence Club had a significant impact on Korean politics and society?
2. 'The Independence Club was successful in achieving its goals by 1898.' To what extent do you agree with this view?

IV. Decline of the Korean Empire

Inquiry Question

To what extent did Korea resist Japanese efforts to establish a protectorate?

As Emperor Gojong and the imperial elites struggled to contain internal challenges to their rule such as the Independence Club, external threats began to grow. In particular, Japan began taking increasingly decisive steps towards the annexation of Korea in the early years of the 20th century.

Protocols and 'Agreements'

The Japan-Korea Protocol (1904)

The Japan-Korea Protocol was signed in February of 1904. At this time, tensions over the Korean Peninsula between Japan and Russia were reaching a boiling point. In order to secure their advantage, the Japanese coerced Korean diplomats into signing this agreement. It enabled the Japanese to place military bases at strategic points in Korean territory, although the Protocol included an article that guaranteed Korean Independence.

The First Japan-Korea Agreement (1904)

In August of the same year, with the Russo-Japanese War underway, the Japanese imposed a new 'agreement' on Korea. This document afforded greater control of Korean foreign affairs to the Japanese Empire. It required Korea to accept financial and diplomatic advisors sent by the Japanese and to consult with the Japanese government before signing treaties with any other foreign nation. Historian Yi Tae-Jin describes this document as a 'memorandum' from the Japanese rather than an agreement or a treaty, since it did not include important features for formal diplomatic agreements. For instance, it did not have translations in both languages, nor details of the representatives authorised to sign it.

The Taft-Katsura Agreement (1905)

In July of 1905, U.S. Secretary of War William Howard Taft and Japanese Prime Minister Katsura Tarō met in Tokyo. The two diplomats met and drew up a memorandum which summarised their discussions; this has come to be known as the Taft-Katsura Agreement. They had reached an important understanding in this meeting: that Japan would not challenge US sovereignty in the Philippines and the US would not challenge Japanese domination in Korea. Aware that such bilateral meetings were imminent, Syngman Rhee had appealed to President Theodore Roosevelt to check growing Japanese power, which he argued was required by the 1882 US-Korea Treaty (see Chapter 2). These efforts were, however, in vain. Once the notes from the meeting were cabled back to Washington D.C., President Roosevelt – without consulting Congress – wrote to Taft to assure him that he would “confirm every word you said.” These documents were then kept secret for almost 20 years until they were discovered by historian Tyler Dennett in 1924 who published the first work referring to them as an ‘agreement.’

Many historians today challenge the view that this memorandum and cable constituted an agreement. The various documents recorded diplomatic exchanges but had none of the formal features of a signed agreement or treaty. Nonetheless, the memorandum shows that Taft told Katsura that the US was so firmly in support of Japanese policy that it “could be counted on by them quite as confidently as if the United States were under treaty obligations.”

In November of 1905, President Roosevelt mediated peace negotiations between Russia and Japan. The outcome was the Treaty of Portsmouth, in which Russia recognised that “Japan has predominant political, military, and economic interests in Korea.” Roosevelt was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize for his role in negotiations.



TOK Connection

Knowledge & Language

Discussion Questions

Discuss these questions with reference to the First Korea-Japan Agreement and Taft-Katsura Agreement described above.

1. **Defining terms:** What constitutes an ‘agreement’ between nations or leaders? Formulate your own definition. How does your definition compare with others in your class? Which of the ‘agreements’ above fit into your definition? Is this the same for others in your class?
2. **Perspectives:** Who appears to favour the use of the term ‘agreement’ in the examples above? Why do you think this is? What is similar or different about the possible motivations for using the term ‘agreement’ in each example?
3. **Interpretation:** How does the choice to use the term ‘agreement’ when describing the First Japan-Korea Agreement and the Taft-Katsura Agreement affect the way you, as a learner, acquire knowledge about these historical events?
4. **History as an Area of Knowledge:** How significant is the role of language in the communication of knowledge in history?

The Eulsa Treaty (1905)

The Eulsa Treaty was called the *Second Japan-Korea Agreement* by the Japanese and is known by many Koreans as the *Forced Treaty of the Eulsa Year*. It was signed on November 17, 1905, and officially made Korea a protectorate of Japan, though significantly the treaty was not signed by Emperor Gojong and was seen as a coerced treaty. The treaty further limited Korea’s control of its own foreign affairs and allowed Japan to appoint a Resident-General with authority over diplomatic matters.

The Signing of the Treaty

When the treaty was first proposed by the Japanese, Emperor Gojong and his ministers were staunchly opposed to it, with many making statements about preferring death to signing. Emperor Gojong initially told Japanese lead envoy, Ito Hirobumi, that he could not sign without consulting with the Privy Council

and his Korean subjects. Ito contended that such an argument was invalid, as the Korean Empire was an absolute monarchy in which Gojong had the ultimate authority. He was, nonetheless, unable to compel Gojong to sign.

On November 17th, the Japanese convened eight Korean cabinet ministers in the Deoksu palace. Ito was accompanied by the Japanese military commander and a contingent of Japanese military police to threaten those present. The Japanese leader was able to coerce five ministers, including Foreign Affairs minister Pak Chesoon, into signing the treaty. Theories about the reasons these ministers signed the document vary amongst both primary and secondary sources. They include: fear of violence to themselves, desire to avoid war with Japan, bribery by the Japanese, and agreement on the condition they could negotiate the terms of the treaty in a way that would allow Korea to retain some autonomy. Whatever their true motivations, the group became known across Korea as the 'Eulsa Traitors.'



Source Activity Six

ATL: Thinking Skills

Source A: Editorial in Korean Newspaper, 1905

Context: This excerpt is drawn from an editorial in the Hwangsŏng Shinmun (Capital Gazette) newspaper on November 20, 1905 discussing the role of the Eulsa Traitors. It was entitled 'I Wail Bitterly Today' and authored by the newspapers editor-in-chief Chang Chi-yŏn.

"Without warning, a proposal containing five clauses was laid before Emperor Gwangmu, and we then saw how mistaken we were about the object of Marquis Ito's visit. However, the Emperor firmly refused to have anything to do with these proposals and Marquis Ito should then, properly, have abandoned his attempt and returned to his own country.

But the Ministers of our Government, who are worse than pigs or dogs, coveting honours and advantages for themselves, and frightened by empty threats, were trembling in every limb, and were willing to become traitors to their country and betray to Japan the integrity of a nation which has stood for 4,000 years, the foundation and honour of a dynasty 500 years old, and the rights and freedom of twenty million people."

Source: Translation published in McKenzie, Frederick Arthur (1920). *Korea's Fight for Freedom*. Fleming H. Revell. pp. 96–97. ISBN 978-1-4142-4914-8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Wail_Bitterly_Today.

Questions:

1. According to Chang's view, why did five ministers decide to sign the treaty?
2. Consider Chang's use of dehumanising language ("worse than pigs or dogs"). How does this language convey the nature of the views of some nationalists at the time? How does this language affect your own interpretation of the source and the perspectives expressed?
3. To what extent do you agree with Chang's conclusion that these ministers were 'traitors'? Justify your response.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian



⚠ This photograph was taken as a souvenir from the signing of the Eulsa Treaty in November 1905. The image shows the Japanese dignitaries present at Toksu Palace, including Ito Hirobumi. Image Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Explaining content from historical sources

1. Who is present and who is absent from this photograph at the signing of the Eulsa Treaty?
2. What might we infer about the signing of the treaty from this source?

Analysing the context of a source

1. Who do you think took this photograph and why?
2. How might this context affect the usefulness of the source for a historian studying the signing of the Eulsa treaty?

Political steps towards the establishment of a Japanese Protectorate in Korea



Resistance from the Emperor

Emperor Gojong made immediate efforts to resist the treaty by appealing to the international community for support. Unaware of the secret Taft-Katsura 'agreement,' Gojong sent emissaries to the US with an imperial letter appealing for their support on the basis of an 1882 treaty between Korea and the USA. The 1882 treaty suggested that the US would intervene in case of threats to Korea's sovereignty, though the wording was ambiguous (see Chapter 2). On November 23, 1905, President Roosevelt refused to provide help to Korea and withdrew the US Legation to Korea the following day. These decisions were regarded by many Koreans as an act of treachery.

Emperor Gojong continued his campaign of letter writing to foreign nations, writing to nine different powers in 1906 to seek their support in declaring the Euisa Treaty null and void. In 1907, he secretly sent three aides to the Hague Peace Conference in an effort to appeal to the 44 countries meeting there. They were denied entry.

Most foreign powers refused their support and many followed the US in closing their legations in Korea. The United Kingdom, for example, declined to intervene largely because they had formed the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1902 in an effort to protect their colonial holdings in Asia. This treaty had specifically recognised Japanese interests in Korea. Even countries such as Russia and France who appeared more amenable to Gojong's claims distanced themselves and offered no meaningful support.



Source Activity Seven

Source A: Emperor Gojong's Letter to the Korean Minister to Germany, November 24, 1905

Context: This letter is the first example of many sent by Emperor Gojong to leaders of foreign powers in an effort to gain their support in declaring the Eulsa Treaty invalid. This was sent to Korea's minister to Germany, Min Cheol-hun, in the days after the signing of the treaty and was translated from Korean and submitted to the German foreign ministry.

Content: "Japanese officials came to the palace with their army and forced me to sign a document they had prepared. After that Japan named a governor and forced us to give up our diplomatic rights. Such a crime is unacceptable under international law. You [Min Cheol-hun] have to alert Germany and ask for help. The last hope for me and for the empire is Germany and international law."

Source: Lee, Hang-bok. "The king's letter." Korea JoongAng Daily, 21 Sept. 2009, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2009/09/21/features/The-kings-letter/2910347.html>.

Question

1. What does this source reveal about the methods used by Emperor Gojong to resist the Eulsa Treaty? Consider both the context and the content of the source.

Resistance from the Korean People

The Emperor was not alone in his fight to resist the Eulsa Treaty. Korean people also came together to resist in different ways. For example, in the years following the treaty, a number of nationalist associations and schools were established. From 1905, a guerilla force known as the *Righteous Armies* also began confronting the militarily superior Japanese forces. In 1907, it was announced that Emperor Sunjong was dissolving the Korean Imperial Army. Commander Park Seung-hwan committed suicide in protest, proclaiming "This is not the Emperor's will, but an enemy's forgery of the Imperial order. I would rather die than accept the order." Enraged, several Imperial Army units rose up against the Japanese in the Battle of Namdaemun. At the same time, many former army officers joined the *Righteous Armies* whose numbers swelled to 70,000 by 1908. They sought recognition as a legitimate army from foreign powers but none agreed.



⚠ This photo shows a company of Korean rebels from the Righteous Armies photographed 1907 by F.A. McKenzie, a Canadian Journalist.

Japanese Repression

The Japanese government found many means of repressing efforts to resist the Eulsa Treaty. In 1905, the Post Office and Telegram Service in Korea had come under Japanese control, which enabled them to monitor and censor communications. They closely surveilled Korea's politicians and diplomats, including Emperor Gojong, to limit their ability to seek outside support.

The Japanese also used violent methods to exert control. When British reporter Douglas Story met with the Emperor's emissary in 1906 and was provided with documentation to support the claim that the Eulsa Treaty was invalid, he only narrowly escaped assassination by Japanese agents. Moreover, in 1909, the Japanese military launched a sustained offensive against Korean guerilla forces and effectively quashed the armed resistance.

Perhaps one of the most impactful political tactics employed by the Japanese in this period was the forced abdication of Emperor Gojong in 1907. On July 20th, in response to his efforts to send envoys to the Hague Conference, the Emperor was dethroned through an abdication ceremony under coercion by Japanese officials and certain members of his own cabinet. He handed power to his son, Crown Prince Sunjong, who some sources describe as having cognitive or developmental difficulties.

The 1910 Annexation Treaty

On July 24th 1907, the Japanese introduced the Third Japan-Korea Treaty which gave them control of Korea's internal affairs. However, there is evidence that not only this treaty from 1907 but also those

from 1904 and 1905 were coerced because none included the instrument of ratification by the Emperor, undermining the validity of these treaties and the claims of the Japanese. Then, on July 31st, 1907, they coerced Sunjong into announcing the dissolution of the Korean Army. With the Korean Empire effectively rendered a puppet state, Sunjong's reign would last for only three years until the formal annexation of Korea in 1910, another treaty that was made under duress and also did not include the signature of the Emperor. The 1910 Annexation Treaty was the final step in a series of treaties that were forced on Korea. The point is underscored in this final treaty because not only did it not include the seal or Sunjong's signature but his oral will, later published overseas in San Francisco in 1926, stated that Japan had ratified the treaty and that he had not. The consequences of this 1910 treaty were significant and elicited equally significant responses from the Korean people as their country was forced to be part of the Japanese Empire.

Conclusion

The turn of the 20th century was a tumultuous time for Korea. It was clear to those living through this period that external pressures – especially from Japan, Russia and China – posed serious threats to Korea's independence. There was disagreement, however, on how best to address these challenges. Conservatives, for instance, advocated a deepening commitment to Korean traditions while the Independence Club sought **modernisation**, international connections and further democratic processes within the monarchic system. Thus, events both outside and within Korea created increasing conflict and instability. Gojong's efforts to strengthen the Korean state by establishing an authoritarian empire and by enacting the Gwangmu Reforms ultimately had limited success in staving off these threats. While efforts to modernise the state had progressed in some domains, particularly in the city of Seoul, many of the ambitious goals had not been reached. Meanwhile, Gojong's oscillating position on many matters often fuelled social and political tensions and at times alienated elements of Korean society. Internal tensions and weaknesses were compounded as Japan took both political and military steps to increase its domination of the Korean peninsula. The Japanese establishment of a protectorate in 1905 was a key turning point in Korea's colonisation and Korean resistance was severely suppressed.

Historiographical Debates

Historians dispute the extent to which Gojong should bear the blame for Japan's eventual domination of Korea. Some, like Jae-Ho Kim, argue that he was a weak and indecisive leader who prioritised his personal power and did little to resist increasing Japanese imposition. Others, such as Tae-Jin Yi, view him as an 'enlightened monarch' and suggest that progress was being made in the Gwangmu period until it was cut short by the Japanese. Many also point to Gojong's consistent campaign to seek foreign support in opposing the Eulsa Treaty as evidence of his commitment to Korean independence. Similarly, there is limited consensus amongst historians about whether Korean **modernisation** occurred only after it was made a protectorate by the Japanese or if it had already truly begun locally as part of the Gwangmu reforms prior to colonisation. Finally, there also remains historiographical and public debate about whether or not the United States 'betrayed' Korea by failing to intervene on its behalf in this period of Japanese encroachment. Many in Korea continue to hold this view, although defenders of Roosevelt point to a lack of clarity in the 1882 treaty as well as the necessity of the US policy for the nation's interests at the time.

Paper 3 Practice

1. “Korean resistance to the Eulsa Treaty was limited.” To what extent do you agree with this argument?
2. To what extent do you agree with the view that the failures of the Gwangmu Reforms contributed to the establishment of a Japanese protectorate in Korea in 1905?

Paper 3 Practice

Essay Skills Builder

Focus: *Synthesing different arguments*

Practice Question

To what extent do you agree with the argument that the Independence Club had a significant impact on Korean politics and society?

AtL: Collaboration

Learning Focus

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

1. Collaboratively plan and write a Paper 3-style essay
2. Articulate relationships between arguments and perspectives by using connectives and tentative language
3. Ensure an essay is coherent and effectively synthesises arguments throughout

Step 1 – Work with your group to collaboratively unpack the question

- **Main claim:** The Independence Club had a significant impact on Korean politics and society
- **Key terms:** significant, impact, politics and society (→ both need to be attended to)
- **Ask:**
 - How might you evaluate significance?
 - Would your evaluation for politics and society be the same or different?
 - How might you categorise different impacts (e.g. short vs long-term)?

Step 2 – Brainstorm Relevant Factors

Brainstorm relevant arguments that can both **support** and **challenge** the claim – considering both is a requirement for ‘to what extent’ responses.

Step 3 – Develop an Essay Outline

As practiced in Chapter 2, work collaboratively to create an outline for the essay. Work together to agree on:

- A well-formulated **thesis** that clearly addresses the question
- A **logical order** for the body paragraphs so that they can build on each other
- A draft **Point sentence** for each body paragraph, and
- Bullet points of the key **evidence** and **arguments** each body paragraph would include

Step 4 – Drafting the essay

Write an initial draft of the essay either by working through all parts as a group or by delegating different parts of the essay to individual members. Remember that one way you can help structure your writing is by using the strategies explored in earlier chapters like PEEL paragraphs and developed conclusions.

Step 5 – Consider the role of connectives and tentative language

It is important for an essay to be coherent throughout but it can be difficult to consider different perspectives and arguments without contradicting yourself or making them seem disjointed.

Connectives and tentative language can be helpful to show the relationship between these different arguments and perspectives. These can be used both between and within paragraphs. See examples below:

Connectives

To introduce one argument or perspective:

On one hand,...
Firstly,...

To add new points to the same argument or perspective:

Secondly,...
Furthermore,...
Moreover,...
In addition,...
Similarly,...

To introduce a contrasting argument or perspective:

On the other hand,...
However,...
Conversely,...
In contrast,...
Although,...

Tentative language

Phrases:

It could be argued that...
Another possible interpretation...
This may suggest that...
This indicates that...
... appears to show that...
... may also have ...
In some ways...
To a certain extent...

Adverbs:

Possibly, potentially, likely, probably, generally, more, less, moderately

Verbs:

May, might, could, appears to, indicates, suggests, implies

These two types of language can be used together to help show relationships between arguments and perspectives whilst avoiding contradiction. For example, compare these two sets of Point sentences:

Weak synthesis	Strong synthesis
Body Paragraph 1: Point: The Independence Club did not have a significant impact on Korean politics given its role on the People's Council lasted less than a year. Body Paragraph 2: Point: The Independence Club did have a significant impact on Korean politics, especially by acting as a training ground for future political leaders.	Body Paragraph 1: Point: On the one hand, the fact that its role on the Privy Council lasted less than a year may indicate that the Independence Club's impact on politics was limited in the short-term. Body Paragraph 2: Point: On the other hand, however, the club's role as a training ground for future political leaders suggests that it did have a more significant impact on Korean politics in the long-term.

Step 6 – Practice Task – Add connectives and tentative language

- Start by collaboratively reviewing the point sentences of each paragraph considering the examples above. Look for opportunities to add connectives and tentative language to better show the relationships between arguments and perspectives.
- Reread the rest of the essay and identify more opportunities to synthesise different arguments and ideas with connectives and tentative language.

Step 7 – Final Review

- Once finished, read the entire essay as a group and check:
 - Is the relationship between the different arguments in the essay clear?
 - Are there any places where arguments contradict each other?
 - Are there any places where arguments seem disconnected from each other?
- Make any final adjustments you deem necessary to maximise synthesis of arguments.

Paper 1 Practice

Inquiry Question: To what extent was Emperor Gojong responsible for the fall of the Korean Empire?

Full Practice Paper 1: Gojong's Leadership

Source A

Context: Kim Ki-Seok (Kim, Gi-seok) is Professor of Education at Seoul National University. He has a Ph.D. in education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. This excerpt is from a peer-reviewed article in the Korea Journal in which he responds to the arguments of US historian Dennett about the roles of both Emperor Gojong and Theodore Roosevelt in Japan's colonisation of Korea.

Content: "Due to the negative assessment of the ill-fated Emperor Gwangmu, many scholars of modern history in Korea and especially a few historians of Korean-American relations frequently lampooned him and even disgraced him as a traitor who sold his own empire. A cross-examination of diplomatic records of the U.S. State Department with new evidence recently recovered since 1993, however, reveals that the Emperor consistently and systematically explored diplomatic measures to protect the sovereignty of the Empire from Japanese military aggression. These measures proceeded as follows: 1) preemptive measures against foreign aggression, 2) proclamation of the forced treaty as null and void, and 3) public denouncement. [US Historian] Dennett was not right in his presumptuous claim that the Emperor's actions were a play at some sort of crooked diplomacy, and his reasoning is flawed in stating this in his defense of Roosevelt's betrayal of a treaty obligation to the Emperor. American strategic diplomacy focused on maintaining the balance of power for the "peace" of the Far East, conceived and well executed by the President, led to the passing of Korea into colonial rule and to Roosevelt's being the first American to win a Nobel Peace Prize."

Source: Kim, Ki-Seok. "Emperor Gwangmu's Diplomatic Struggles to Protect His Sovereignty before and after 1905." Korea Journal, Summer 2006, pp. 237-255.

Source B

Context: Chu Chinoh is a professor of History at Sangmyung University in Korea. He has authored several books on Korean history. This excerpt is drawn from a peer-reviewed journal article about Korean-Japanese relations at the turn of the 20th century.

Content: "Gojong might be considered most responsible for the nation's loss of sovereignty. By not taking into account the ideas of opposition forces, including refugees and the Independence Club, he failed to exercise good political judgment. He also failed to establish an adequate military force, despite the dire need to do so at a critical time and made a serious error in not maintaining stable diplomatic ties to protect Korea from outside forces. He lacked the ability to be a strong leader, for during a crisis his only solution was to flee and take refuge at a foreign

legation. In his position as emperor, his duty was to protect national sovereignty and not rest the blame on officials who were inclined to favor Japan. However, Gojong was not entirely at fault for the Japanese colonization of Korea. It would be unfair to describe Gojong as a monarch without any will for reform. But equally, it would be false to acclaim Gojong as a king who was completely dedicated to protecting national sovereignty. Historical examination reveals that Gojong must share some, but not all, of the responsibility for the downfall of the Great Han Empire."

Source: Chinoh, C. H. U. (2011). Korean perceptions of Japan during the Great Han Empire and the Japanese annexation of Korea. *Korea Journal*, 51(4), 89-109.

Source C

Context: This article published in the New York Times presents an interview with the Korean delegates turned away from the Hague Conference in 1907. In the article, the delegates who had been secretly sent by Emperor Gojong discuss the fact that the Korean leader had denied sending them and officially criticised their presence.

Content: "Don't Blame Korean Ruler: Envoys at The Hague Say He Had to Repudiate Them."

THE HAGUE, July 6.—The members of the Korean delegation here say they consider it quite natural that the Emperor of Korea should have officially repudiated them in his interview with the Marquis Ito, the representative of Japan at Seoul, who questioned him on the subject of their mission. The Koreans here add: "To have admitted that he instructed us to represent him at The Hague would perhaps have meant his being dethroned, or even murdered".

The delegates suggest that if the United States or a European power had made a similar inquiry of the Korean Emperor the answer would have been different.

To keep order and assure the maintenance of peace in the Far East, the United States and the European powers, the Koreans say, should uphold the independence of Korea by declaring that country to be a neutral State.

Source: The New York Times. "Koreans Appeal to Hague for Help: Three Delegates, Their Passports Signed by the Emperor, Try to Get Hearing." 7 July 1907, p. 3. <https://nyti.ms/4iQGKAs>. Accessed 31 July 2025.

Questions:

1. Explain how the content of both source A and source B can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)
2. Analyse how the context of source C influences how it can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)
3. Examine how the perspectives in all the sources can be used to answer the inquiry question. (12 marks)

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

A number of threads that would ultimately connect to the Korean War are apparent in the period from 1897-1907.

Foreign Relations: The imperial period witnessed increasing competition for power and influence over Korea. Russian influence increased as emperor Gojong had used their legation to seek refuge in 1896-1897, and they sought to benefit from Gojong's encouragement of foreign investment by gaining additional trading rights and footholds in Korea, especially in northern regions near Manchuria. While the Russo-Japanese War put an end to Russian aspirations in the short-term, this period reflects their keen interest and sense of entitlement in Korean affairs well before the establishment of the Soviet Union. The imperial period also witnessed growing American interests in Korea. Through significant investment in infrastructure, diplomatic advice and the work of missionaries, the United States built an increasing presence in Korea and particularly in Seoul. In some ways, therefore, the Gwangmu period was important in laying the foundations for Russian and American interests in Korea, with a focus on the North and South respectively. This is relevant for understanding the context of the role of the USA and USSR in the Korean War.

Japanese Colonisation: The imperial period essentially ended with the establishment of the Japanese protectorate in Korea in 1905. This was a turning point in the formalisation of Japanese colonisation and domination of the peninsula. As Chapters 5 and 6 will show, Japanese colonial rule, and resistance to it, would create the conditions for internal conflict in Korea following Japanese withdrawal. Japanese colonisation therefore lays the groundwork for the later division of Korea and disagreements over free elections.

Emerging Nationalist Leaders: The late 19th century in Korea also witnessed the emergence of a more clearly articulated sense of nationalist ideology, led particularly by groups such as the Independence Club. Significant individuals, such as Syngman Rhee, gained political experience and prominence during this time. Nationalist leaders, and Rhee in particular, would go on to play important roles in the conflict over the governing of an independent Korean nation. Thus understanding the imperial era can provide insights into the early development of his leadership.



Conceptual Connections

IB Concepts	Relevant examples from this chapter
Cause & Consequence	• Reasons for the establishment of the Korean Empire • Political, military, economic, social and cultural effects of the Gwangmu Reforms • Impacts of the Independence Club and reasons for its demise • Reasons for the creation of a Japanese protectorate in Korea
Continuity & Change	• The extent of both change and continuity as a result of the Gwangmu Reforms • The extent to which modernisation efforts were successful in achieving change
Perspectives	• Views and experiences of different groups impacted by the Gwangmu Reforms • Changing views and responses of the government to the Independence Club • Controversy regarding the legitimacy of the Eulsa Treaty and other 'agreements' • Historiographical debates
Significance	• The significance of the Independence Club despite its short period of existence • The significance of individuals such as Emperor Gojong and Philip Jaesohn • The significance of the Eulsa Treaty as a turning point in Korean history

Activity: Preparing for Paper 2

- Practice responding to these Paper 2 style questions using your choice of the examples above:
 - Analyse how historical events can be seen from different perspectives. Use one example from the thematic study to support your response.
 - Analyse how historical events can have historical significance. Use one example from the thematic study to support your response.
 - Analyse how historical events may result in continuity. Use one example from the thematic study to support your response.
- Create your own table with the four concepts in the left column like the one above. Complete your table by looking for relevant examples that could be used to explore each of those concepts in one of the other chapters in this textbook. Repeat for as many chapters as you can.

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

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)**.

In this chapter, one authoritarian system you might examine is the Daehan Empire (a continuation of the authoritarian rule which emerged while Korea was still a Kingdom). The main inquiry question is **How was authoritarian rule maintained?** This chapter is focusing more specifically on the role of legal methods and the question:

How effectively were legal methods used to secure authoritarian control in the Daehan Empire?

Changing the status of the Korean nation from a kingdom to an empire in 1897 presented an opportunity to reconfigure the entire legal system of the state in such a way as to cement the authoritarian power of the emperor. For example, the State Law of the Daehan Empire, introduced in 1899, gave the Emperor absolute power in political and military affairs, while outlawing dissent (see extract on page 122). While Gojong had already been monarch, this legal method enabled him to maintain, and even strengthen, authoritarian rule following threats that had arisen with the Donghak Peasant Revolution and the Japanese assassination of Queen Min. Similarly, over 150 legal amendments in the early imperial period strengthened the power of the royal household. Korea used legal methods to stave off external threats as well. For instance, they formulated a new – more balanced – treaty of commerce with China and signed international treaties such as the Geneva Convention in 1903. Joining these international legal agreements was intended to build stronger bonds with the international community to maintain the independence of the empire.

The Emperor and his government also used different legal methods to limit opposition, particularly from the Independence Club. Whilst it might be argued that the new powers provided to the Privy Council, and the initial promised inclusion of representation from the club on the council enabled and empowered them. Nonetheless, legal methods were also used to undermine their activities such as government censorship by blocking the publication of their *History of the Great Eastern State* books. Perhaps more significantly, legal methods were eventually used to prohibit the club altogether via the imperial edict to dissolve the club in 1898 and the subsequent arrest of many of its members.

For this inquiry question, it would be relevant to consider how successful these legal methods were at staving off both external and internal threats in order to maintain the authoritarian rule of the emperor.

Comparative Case Studies

Case studies of other forms of authoritarian rule which may be helpful points of comparison include:

- Brazil in the 1960s
 - In particular, compare and contrast the impact of the 1968 AI-5 law under President Artur da Costa e Silva with the imperial edict to dissolve the Independence Club.
- Chile in the 1980s
 - Specifically, compare and contrast the role of Pinochet's 1980 constitution and the State Law of the Daehan Empire.
- South Africa in the 1950s-1960s
 - In particular, compare and contrast the government's 'bans' on anti-Apartheid activists and organisations with the imperial edict to dissolve the Independence Club.
- Italy in the 1920s-1930s
 - Specifically, compare and contrast Mussolini's participation in international treaties and organisations such as the League of Nations, Lateran Treaty and Pact of Steel with the Daehan Empire's efforts to gain international legitimacy via treaties such as the Geneva Convention or the treaty of commerce with China.

Practice Paper 2 style questions: Section B

Part 1: Explain how legal methods were used to maintain authoritarian rule.
Use one example from the thematic study in your response. (4 marks)

Part 2: To what extent did legal methods succeed in maintaining authoritarian rule?
Use at least two examples of authoritarian rule from at least two regions to support your response. (15 marks)

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05

Nature Of, and Social, Economic and Political Impact of Japanese Rule

IB Lines of Inquiry

Inquiry Questions

Political impact of Japanese annexation and colonial government

To what extent do you agree with the perspective that annexation transformed Korea's sovereignty and political life?

Repression and resistance, including Samil Independence Movement (1919)

To what extent do you agree with the claim that Koreans resisted repression under Japanese colonial rule through political, cultural, and armed struggle?

Social impact of assimilation, including education, language and religion

To what extent do you agree with the argument that Koreans resisted assimilation policies in schools, language, and religion?

Economic developments in banking, industry and infrastructure

To what extent do you agree with the statement that economic changes under Japanese colonial rule affected Korean farmers, workers, and entrepreneurs?

Introduction

After examining the nature and impact of reforms under the Korean Empire, including the Gwangmu Reforms (1897–1904), efforts to modernize the state, the activities of the Independence Club (1896–1898), and Korean resistance to the Eulsa Treaty, the focus now shifts to the subsequent period of Japanese rule.

Korea shifted from an independent monarchy to a colony under Japanese authoritarian control, fundamentally altering its government and societal structures. The Japanese annexation and establishment of a colonial government in Korea brought significant social, economic, and political changes. This period was marked by both repression and resistance, including the notable Samil Independence (1st March) Movement of 1919, a widespread protest against Japanese rule that demonstrated Korea's persistent nationalism, and desire for self-determination. Despite Japanese efforts to suppress Korean identity, resistance movements continued throughout the colonial period.

In response to Korean opposition, Japan's rule over Korea was not static but instead evolved, shifting imperial priorities and responding to international pressures. Through assimilation policies, economic restructuring, and political repression, the Japanese sought to entrench their control and eliminate Korean autonomy. However, Korean efforts to preserve their cultural identity, assert political independence, and resist through various forms continuously challenged this control. Understanding the methods of Japanese rule and the responses they provoked reveals important insights into the dynamics of authoritarian colonialism and the resilience of national identity under foreign domination.

Timeline of Key Events

1909 (October 26)	Korean independence activist An Jung-geun shoots Ito Hirobumi, killing him in the Harbin Railway Station in Manchuria.
1910	Korea formally annexed by Japan; Emperor Gojong forced to abdicate.
1910–1918	The Land Survey Program dispossessed many Korean farmers, creating widespread tenancy and significantly impacting Gogung's land reforms.
1919 (January 21)	Emperor Gojong was found dead with symptoms of being poisoned, igniting national demonstrations against Japanese colonial authority.
1919 (March 1)	Samil (March 1st) Movement: nationwide protests; about 2 million participants, thousands arrested or killed.
1919 (April)	Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea established in Shanghai.
1919	Kim Kyu-sik appeals for Korean independence at the Paris Peace Conference.
1919–1920 (October)	Battle of Cheongsanri: Korean Independence Army under Kim Jwa-jin defeats larger Japanese forces; Japan retaliates with the Gando Massacre.
1926	Na Seok-ju bombs Japanese institutions in Seoul.
1929	Wonsan General Strike: thousands of Korean workers protest exploitation and discrimination.
1932	Yun Bong-gil kills Japanese officers with a grenade in Shanghai and gains admiration in China.

Key Terms

Annexation Treaty (1910)	Formally ended Korean sovereignty and began 35 years of Japanese colonial rule, framing all subsequent resistance as a fight for survival.
Battle of Cheongsanri (1920)	Battle where 3,000 Korean fighters held off nearly 30,000 Japanese troops under Kim Jwa-jin. This battle became a legendary victory in nationalist memory, though followed by brutal Japanese reprisals (Gando Massacre).
Cultural Rule (1919–1937)	Period after March 1st Movement when Japan allowed limited cultural expression (Korean newspapers, associations). This period gave space for cultural nationalism and modern literature. At the same time, the colonial government tried to win over wealthy and powerful leaders while hiding the fact that ordinary people were still being controlled and oppressed.
Gando Massacre (1920)	Mass killing of thousands of Korean civilians in Manchuria following Cheongsanri. The brutal massacre demonstrated Japan's readiness to use collective punishment and fueled international criticism of colonial brutality.
Korean Independence Army (founded 1919, active in Manchuria)	Armed forces of the Provisional Government, most famous for victory at Cheongsanri in 1920. The army provided the strongest example of organized military resistance, proving that Koreans could inflict real losses on Japan.
Land Survey Program (1910–1918)	Required land registration under Japanese authorities, dispossessing countless peasants and consolidating land into the hands of landlords and colonial companies. This program deepened rural poverty, fueled tenancy, and created the social base for later protests and strikes.
Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea (1919)	Established in Shanghai after the Samil (March 1st) Movement, it was the first modern republic in Korean history, symbolizing Korea's continuing claim to sovereignty despite Japanese rule. Though plagued by factional divisions and lacking formal recognition from major powers, it coordinated international lobbying, published declarations, and supported armed resistance groups in Manchuria and China. Its survival gave legitimacy and continuity to the independence movement in exile.
Samil (March 1st) Movement (1919)	A nationwide protest involving nearly two million Koreans, brutally suppressed with thousands killed or arrested. Its significance lay in revealing the breadth of nationalist sentiment across classes, inspiring both diplomatic and militant strategies, and forcing Japan to shift from harsh "Military Rule" to the more controlled "Cultural Rule." The movement was also strongly influenced by Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points on self-determination, which gave Koreans hope that international principles could support their independence.
Wonsan General Strike (1929)	Major labor protest involving about 10,000 Korean workers. This strike revealed how nationalism and class struggle were intertwined; economic grievances fed into broader resistance to colonialism.

Key People

An Jung-geun	His 1909 assassination of Ito Hirobumi, Japan's Resident-General in Korea, symbolized militant resistance and offered Koreans a heroic model of sacrifice. He underscored that violence could be used as a political tool, inspiring later nationalist militants.
Emperor Gojong	Forced to abdicate in 1910, his dethronement marked the symbolic end of the Korean monarchy. His death in 1919 provided a rallying point for mass protests, helping trigger the Samil (March 1st) Movement.
Kim Kyu-sik	By presenting Korea's case at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, he internationalized the independence cause, even though his appeal was rejected. His effort gave Korea's struggle diplomatic legitimacy on the world stage.
Syngman Rhee	As president of the Provisional Government in exile, he lobbied the United States for recognition of Korea's sovereignty. Though he achieved little immediate success, his advocacy kept Korea visible in American political discourse and foreshadowed his later leadership role.
Kim Gu	A central figure in the Provisional Government, he emphasized armed struggle and helped coordinate with Korean fighters in Manchuria. His leadership embodied the more militant strand of exile nationalism, ensuring that armed resistance remained part of the movement.
Kim Jwa-jin	As commander of the Korean Independence Army, he led the force to victory at the Battle of Cheongsanri (1920). This moment, though followed by brutal reprisals, gave Koreans a powerful symbol that armed resistance could succeed against overwhelming odds.
Na Seok-ju	His bombing campaign against Japanese institutions in Seoul (1926) was militarily minor but politically significant, inspiring younger radicals and demonstrating that resistance persisted inside Korea itself.
Yun Bong-gil	His grenade attack in Shanghai (1932), which killed Japanese officers, drew admiration in China and international attention. His act linked Korea's independence struggle with broader Asian anti-imperial movements.
Yu Gwan-sun	As a teenage Christian activist, she organized Samil (March 1st) protests and died in prison under torture. Her martyrdom highlighted the critical role of women and youth in the nationalist movement and became a lasting symbol of resistance.

I. Political Developments: Japanese Annexation and Colonial Government

Inquiry Question

To what extent do you agree with the perspective that annexation transformed Korea's sovereignty and political life?

Koreans lost sovereignty in 1910 when Japan formally annexed the peninsula, abolishing the monarchy and declaring Korea part of the empire. Although Japanese military and political involvement in Korea began years earlier, the official annexation of Korea by Japan commenced on August 22, 1910. At this time under duress Emperor Gojong was forced to abdicate, "righteous armies" were crushed in the countryside, and sovereignty was extinguished in a single stroke of a pen. This sudden loss of sovereignty illustrates a cause and consequence dynamic in that Japan sought to expand its empire for geopolitical security and prestige, but the consequence for Koreans was the end (for a time) of their nation.



TOK Connection



Map shows Korea (dark red) within the Empire of Japan (light red) at its furthest extent in 1942.

The Power of Naming

Look at a world map. The water between Korea and Japan is often labeled the “Sea of Japan.” But Koreans call it the “East Sea.” Why does this matter so much?

How It Started

Before the 1900s, maps used all kinds of names: “Sea of Korea,” “Oriental Sea,” “Sea of Japan.” There was no single standard. When Japan colonized Korea (1910–1945), it promoted the name “Sea of Japan” on international maps and in world organizations. Because Korea had lost its independence, it had no power to argue for its own name, “East Sea.”

After World War II

When Korea was freed in 1945, it began calling the sea the “East Sea” again. But by then, “Sea of Japan” had already become the international norm. Korea has pushed for dual naming, but Japan has resisted.

Why the Name Matters

- **Naming = Power:** The name on a map is not just a word—it shows which country had the power to decide. During colonization, Japan had that power, while Korea was silenced.
- **Identity:** For Koreans, “East Sea” is about protecting their culture and reclaiming their voice after colonization.
- **Global Politics:** Map names are political. They can confirm or deny a people’s history.

Key Lesson

Names on maps are never neutral. They tell us who controlled the story at the time. For Korea, pushing for “East Sea” is not only about geography, it’s about undoing the legacy of colonization and claiming their place in the world.

Question

1. How does the map visually communicate dominance or control?

Government and Political Control

Korea’s sovereignty ended with the Annexation Treaty of 1910. The monarchy was dissolved and the peninsula was declared part of the Japanese Empire, though the validity of the treaty remains in question. Historian Ki-baik Lee describes this event as the culmination of decades of humiliation, from unequal and coerced treaties to Emperor Gojong’s forced abdication. For Koreans, annexation was not simply a political transfer but the symbolic death of their nation.

The colony was governed through the office of the Governor-General of Chosŏn, appointed directly by the Japanese emperor. The Governor-General concentrated every major authority (executive, military,

and judicial) in one office with no Korean input or oversight. Japan adopted a system of direct rule, a significant choice that contrasts with other colonial models such as the British reliance on indirect rule in parts of India. This decision was rooted in a profound distrust of Korean officials and a persistent fear of uprisings. As a result, Koreans were systematically excluded from meaningful political life, with fewer than two percent of higher bureaucratic posts held by Koreans, who were typically confined to low-ranking or clerical positions. This policy not only extinguished Korean sovereignty at the national level but also prevented the development of a Korean administrative class, ensuring total Japanese control over the colony's governance.

During the first phase, known as “Military Rule” (1910–1919), over 70,000 Japanese troops and police occupied the Korean peninsula. Public gatherings required permits, newspapers were censored before publication, and Koreans faced imprisonment or worse for dissent. Arrests could be made without trial, and detention could last months or years with little legal recourse. Historian Bruce Cumings describes this system as a form of “bureaucratic authoritarianism,” meaning Japan used modern, organized government methods to control the population through fear, surveillance, and strict order. King Gojong died suddenly on January 21, 1919, at the age of 67 while under house arrest. His death remains one of the most significant events in Korean history due to the suspicious circumstances and the massive political uprising it triggered just months later with the Samil (March 1st) Movement.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Explaining Content from Historical Sources: The Mystery of the Death of Emperor Gojong

The sudden death of Emperor Gojong remains one of the most significant mysteries in modern Korean history. While official Japanese reports at the time failed to investigate the cause, historical evidence from the diaries of Yun Ch'i-ho and Kuratomi Yūzaburō, as well as the autobiography of Princess Masako, strongly suggest he was poisoned. Eyewitness accounts describe the Emperor dying in violent contortions shortly after drinking a beverage, with his body later showing physical signs consistent with poisoning, such as severe swelling and rapid discoloration. In their article “The Mystery of Emperor Gojong’s Sudden Death in 1919: Were the Highest Japanese Officials Responsible?” Yong-ho Ch’oe and Tae-jin Yi state that the Japanese Government-General likely ordered the assassination through a court physician named An Sang-ho to prevent the Emperor from sending secret emissaries to the Paris Peace Conference to plead for Korean independence where calls for the principle of self-determination were made following World War I by leaders including President Woodrow Wilson of the US. This posed a significant threat to Japan’s continued political control of Korea. Gojong’s death, therefore, served to eliminate both a symbolic and practical challenge to Japanese colonial authority at a critical moment in international diplomacy.

Question:

1. In this research, historians have relied on personal documents including diaries and autobiographies rather than official government documents and statements. Why might historians consider these personal documents credible in this case?

Paper 3 Practice

1. To what extent did Japanese annexation transform Korea's political system in the period from 1910–1945?
2. To what extent were long-term Korean political traditions and nationalist movements able to endure and adapt under Japanese colonial rule between 1910 and 1945?

Cultural Suppression and Symbolic Domination

Annexation was marked by overt attempts to undermine Korea's cultural and symbolic foundations. In 1921, a royal Joseon dynasty cemetery was converted into a golf course, with graves still visible as players teed off. This deliberate insult demonstrated Japan's contempt for Korea's dynastic traditions. When Koreans protested, the colonial government dismissed their concerns as "superstitious," highlighting their cultural insensitivity and the imperial tendency to belittle Korean culture as backward or irrational.

The construction of the General Government Building in 1926 made Japan's intentions clear. Built directly in front of Gyeongbok Palace which was the traditional seat of Korean kings, it was deliberately placed off-center, breaking Korea's geomantic principles (pungsu-jiri) that linked the royal site to its mountain backdrop and blocking access to the palace. For many Koreans, this was more than an architectural and/or aesthetic disruption and instead symbolized an intentional attempt to sever their connection to royal legitimacy and the Confucian cosmology and worldview of the Joseon dynasty. The conversion of royal cemeteries and construction of the Government-General Building were significant not just as insults but as deliberate strategies to sever Korea's connection to dynastic legitimacy and Confucian cosmology.



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skill

Source A

"Introduction to Geomancy" based on Dr. Jongwoo Han's *Power, Place and State-Society Relations in Korea*.

When geographers and historians explain South Korea's economic miracle and its simultaneous democratic development, they often focus on political or economic factors. However, Confucian doctrine and indigenous Korean schools of thought, such as geomancy (pungsu jiri sasang in Korean or feng shui in Chinese), are rarely examined. Geomancy, often dismissed as superstition, is crucial to understanding Korea's cultural, political, and economic systems.

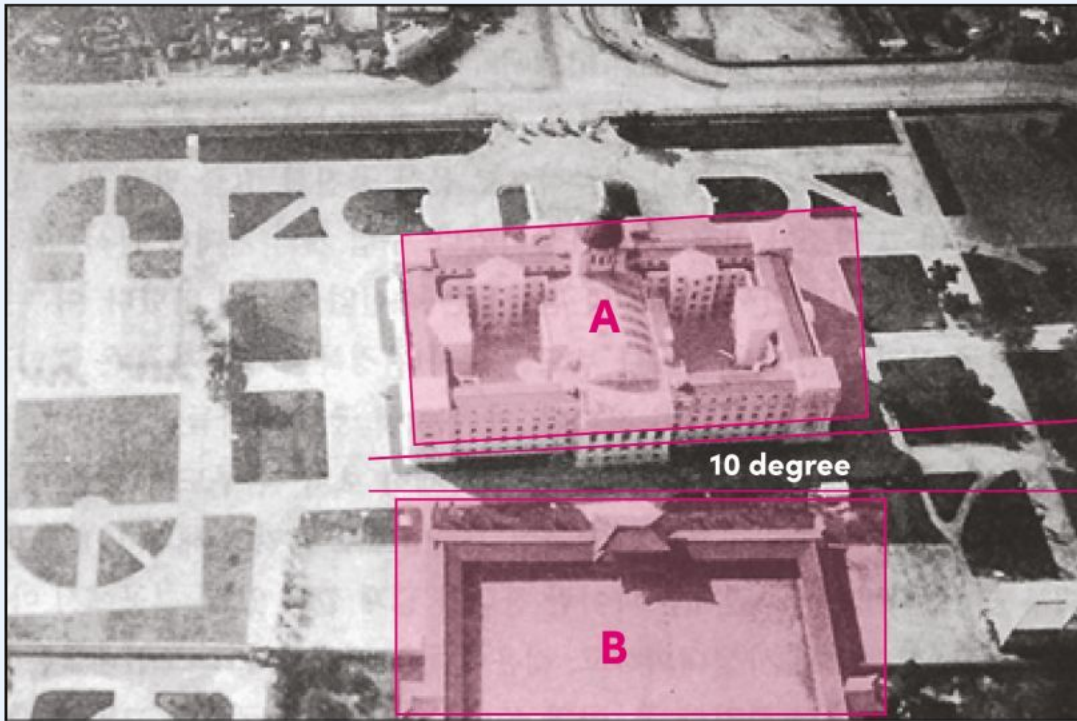
Ancient Asian cities, unlike Western ones that emphasize economic functions, focused on religious or mystical characteristics. Geomancy was used to find the perfect place where heaven's power is reflected on earth. Governing elites in ancient Asian cities set up national capitals and sacred places based on geomantic principles, such as mountains to the north or water in front of the city. Political buildings were valued more than economic ones, aligning with Confucian principles, and were placed along the north-south axis to communicate power.

Geomancy explained how "Heaven's will" was reflected in the natural world through geographical features and combined with human actions. Success depended on harmony with social, cultural, and political situations, and required knowledge of cosmology, astronomy, and astrology to position buildings correctly. Confucianism, a political ideology promoting strong state leadership and meritocracy, also played a role. People were willing to sacrifice for the state due to their Confucian and geomantic understanding of the world. Proper arrangement of buildings and the environment communicated a powerful message to anyone in the city, both in the past and today.

Source B



The General Government Building (pictured above) was the main colonial administration building used by the Japanese colonial government of Korea. The building was constructed on the Gyeongbok Palace site, which was designed according to geomantic principles, with mountains to the north and water in front, reflecting the ideal placement for harnessing heaven's power on earth.



⏏ Jongwoo Han, Power, Place, and State–Society Relations in Korea.
The Japanese General Government Building distorts the *axis mundi* of the Confucian Joseon Dynasty by 10 degrees.

- A. The General Government Building
- B. The *Geunjeongjeon*

Questions:

1. According to Source A, what role did geomancy play in the political and social organization of pre-modern Korean cities?
2. With reference to Source A, explain how Confucianism and geomantic principles were connected to ideas of political authority and legitimacy.
3. Using Source B and its caption, explain how the location and construction of the General Government building can be understood as a symbolic act of power.
4. Using Sources A and B, explain how the construction of the General Government Building by the Japanese colonial government might affect Korean cultural identity.

Even the environment was reshaped. Japanese cherry blossoms and kaizuka junipers were planted across public parks and boulevards, altering Korea's ecological landscape. These ornamental plantings were not merely aesthetic but served as seasonal reminders of colonial presence, making Seoul appear more like Tokyo. This strategy was not unique to Korea; colonial regimes elsewhere similarly imposed their own symbols. The French in Hanoi lined streets with European trees and built French-style boulevards to "civilize" the city. Such global parallels highlight how Japan sought to overwrite Korea's environment as part of a broader imperial project.

Land Reform and Rural Dispossession

One of the most consequential policies was the Land Survey Program (1910–1918). Farmers were required to produce written deeds to prove ownership, but most Korean peasants only had customary claims passed orally through generations. Land lacking documentation defaulted to the state, which redistributed much of it to Japanese settlers and landlords. By the 1930s, about two-thirds of Korean farmers were tenants, paying 40–50 percent of their harvest as rent. Over 400,000 hectares of land had passed into Japanese hands. While some Korean landlords consolidated property and benefited from the new legal order, the vast majority of peasants were impoverished. This “land reform” which reversed Gojong’s effective land policies during the Gwangmu reforms was clearly designed to benefit the colonial rulers and consequently sharpened class divisions within Korean society, as rural elites sometimes collaborated while tenant farmers sank deeper into poverty.

According to Korean historian Ki-baik Lee, author of *A New History of Korea* (1984), this change destroyed the traditional village economy and became a turning point that broke Korea’s farming system, leading many people to resent Japanese rule. Michael Robinson (1988), in *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea*, adds that these disruptions also inspired new kinds of cultural nationalism. As rural life declined, educated Koreans in cities began promoting cultural reform and national pride as ways to preserve their identity under colonial control. Together, Lee and Robinson show how economic hardship and cultural response worked hand in hand to shape Korean nationalism in the early 1900s.

Korean Migrations

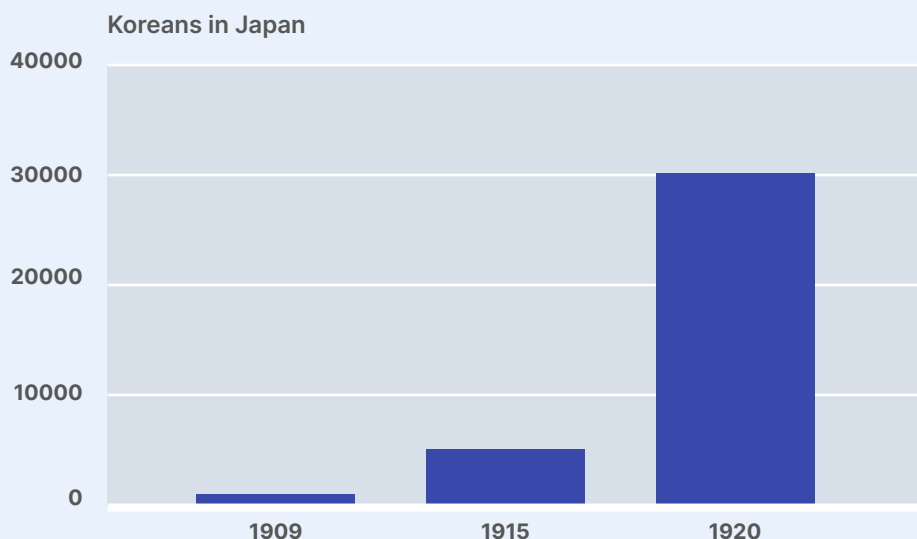
As Koreans came to understand the goals and nature of Japanese colonial rule, some decided to leave Korea. Initially, many Koreans migrated to Manchuria (China) for economic reasons, as many Korean farmers became landless due to not understanding the need to register their land during Japanese land surveys. Therefore, they migrated to find new land to farm. Some Koreans also migrated to Manchuria in order to organize various kinds of resistance against Japanese rule including schools, guerrilla bases, and nationalist associations.

Surprisingly, starting in 1909, one of the most common destinations for these migrants was Japan (see chart), which offered new opportunities. Most Korean migrants to Japan were looking for jobs in Japanese industries, while a smaller number went to pursue education in Japanese universities. Since Koreans were considered Japanese subjects under colonial rule, it became easier for them to migrate to Japan. These opportunities provided chances for economic improvement, social mobility, and stability, despite facing challenges and discrimination. The Korean diaspora community in Japan, known as Zainichi Koreans, preserved their cultural traditions. The impact of this migration continues today, with Koreans remaining the largest ethnic minority in Japan.



Source Activity Two

ATL: Thinking Skills



Graph showing the number of Koreans in Japan in 1909, 1915, and 1920.

Questions:

1. What trend is shown in the number of Koreans living in Japan between 1909 and 1920?
2. Using your contextual knowledge and the source, assess the extent to which Japanese colonial policies were responsible for Korean migration to Japan in the period 1909–1920.

Migration reflected multiple perspectives as some saw it as economic opportunity in Japan while others as nationalist resistance in Manchuria. Diaspora networks would later play a key role in sustaining Korea's independence movement.

The Samil (March 1st) Movement (1919)

Resentment exploded in the Samil (March 1st) Movement of 1919, Korea's first nationwide independence demonstration. Sparked by Emperor Gojong's funeral and global talk of self-determination by Woodrow Wilson, 33 Korean leaders – including religious figures, intellectuals, and businessmen – signed a Declaration of Independence and organized coordinated protests. The signatories included Buddhists, Christians, and Confucian scholars, showing that nationalism cut across religious lines and united otherwise divided communities.



Source Activity Three

ATL: Thinking Skills

Source A: Selected Excerpts, Wilson's 14 Points

5th: "A free, open-minded, and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims, based upon the strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined."

6th: "The evacuation of all Russian territory and such a settlement of all questions affecting Russia as will secure the best and freest cooperation of the other nations of the world in obtaining for her an unhampered and unembarrassed opportunity for the independent determination of her own political development and national policy and assure her of a sincere welcome into the society of free nations under institutions of her own choosing; and, more than a welcome, assistance also of every kind that she may need and may herself desire. The treatment accorded Russia by her sister nations in the months to come will be the acid test of their good will, of their comprehension of her needs as distinguished from their own interests, and of their intelligent and unselfish sympathy."

10th: "The peoples of Austria-Hungary, whose place among the nations we wish to see safeguarded and assured, should be accorded the freest opportunity of autonomous development."

14th: "A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike."

Source B: Selected Excerpts, March 1st Korean Declaration of Independence

"We hereby declare that Korea is an independent state and that Koreans are a self-governing people."

"We make this declaration on the strength of five thousand years of history as an expression of the devotion and loyalty of twenty million people."

"We claim independence in order to restore the natural rights of the people and to ensure their happiness."

"We proclaim it to the nations of the world in affirmation of the principle of the equality of all nations."

"We appeal to the conscience of humanity and the principles of justice and righteousness."

"We believe that this is the only way to rectify the injustices of the past and to establish a new order of peace and justice."

Questions:

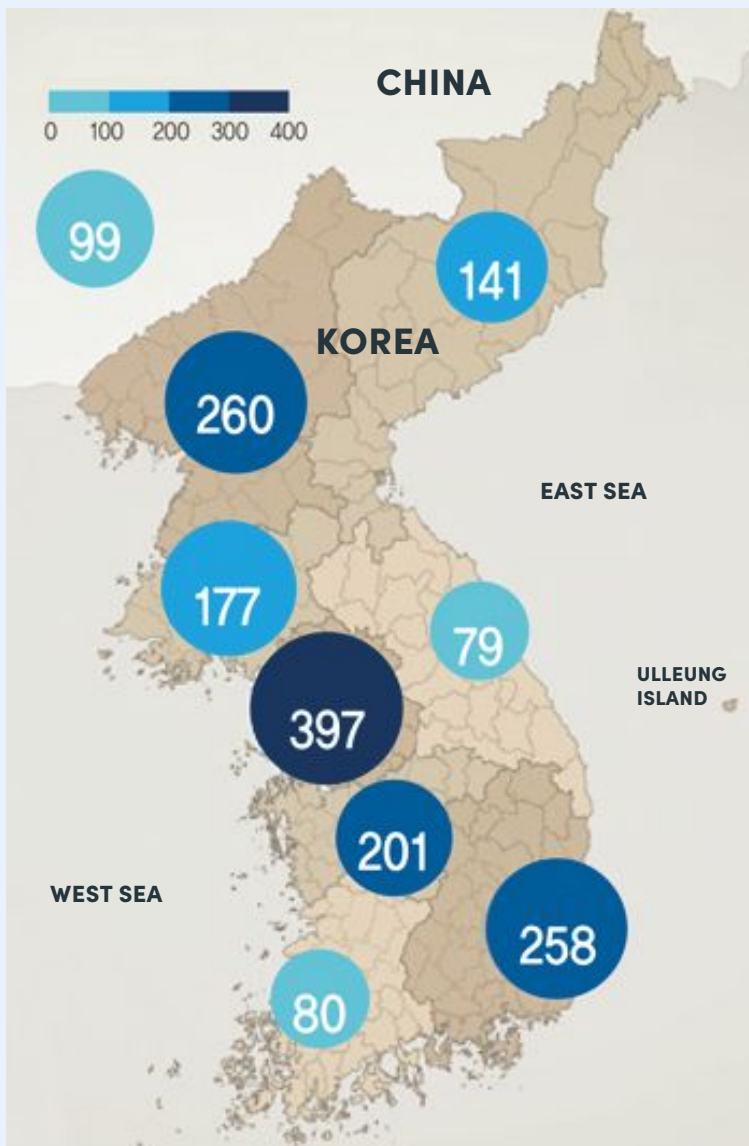
1. Analyze the extent to which Wilson's 5th, 6th, 10th, and 14th points influenced the Korean independence movement.
2. To what extent were Wilson's ideals realized in Korea's Declaration of Independence?

Over the following weeks, nearly two million Koreans participated in rallies across the peninsula (see map), shouting “Manse!” (“Long live Korean independence!”). The protests were notable for the variety of people involved- farmers, merchants, women, and students all took part, reflecting the diffusion of nationalist sentiment.



Source Activity Four

ATL: Thinking Skills



« Number of participants in the 1919 Samil Movement by region in Korea.

Questions:

1. What does this source indicate about protests across urban centers and rural areas?
2. How can this source be used to analyze the significance of the protests in Korea?

Japan's response was brutal. Approximately 7,500 Koreans were killed, 16,000 were wounded, and 46,000 were arrested. Entire villages were destroyed in collective punishments. Historian Michael Robinson, author of *Cultural Nationalism in Colonial Korea, 1920–1925* (1988), explains that the March First Movement was significant because it showed how nationalism had spread beyond the educated elite to include students, farmers, and workers across the country. In the United States Congressional Record from July 17, 1919, accounts from the Samil Movement from a 19-year-old student who was shot in the leg, a 61 year old man also shot in the leg and then mistreated, and a 27 year old man who was shot in the arm as he fled from Japanese soldiers breaking up a gathering are just three of 22 stories of violence. Each was treated at Severance Hospital, a missionary-run hospital in Seoul, as many avoided Japanese-run hospitals out of fear. Ki-baik Lee, one of Korea's most respected historians and author of *A New History of Korea* (1984), interprets the movement as proof of Korea's enduring national spirit. The aftermath of the uprising convinced many activists that peaceful protest alone would not achieve independence, pushing some to turn toward armed resistance based in Manchuria, Shanghai, and other parts of East Asia.

Though suppressed, the Samil (March 1st) Movement is significant as the first truly mass nationalist uprising since it involved millions across class, gender, and religious lines.



Source Activity Five

ATL: Thinking Skills



Red Cross account of the Samil (March 1st) events (1919).

International reports publicized Japan's crackdown with deaths and mass arrests.

Question

1. How useful is this source to assess the impact of international reporting on foreign governments, missionary networks, and/or Korean activists overseas?



Conceptual Connections

Concept Focus: Cause & Consequence, Significance

Essential Question: Why did the Samil Movement occur, and why does it remain historically significant even though it failed to win independence?

Using the information about the movement in the text along with the selected excerpts (provided previously) from the Korean Declaration of Independence, create a two-column causation and consequence map:

CAUSES (Why it happened)	CONSEQUENCES (What it led to)

In what ways was Samil a failure? In what ways was it a turning point? Explain using IB language about historical significance (transformative, symbolic, foundational, galvanizing).

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

As this thematic study focuses on Authoritarian Rule from 750 CE onwards, the material on Korean resistance can be used as a case study of how **authoritarian rule was challenged**. The Lines of Inquiry for this inquiry question focus on internal opposition, popular resistance, impact of policies and external threats.

The Samil Movement represents an example of a nationwide Korean independence uprising challenging Japanese colonial rule. It represents a non-violent resistance across different sections of Korean society with the participation of both youth and women, including Yan Gwan-sun, and included elements such as nationalist sentiments and sacrifice for the greater cause. It helped unify dispersed resistance providing it with clear direction.

Other case studies that focus on how colonial rule was challenged are:

- The 1919 Amritsar protests in India against British colonial rule
- The Mau Mau Uprising (1952-60) in Kenya against British colonial rule
- The Cuban War of Independence (1895-98) against Spanish colonial rule

The comparative studies can focus on the following factors:

- Mass participation of the colonized population across different societal groups
- The connected concepts of questioning legitimacy, identity and power
- Comparing short-term vs long-term impacts

Paper 3 Practice

1. To what extent was the Samil Independence Movement (1919) significant for Korean nationalism and the shaping of long-term resistance strategies?
2. To what extent did the Samil Independence Movement pose an immediate threat to Japanese colonial rule in Korea?

“Cultural Rule” (1919–1937)

In response to the global criticism following the Samil (March 1st) Movement, Japan introduced a period of so-called “Cultural Rule.” Japan presented Cultural Rule as change as limited newspapers were permitted, cultural associations allowed, and censorship was loosened. Korean athletic clubs, youth groups, and cultural journals flourished briefly under this opening.

These changes were more cosmetic than substantive though, and the continuity of repression continued. The police retained ultimate authority and organizations could be shut down at any sign of disloyalty. The Peace Preservation Law of 1925 was a key tool used to suppress opposition. Initially introduced in Japan to combat social unrest, the law was extended to colonies like Korea. It targeted groups and individuals seen as threats to the state and its imperial vision. Strict censorship ensured that only government-approved

messages could be spread through newspapers, literature, and broadcasts. Censors repeatedly suspended the *Dong-A Ilbo* newspaper, and in 1940 they closed it entirely after editors omitted the Japanese flag from a photo of a sporting event.

By the 1930s, enforcement of the Peace Preservation Law escalated. Colonial authorities pressured individuals to abandon their beliefs and practices and thousands were arrested, often without trial. Surveillance was intensified with networks of secret police and informants who monitored dissidents. Those caught opposing Japanese rule faced harsh punishments, including arrests, imprisonment, and even torture. These measures created a climate of fear, stifling some open resistance but also fueling efforts to resist Japan's domination.

According to Michael Robinson, Tokyo alternated between concession and coercion, a 'carrot-and-stick' routine, while Ki-baik Lee argues that Koreans soon saw the supposed freedoms as merely tactical. Some newspapers, cultural associations, and political organizations were permitted. Koreans were allowed to publish limited magazines and establish cultural societies, and censorship appeared to relax.

However, the Governor-General retained ultimate control, and the police continued to monitor, censor, and arrest activists. Robinson describes these reforms as largely cosmetic, aimed at improving Japan's international reputation rather than granting Koreans genuine freedom. Lee emphasizes that Koreans quickly recognized the limits of Cultural Rule given that cultural activity was tolerated only so long as it did not challenge imperial authority.

Summary

Japan abolished Korea's monarchy in 1910 and ruled directly through the Governor-General. Few Koreans held government posts, and strict censorship and military surveillance defined "Military Rule" (1910–1919). This direct system mirrored other empires but left Koreans with no sovereignty. Cultural suppression extended beyond policy into the manipulation of sacred sites and public spaces, with palaces obstructed, cemeteries desecrated, and even landscapes remade as symbols of colonial power. Land reforms dispossessed millions of farmers, producing widespread rural poverty. Resistance erupted in the Samil (March 1st) Movement, which demonstrated the breadth of Korean nationalism but was met with violent repression. "Cultural Rule" softened appearances but left the structure of domination intact.

Some scholars including Carter Eckert have argued that annexation introduced modern institutions such as centralized bureaucracy and modern property systems, but this interpretation is widely challenged. Most historians instead emphasize that, for Koreans, annexation was experienced as domination, humiliation, and cultural erasure but it also laid the foundation for resilience and renewed nationalist struggle.

II. Social Developments: Education, Language, and Religion Assimilation Attempts

Inquiry Question

To what extent do you agree with the argument that Koreans resisted assimilation policies in schools, language, and religion?

Education

Korea's schools were transformed into tools of assimilation. The Joseon (Chosen) Education Ordinance (1911) created a two-track system with limited schooling for Koreans. This system focused on basic literacy and vocational skills for Koreans and created more advanced schools for Japanese settlers. By 1930, less than three percent of Korean children advanced beyond primary education, while Japanese students in Korea enjoyed far greater access to higher schooling. This imbalance ensured most Koreans were trained only for subordinate roles in the colonial economy.

The curriculum reinforced loyalty to the empire. By the late 1930s, more than two million Korean children were enrolled in colonial schools, yet much of what they were taught served Japan's imperial goals. In boys' common schools, almost 40 percent of class time focused solely on Japanese language instruction, while Korean history, literature, and language were deliberately removed. Students were required to memorize the *Imperial Rescript on Education*, which reinforced loyalty to the emperor and the moral duty of self-sacrifice to the Japanese Empire. Schools offered literacy and technical skills, but at the cost of identity. In effect, education created Koreans who were literate in Japanese ideology but alienated from their own traditions.

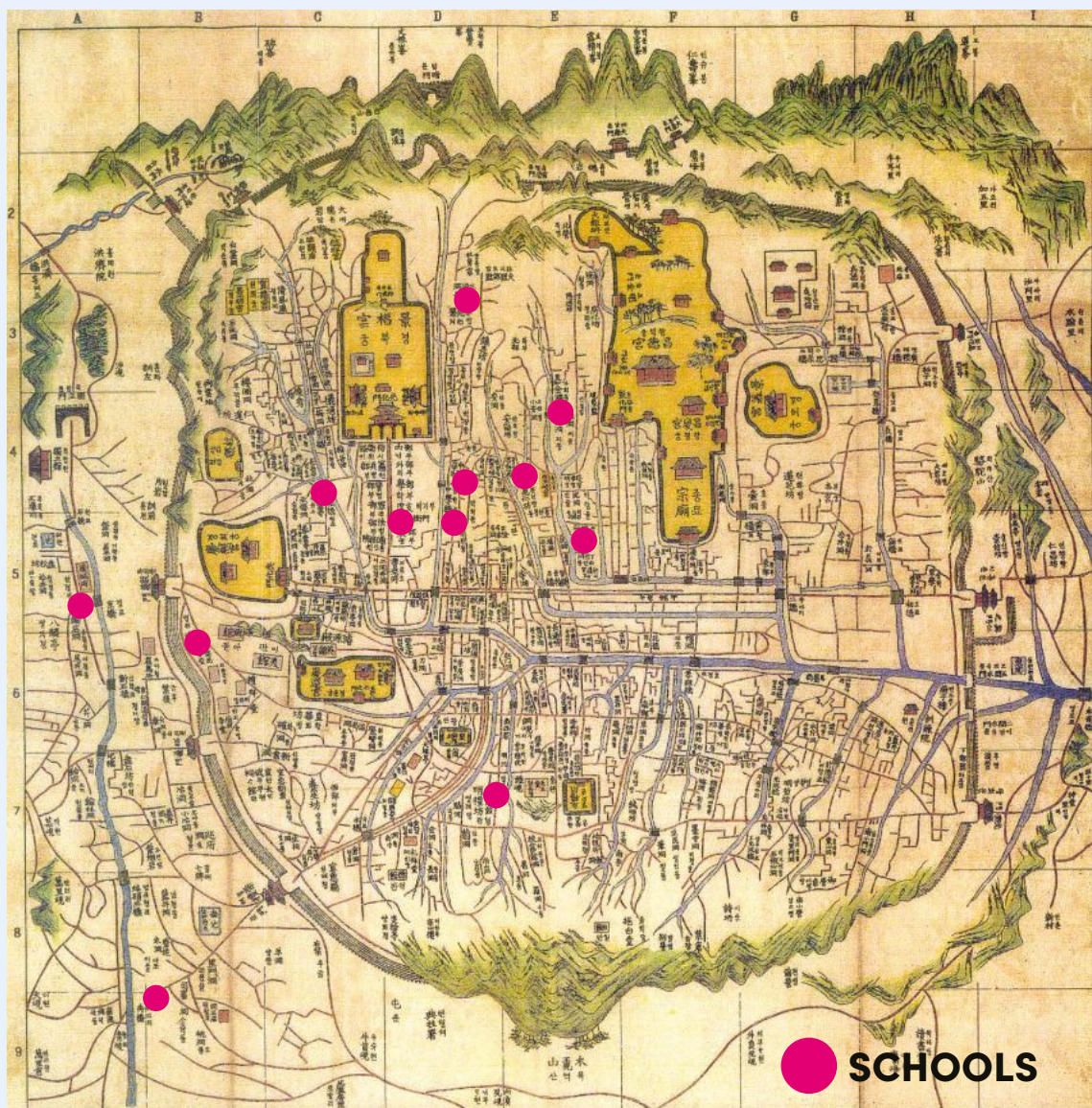
Schools thus became sites of indoctrination rather than opportunity. The lack of access to higher education hindered the intellectual and professional development of Koreans, contributing to social and economic disparities. Without access to higher education, most Koreans were excluded from professions in law, medicine, academia, and government. This contributed to persistent income gaps, limited social mobility, and a delayed emergence of Korean-led institutions after liberation.

But education was not only about what was taught but also about where it happened. Many of the missionary schools that gave Koreans alternative opportunities, such as Ewha, Yonhi, and Pai Chai, were built in Hanyang (Seoul), the sacred capital laid out by the Joseon dynasty. This city was designed according to p'ungsu-jiri (geomancy) to embody royal legitimacy and the spiritual center of the nation. By placing new schools in this space, missionary institutions were not just offering lessons but also reshaping the geography of Korea's most symbolically important city. In the eyes of many Koreans, this tied modern education to the lineage of Korea's sacred space and served as a reminder that learning itself was connected to national identity and survival.



Source Activity Six

ATL: Thinking Skills



⏏ Locations of Liberal Educational Institutions in the Early 20th Century (Lee, Young-Han (1992). p. 101.

Questions:

1. What does the map suggest about the geographical distribution of liberal educational institutions in early 20th-century Korea with regards to the spread of nationalist ideas and organizations during the colonial period?
2. Using the map and your own knowledge, assess the extent to which liberal education contributed to political and social change in Korea in the early 20th century.

For Korean families, education represented both hope and betrayal. Parents recognized that literacy and technical training might provide mobility, but at the cost of cultural identity. Many resisted by sending children to private Han'gŭl schools or church-run academies, which preserved Korean language, history, and traditions. Some of these schools operated in secret, with teachers risking arrest to keep Han'gŭl alive. Their survival shows how education became both a weapon of assimilation and a site of resistance. Historian Ki-baik Lee emphasizes that parents saw education as a "cultural battlefield," since parents recognized that modern education could provide hope for social mobility, but they also saw it as a source of betrayal since it cost their children their cultural identity.

Nationalist leaders emphasized education as a path to freedom from colonial rule. Through the Young Korean Academy (Hŭngsadan) founded in 1913 in San Francisco and later extended to Korea, An Chang-ho (Dosan) taught that disciplined study and moral reform were essential preparation for liberation. The Academy was not a school in the usual sense, but a civic organization where young Koreans pledged to live honest, industrious lives and to put the nation above themselves. Its curriculum blended lessons on ethics, self-discipline, and community service with discussions about independence, creating a space where character development and patriotism were inseparable.

For Koreans inside the peninsula, the Hŭngsadan provided a model of how education could be reclaimed as a national duty rather than a colonial tool. Families running local Korean schools, church schools teaching Han'gŭl, and students in protests all echoed the same principle- learning was about preparing to serve Korea.



Source Activity Seven

ATL: Thinking Skills



« A seodang (traditional village school) class in 1930, Seoul. The setup illustrates how some traditional educational practices persisted, even under growing Japanese pressure on imperial school systems.

Questions:

1. Identify two features of the classroom that suggest continuity with traditional Korea education.
2. Identify one limitation of the source for understanding education across Korea as a whole.
3. Explain how the persistence of seodang schools challenges the view that Korean education was completely replaced by Japanese colonial systems.
4. Analyze what this source suggests about the reach and limits of colonial control at the local level.

Paper 2 Practice

1. Compare Korean cultural-educational resistance with another Asian case (e.g., Chinese New Culture Movement, Vietnamese Quốc Ngữ schools). In what ways did education become a tool of both control and resistance?

Language

Korea's language was steadily suppressed. From the start of colonial rule, Japanese was made the language of administration and law. The growing Japanese settler population, which reached over 420,000 by the mid-1920s, further accelerated the cultural shift in urban centers where Japanese-language media dominated. By the 1930s, restrictions intensified under the 1938 Education Ordinance, which banned Korean from schools entirely. Newspapers in Korean were closed, leaving only Japanese-language publications. Writers and publishers who attempted to produce content in Korean faced strict censorship or punishment if their work was seen as non-compliant with Japanese standards. These language policies ensured that Japanese ideas and culture dominated public and private life, reinforcing the broader strategy of erasing Korean identity and facilitating assimilation into the Japanese Empire. By 1938, approximately 12.4% of the Korean population could speak Japanese, and that number would continue to increase in subsequent years as the Japanese wartime efforts intensified.

This policy created lasting consequences. Generations of Korean children grew up unable to read or write fluently in their own language. Agencies such as courts, businesses, and government, were inaccessible without being able to fluently speak Japanese. The irony was that by banning Han'gŭl (the Korean vernacular), the colonial state inadvertently transformed it into a nationalist symbol, uniting elites and commoners behind a shared written language. The Korean Language Society, founded in 1921, labored to standardize spelling and compile a modern dictionary. Later, dozens of its members were arrested, tortured, and imprisoned, simply for their work on a dictionary, demonstrating that the colonial state equated cultural preservation with rebellion.

Despite these risks, Koreans continued to use Han'gŭl in diaries, letters, and private publications. Historian Andre Schmid notes that the very act of defending Han'gŭl became synonymous with defending Korea itself. Ki-baik Lee stresses that the silencing of Korean in schools and the press was felt as cultural trauma, deepening resentment toward colonial rule while galvanizing underground efforts to keep the language alive.

Religion

Korea's religious life was also transformed by assimilation. The colonial state mandated Shinto shrine worship, presenting it as a patriotic duty rather than a religious act. Koreans were required to bow at shrines, and schoolchildren were marched to ceremonies as part of their education. Refusal could lead to expulsion, loss of employment, or imprisonment. Although Japanese officials claimed that shrine rites were "non-religious," most Koreans saw them as acts of loyalty to the Japanese emperor, and worshipping at a shrine felt like a forced betrayal of their own beliefs.

The colonial government also worked to marginalize Korean religions and philosophies. Confucian ancestor rites that connected families to their ancestors and reinforced social harmony were discouraged. Buddhism was reorganized under state control, which reduced the independence of temples and monks. Indigenous beliefs such as shamanism and geomancy were labeled "superstitions" and pushed to the margins. These efforts cut deeply into Korean identity because they attacked the values, rituals, and spiritual connections that had long shaped family life and cultural continuity. By weakening these traditions, Japan sought not only political dominance but also to reshape how Koreans understood themselves as a people.

Despite repression, Christianity became one of the most important areas of both spiritual life and resistance. Linked to American missionary networks, Korean churches functioned as more than places of worship. They provided literacy programs in Han'gŭl, offered access to modern education, and served as safe meeting places for activists. For many Koreans, especially women and youth, the church was one of the few spaces where leadership and education opportunities were still accessible under colonial rule.

Even as the colonial government attempted to suppress Korean language and reshape cultural life, Christian missionary schools such as Ewha Haktang (later Ewha Womans University, founded by Mary Scranton) and Yonhi College (later Yonsei University, shaped by the work of missionaries like Horace Underwood) educated both boys and girls and directly challenged Japanese restrictions on Korean education. In these classrooms and youth circles, Korean students encountered not only Western ideas but also a renewed sense of national dignity grounded in literacy, moral purpose, and community responsibility. These schools weren't just religious or academic and instead also about civic vision even at a time when direct political organization was dangerous.

Churches also nurtured future nationalist leaders. Many who later led protests or joined the Provisional Government began their activism in Christian youth groups or Bible study circles. Christianity's ties to the United States meant that reports of repression, such as the torture or imprisonment of Korean pastors, reached Western newspapers, which created embarrassment for Japan.

Christianity's political role was undeniable. During the Samil (March 1st) Movement of 1919, pastors and congregations provided the organizational backbone of demonstrations. Out of the 33 signatories of the Declaration of Independence, 16 were Christians, reflecting how deeply church networks were tied to nationalism. Students from missionary schools like Ewha and Yonhi helped distribute leaflets and organize rallies. International press coverage of Christian leaders arrested or tortured further amplified Korea's plight, which linked local resistance to global sympathy. Thus the church acted simultaneously as a sanctuary and megaphone.

Churches also supported anti-Japanese organizations beyond worship. For example, Christian networks helped channel funds to independence activists abroad, provided cover for secret meetings, and kept alive a sense of moral purpose in the face of forced assimilation. For women especially, churches offered rare spaces to lead literacy classes, organize relief, and inspire political activism.

Mission hospitals and universities represented another dimension of this influence. Horace Allen Newton, Oliver Avison, Horace Underwood, and other missionaries worked to establish medical and higher-education institutions that combined scientific instruction with service and national self-strengthening. For example, Avison, a Canadian Christian medical missionary, restructured and then opened Severance Hospital and College in 1904.

Although colonial authorities did attempt to limit or stop Christian education (for example with the 1915 Private School Regulations that controlled curricula), mission leaders persisted and fostered a generation of Koreans who were not just academically trained, but also grounded in cultural pride and duty. Furthermore, institutions such as universities and hospitals also remained, another testimony to Korean resistance. It was a complicated entanglement of being foreign-established, but shaped by Korean nationalism and challenging colonial authority. Christianity therefore acted as both a vehicle of Western religion and also a vehicle of the Korean imagined community.



TOK Connection

TOK Concept: Power, Perspectives

AOK: History

Context: During Japanese colonial rule, education and culture became key battlegrounds. Japan attempted to reshape Korean identity through language, schooling, and state ideology. At the same time, Korean Christians used missionary schools and church networks to preserve Korean language and culture, expand literacy, and mobilize resistance.

After reading the information in this chapter on education and religion, answer the following:

In what ways can “foreign knowledge” become a tool for national identity rather than a threat to it?

1. Create a claim that explains how foreign knowledge could threaten national identity in colonial Korea.

- a. Outline evidence supporting the claim
 - b. An example starter sentence is- Japanese attempts to control language and education show how external knowledge can be used to dominate a population...
2. Create a counterclaim that explains how Koreans adapted and used foreign knowledge to strengthen their own identity and resistance.
 - a. Outline evidence supporting the counterclaim
 - b. An example starter sentence is- However, Korean Christians transformed mission schools into spaces for literacy, leadership, and nationalism...
3. Explain how the case of Korea helps think about knowledge as a whole.
 - a. An example starter sentence is- This example from Korea shows that knowledge is not neutral; communities can transform outside ideas into resources for empowerment...

History as an Area of Knowledge

Focus: Perspective, Interpretation, Narrative

Knowledge Question: How do perspectives and present-day narratives influence interpretations of the past in History

Context: The history of colonial Korea (1910-1945) has been interpreted differently by various groups at the time and by historians writing later. These interpretations are shaped not only by historical evidence but also by values, purposes, and present-day contexts.

Task 1: Identifying Perspectives

Consider how each of the following groups might interpret Japanese rule in Korea:

- Korean nationalists
- Japanese colonial officials
- Foreign missionaries and observers
- Later historians (Korean, Japanese, international)

Task 2: Interpretation and Bias

Discuss the following questions with your neighbor:

1. Why might the same historical event be interpreted differently by members of the above mentioned groups?
2. To what extent does bias necessarily undermine historical knowledge? Can bias, on the other hand, reveal important insights?

Task 3: Evaluation

Answer the following question:

To what extent can historians ever produce an 'objective' account of colonial Korea?

Summary

These policies collectively created a generation of Koreans who were educated mainly in Japanese language, history, and loyalty to the emperor, which caused a deep weakening of Korean cultural identity. Many children grew up reading Japanese textbooks, reciting Japanese songs, and celebrating Japanese national holidays, while traditional Korean stories, customs, and even the use of Han'gŭl were discouraged or banned in schools. After the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, assimilation efforts became even more extreme. Through "imperial subjectification", the colonial government sought to turn Koreans into loyal subjects of the Japanese empire by requiring them to adopt Japanese names, speak only Japanese, and participate in Shinto worship. School lessons were rewritten to emphasize obedience, sacrifice, and service to the emperor, while older students were trained for military duty or factory labor to support Japan's war effort. These measures embedded imperial ideology into everyday life and reshaped the values of Korean youth to fit Japan's wartime needs.

By targeting education, language, and religion the Japanese colonial government sought not only to dominate Korea politically but also to erase its unique national character. Yet Koreans resisted through underground schools, preservation of Han'gŭl, church-based activism, and the quiet defense of traditions within families. Assimilation deepened Korea's cultural trauma, but it also strengthened the determination to preserve and defend national identity.

Paper 3 Practice

1. To what extent did Japanese assimilation policies result in lasting social and cultural change in Korea during the period of colonial rule?

III. Economic Developments: Banking, Agriculture, Industry, and Infrastructure

Inquiry Question

To what extent do you agree with the statement that economic changes under Japanese colonial rule affected Korean farmers, workers, and entrepreneurs?

Banking and Currency

Korea's financial system was overhauled soon after annexation. In 1911, the Bank of Chosŏn replaced the short-lived Bank of Korea and became the central financial authority of the colony. As the central bank, The Bank of Chosen controlled monetary policy and helped increase the flow of money to Japanese businesses

operating in Korea. The introduction of the Korean yen, tied to the Japanese yen, further demonstrated Japanese economic control over Korea. This shift gave Japan full control over Korea's financial landscape, including interest rates, credit access, and currency value.

While the new system introduced modern banking, it overwhelmingly favored Japanese settlers and corporations. By the 1920s, more than half of all loans went to Japanese borrowers, while fewer than ten percent went to Koreans. Korean entrepreneurs, including small manufacturers, shop owners, and farmers hoping to modernize, found it nearly impossible to compete. The reason was structural. Access to credit required collateral, land titles, and written applications in Japanese, conditions that most Korean farmers and small business owners could not meet. Even qualified Koreans often faced discriminatory lending practices and higher interest rates. As a result, Japanese firms such as the Oriental Development Company and major conglomerates like Mitsui and Mitsubishi gained easy access to capital, allowing them to expand rapidly into rice milling, textiles, and transportation, while Korean enterprises stagnated.

Nationalist writer Sin Ch'ae-ho condemned this system as a form of "economic warfare" meant to erode Korean autonomy and ensure colonial dependence. In practice, the banking network became an instrument of control, concentrating economic power in Japanese hands and cutting most Koreans off from opportunities for growth or modernization. This exclusion deepened resentment and reinforced the sense that Japanese rule sought not only to occupy Korean land but also to dominate the nation's economic future.



Source Activity Eight

ATL: Thinking Skills



« Korean Yen issued by the Bank of Chōsen, used 1910–1945.

Following the annexation, Japan replaced the Korean won with Korean yen.

The Bank of Chōsen was a colonial financial institution controlled by Japan. This meant that Korea was integrated into Japan's imperial economy and help Japan to control Korea economically.

Questions:

1. Identify two visual or textual features on the banknote that indicate colonial authority or control.
2. Explain what the replacement of the Korean won suggests about changes to Korea's economic sovereignty.
3. To what extent is the source useful for understanding Japanese colonial control over Korea?

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

As this thematic study focuses on Authoritarian Rule from 750 CE onwards, the material on Korean resistance can be used as a case study of **how authoritarian rule affected people's lives**. The Lines of Inquiry for this inquiry question focus economic and social effects, the experiences of women and marginalized groups.

The example of **Japanese banking policy** can be used to demonstrate how credits and loans favoured overwhelmingly Japanese settlers, companies and zaibatsu. Korean farmers and entrepreneurs had to deal with higher interest rates and limited access to capital which meant that Korean companies experienced limited economic growth. This in turn meant that the Korean economy was structurally dependent on Japanese capital, thus showing how colonial economy functioned based on extraction rather than developing the local population economically.

This impacted Korean society directly, and more specifically Korean farmers who were disadvantaged by the practices of formal land registration based on both the availability of capital and knowledge of the legal system. When Korean farmers were not able to repay loans, their land was confiscated and they became tenant farmers or landless labourers. This led to serious social consequences by widening the gap between rich and poor, rural poverty and large-scale migration to urban centers in Manchuria and Japan.

Other case studies could include the following examples:

- British banks in India with the creation of the Reserve Bank of India
- The French Baque de l'Arcique Occidental in French West Africa
- The Dutch De Javasche Bank in the Dutch East Indies
- The Belgian Banque du Congo Belge

The comparison can focus on the following factors:

- Who controlled the capital?
- Who benefited from the colonial banking system?
- Who was excluded?
- What was the social impact?
- How did this create resistance to the economic control of colonial powers?

Another focus for this line of inquiry can be **Japan's rural land policies** in Korea. Other case studies can include:

- The land revenue and tenancy system in British India
- The settler land seizure in French Algeria
- The cultivation system in the Dutch East Indies
- The White Highlands policy in Kenya (British East Africa)

The comparison can focus on these criteria:

- Legal frameworks
- The economic shift from subsistence farming to production for export or settler use
- The social changes from turning peasants into tenants or labourers
- How this created social instability, migration and resistance to colonial rule

Agriculture and Rural Hardship

Agriculture, the livelihood of over 70 percent of Koreans, was reshaped through the Land Survey Program (1910–1918). Farmers had to produce written deeds to confirm ownership, but many peasants had cultivated land for generations without documents. As a result, land often defaulted to the state, which transferred it to Japanese settlers or absentee landlords. By the 1930s, over two-thirds of Korean farmers were tenants forced to give up as much as 50 percent of their harvest as rent. Ki-baik Lee emphasizes that this process destroyed the traditional village order, producing widespread poverty and dependence.

Colonial agricultural policy also emphasized exports to Japan. The Rice Production Increase Program (1920s–1930s) encouraged the cultivation of high-yield strains, but much of the surplus was shipped abroad. By 1935, nearly half of Korea's rice harvest was exported to Japan, leaving rural communities short of food. This imbalance sparked the Rice Crisis of 1919–1920, when prices soared, exports continued, and Koreans faced shortages despite good harvests. Rural Koreans sometimes went hungry even as they watched trainloads of rice leave for Japanese ports, a clear reminder that they were producing for the empire, not for themselves.

Bruce Cumings stresses that Korea was locked into a peripheral role, supplying food to Japan's urban population at the expense of its own. This also tied Korean diets to colonial priorities, with more Koreans forced to consume barley and millet as rice was exported.

Industry and Labor

Korea industrialized rapidly in the 1930s, especially in the north, where hydroelectric power and coal deposits were abundant. Japanese corporations such as the South Manchuria Railway Company and Mitsui invested in steel plants, chemical factories, and mining. By the late 1930s, Korea had become an important supplier of raw materials and manufactured goods for Japan's war economy.

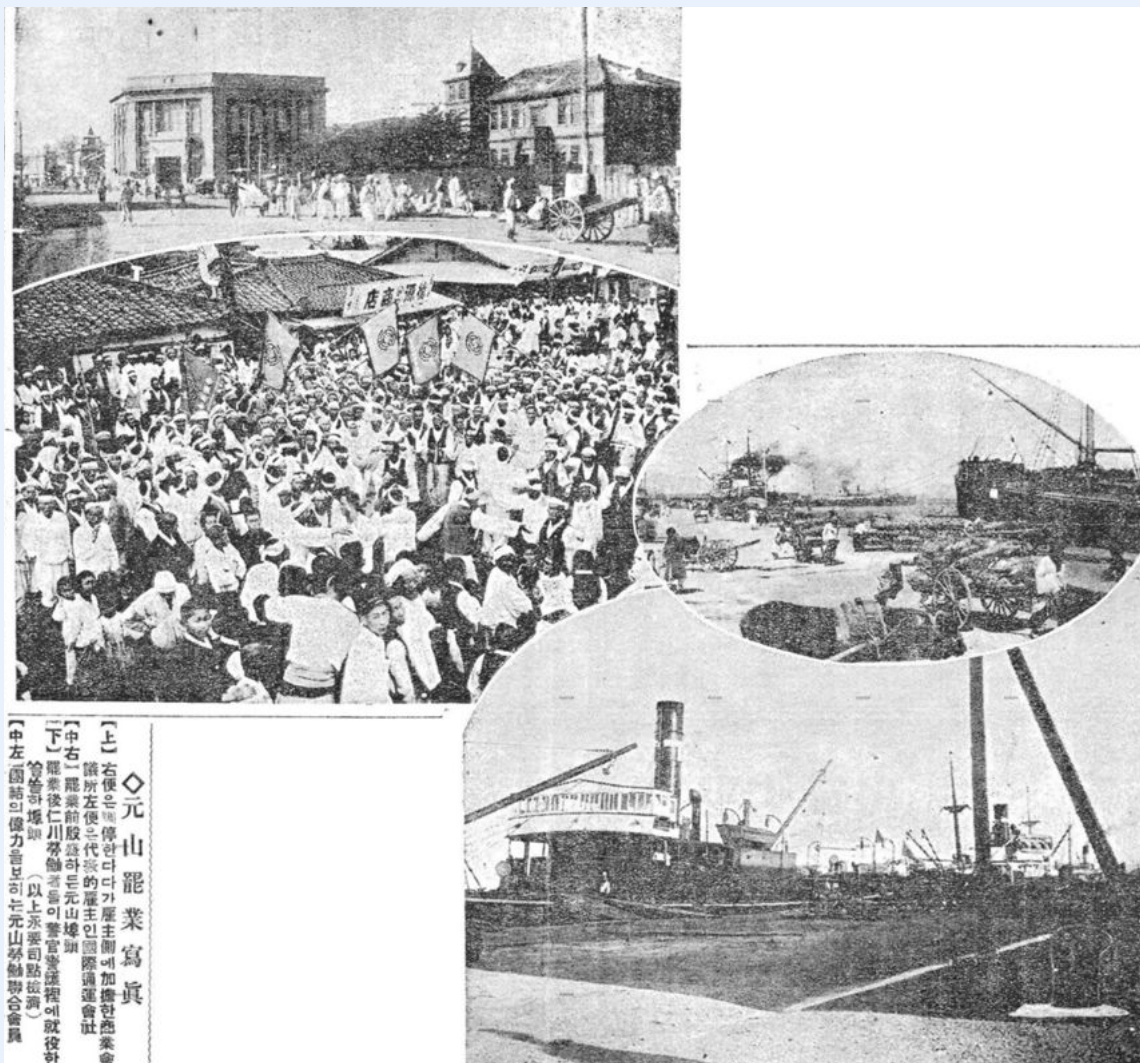
But industrialization excluded Koreans from its benefits. Koreans were rarely promoted to managerial positions and consistently earned less than their Japanese counterparts. Wage discrimination was stark: Koreans were often paid 30–50 percent less for the same work. They were also assigned the most dangerous jobs, such as mining or construction. Discrimination was institutionalized as evidenced by Koreans and Japanese workers living in separate housing, eating in different canteens, and having unequal access to medical care.

This inequality fueled labor unrest. The Wonsan General Strike of 1929, which shut down a major port for nearly three months, was triggered by wage discrimination and unsafe working conditions. It spread to involve over 10,000 workers, making it one of the largest labor actions of the colonial period. Michael Robinson highlights this strike as evidence that Korean workers connected economic exploitation with national subjugation. For many, demanding fair wages became inseparable from resisting colonial domination.



Source Activity Nine

ATL: Thinking Skills



⏏ Newspaper coverage of the Wonsan General Strike (1929).
Labor grievances and national oppression converged in port cities such as Wonsan.

Questions:

1. What does the newspaper image suggest about the scale and nature of the Wonsan General Strike?
2. How do the visual elements of the source (crowds, location, industrial setting) convey the relationship between labour grievances and colonial authority?
3. How might Japanese officials, Korean workers, and foreign observers interpret this event differently?

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

As this thematic study focuses on Authoritarian Rule from 750 CE onwards, the material on Korean resistance can be used as a case study of **how authoritarian rule was challenged**. The Lines of Inquiry for this inquiry question focus on internal opposition, popular resistance, impact of policies and external threats.

A main characteristic of the labour-based nationalist movement in Korea is that it was led by dockworkers, railway workers and industrial labourers. The combination of economic hardship and grievances caused by low wages, long working hours and discrimination and nationalist opposition to colonial exploitation and incorporation into a wider independence struggle as exemplified in the Wonsan General Strike can be compared with other case studies such as:

- The Indian labour movement with textile and railway workers as well as dockworkers in the 1920s-1930s combined with the Indian National Congress and Ghandi's campaigns
- The Egyptian revolution of 1919 against British rule carried out by tram and railway workers as well as civil servants
- The Dakar-Niger railway strike in French West Africa against French colonial rule
- The Indonesian labour movement when labour unions combined nationalist ambitions against Dutch colonial rule in 1945

The comparison can focus on these criteria:

- The link between economic exploitation and national oppression
- The exclusion of urban and industrial workers in political decision-making processes
- The (negative) effects of these strikes on the colonial economies
- The short- and long-term impact of these labour-led resistance movements

Infrastructure

Infrastructure development was a key factor in allowing the Japanese to maintain authoritarian rule in colonial Korea. Before Japanese colonization, Korea's infrastructure was relatively limited and primarily focused on traditional and agricultural needs. The Japanese colonial government invested heavily in infrastructure projects, including the construction of modernized railways, ports, and roads.

By the 1940s, Korea had nearly 5,000 kilometers of railroads, along with new ports, hydroelectric dams, and telegraph lines. These projects created the appearance of progress, but these projects served imperial extraction. Railways connected mines, rice-growing regions, and factories to ports for shipment to Japan, often bypassing Korean towns. Hydroelectric plants powered Japanese-owned industries, not Korean homes. Railroads linked coal mines, rice-producing regions, and industrial sites to coastal ports for shipment to Japan. Hydroelectric dams in the north supplied power for Japanese-owned factories and for Japan itself, not for Korean households. Like railways in India or Indochina, they were not built to integrate local economies but to extract resources. Ki-baik Lee underscores that Koreans rarely gained

direct use of the infrastructure, as trains carried rice out of villages even as local families went hungry. To ordinary Koreans, “modernization” looked like railroads that took their crops away and factories where they worked for half the pay of Japanese laborers.

The intensive extraction of resources such as iron ore, coal, gold, and timber also led to environmental harms. The focus on resource extraction and industrial output for Japan's benefit meant that Korea's economic development was unbalanced and unsustainable. This created long-term challenges for the Korean population, including economic instability and social inequality.

Summary

Korea's economy was transformed under Japanese colonial rule, but not for the benefit of Koreans. The banking system excluded them from credit, land surveys dispossessed farmers, and agricultural exports left villages hungry. Industrialization enriched Japanese corporations but discriminated against Korean workers, while infrastructure projects tied the peninsula tightly to Japan's economy without serving local needs. For Koreans, economic “modernization” was experienced as exploitation and dependency. Yet these hardships also created alliances between peasants, laborers, and intellectuals that led to nationalist resistance.

Paper 3 Practice

To what extent do you agree with the view that Japanese economic development in banking, industry, and infrastructure primarily served Japanese imperial interests rather than benefiting Korea?



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Japanese colonial officials framed the development of railways, banks, and industrial projects as “modernizing” Korea. Yet many Koreans experienced these developments through the loss of their land, factory exploitation, and capital extraction.

Historians must judge the impact of these changes and not simply describe them. This means asking questions such as- “Who benefited, who controlled the resources, and whose story is recorded?”

What it means to make a historical judgement

- Weigh competing interpretations
- Evaluate the quality of evidence
- Evaluate the context of evidence

- Decide which interpretation is best supported
- Acknowledge complexity
- Explain your criteria
- Make a reasoned evaluation

Using the evidence in this chapter, make a historical judgment using the following prompt.

1. To what extent did Japanese economic policy in Korea build a Korean economy versus building an economy for Japan?

IV. Repression and Resistance

Inquiry Question

To what extent do you agree with the claim that Koreans resisted repression under Japanese colonial rule through political, cultural, and armed struggle?

Political Repression

Korea became one of the most tightly controlled societies in the modern world due to the methods of Japanese rule. The Governor-General of Chosŏn held unchecked power, combining military, judicial, and administrative authority in a single office. This concentration of power was enforced by an expanding police force. By the 1930s, there were more than 80,000 Japanese officers and hundreds of thousands of Korean auxiliaries used for local intelligence, translation, and neighborhood policing. Neighbors were often compelled to report on each other, creating a climate of fear where privacy was nearly impossible. Press censorship silenced dissent. Independent newspapers such as *Daehan Maeil Sinbo* were closed, and surviving publications required official approval of their content. Even cultural journals risked seizure if they hinted at nationalist themes. Public gatherings were banned unless granted a permit, which was rarely given for anything other than officially sanctioned events.

The Peace Preservation Law (1925) criminalized activities deemed as threatening to the imperial state, including peaceful demonstrations, labor organizing, and speaking of any doctrine the authorities judged a threat to imperial order. Thousands of Koreans were arrested under this law. Police used torture routinely, including beatings, waterboarding, and electric shocks, to extract confessions. Historian Bruce Cumings notes that the colonial bureaucracy rested on systematic violence disguised as legal order, using surveillance, interrogation, and torture to enforce obedience.

Cultural Resistance

Despite pervasive repression, Koreans found creative ways to sustain their identity. Cultural nationalism flourished in the 1920s and 1930s, and intellectuals recognized that if political independence was temporarily impossible, the preservation of culture could keep the idea of the nation alive.

The Korean Language Society, founded in 1921, exemplified this resistance. Members labored to standardize Han'gŭl spelling and compile dictionaries at a time when Korean was being driven out of schools and public life. Arrests of some members in 1942 on charges of nationalist conspiracy turned them into cultural martyrs, galvanizing further underground work to preserve the language. The fact that lexicographers were treated as criminals demonstrates how Japan equated cultural preservation with rebellion.

Literary activity also became a quiet but powerful channel of protest. Journals like *Kaebiyok* and *Dong-A Ilbo* published essays, fiction, and poetry that sometimes disguised nationalist critiques with allegory and symbolism. Even sports coverage offered a subtle message of resistance as cheering for Korean athletes in colonial competitions was an expression of shared pride that otherwise couldn't be voiced. Writers such as Yi Kwang-su initially inspired cultural nationalism with works promoting self-strengthening, though his later collaboration with the Japanese highlighted the moral dilemmas faced under repression. His trajectory illustrates how colonial pressure could turn early nationalists into reluctant collaborators.

Everyday practices reinforced identity too. Families taught Han'gŭl privately at home, passed down oral folktales, and continued Confucian ancestral rites despite discouragement. Ki-baik Lee emphasizes that such small acts were not trivial but vital, ensuring continuity of Korean traditions under colonial assault.

Organized Nationalist Movements

During Japan's colonial rule over Korea, nationalist leaders worked relentlessly to make their voices heard on the world stage. After the suppression of the Samil (March 1st) Movement in 1919, many turned to diplomacy and exile politics as alternative strategies for independence. That April, Korean leaders established the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in Shanghai. Although divided by factional disputes and lacking formal recognition, it was significant in that it represented Korea's continuing claim to sovereignty and provided a base for coordinating diplomacy and armed resistance.

Korean leaders pursued different paths abroad. Kim Kyu-sik traveled to the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, where he called for Korea's independence and exposed the reality of Japanese occupation. Although the request was denied since Japan was one of the victorious Allied powers, Kim's appeal gave visibility to Korea's struggle and lent credibility to its diplomatic campaign. Syngman Rhee, serving as president of the Provisional Government, took a longer route through years of advocacy in the United States. He met with officials, published articles, and gave public speeches urging American support for Korea's freedom.

Other leaders stressed that armed resistance was necessary alongside diplomacy. Kim Gu, a prominent figure in the Provisional Government, emphasized armed struggle, working with guerrilla forces in Manchuria and training youth in exile schools. Even with limited resources, the government in exile ran schools and training programs to keep younger generations politically engaged.

While neither diplomatic lobbying nor armed struggle secured immediate independence, these efforts built international awareness, kept Korea's claim to sovereignty alive, and laid essential groundwork for future recognition. The Provisional Government's survival became a moral symbol demonstrating that Korea's claim to independence remained alive.



Source Activity Ten

ATL: Thinking Skills



⏏ Photo of leaders at the establishment of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea in 1919, a key moment in Korea's journey toward independence and self-determination.

Question:

1. What does the formal setting and attire suggest about how these leaders wanted to present Korea to the world?

Inside Korea, nationalists faced constant police scrutiny. Moderates pursued cultural nationalism, promoting education, cooperatives, and economic self-strengthening as preparation for eventual independence. More radical groups, including communists and socialists, tied Korean liberation to the wider anti-imperialist struggle. Labor strikes, tenant protests, and youth organizations in the 1920s and 1930s revealed how everyday grievances over wages or rents were increasingly linked to resistance against Japanese rule. Michael Robinson stresses that these divisions reflected strategic debates – whether to confront Japan directly or to preserve national identity until global conditions shifted.

Armed Resistance

Some Koreans concluded that only armed struggle could secure independence. Guerrilla units formed in Manchuria and Siberia, taking advantage of easily crossed borders to launch raids. These guerrilla groups saw their struggle as a mission of liberation whereas the Japanese perspective was that they were bandits. The Korean Independence Army, established after the Samil (March 1st) Movement, operated from bases in Manchuria and became the most organized military force of the exile movement. In October 1920, its fighters under Kim Jwa-jin joined other nationalist units in the Battle of Cheongsanri, the most celebrated episode of armed resistance. Roughly 3,000 Korean soldiers held out against nearly 30,000 Japanese troops, inflicting significant casualties. Japan retaliated with the Gando Massacre, killing thousands of Korean civilians in Manchuria. Though tragic, Cheongsanri became a powerful symbol of Korean resilience and the possibility of sustained armed resistance.

Individual acts of militancy also captured the nationalist imagination. An Jung-geun's assassination of Ito Hirobumi in 1909 remained an enduring source of inspiration. Later, in 1926, Na Seok-ju carried out bombings against colonial institutions in Seoul, and in 1932, Yun Bong-gil killed Japanese officers with a grenade at a Shanghai ceremony. These actions, though militarily small, drew international attention and inspired wider movements in China as well as Korea. They also signaled that resistance was not confined to Korea itself but part of a transnational struggle.



« An Jung-Geun, who assassinated Ito Hirobumi, is remembered as one of the greatest Korean independence freedom fighters during the colonial period. He is pictured here with his handprint and the statement, “I am a citizen of the Korean State.”

By the late 1930s, Japan's total mobilization for war brought new repression (see Chapter 6). Koreans were conscripted into labor battalions and, eventually, the Japanese army. Students staged boycotts against forced Shinto worship, while workers launched strikes and sabotage campaigns in mines and factories. Ki-baik Lee emphasizes that these acts of resistance, though scattered, revealed the depth of nationalist sentiment across all classes by the late colonial period.

Women and Resistance

Korean women played indispensable roles in resistance, both public and private. The participation of women in resistance challenged earlier male-centered narratives of nationalism. During the Samil (March 1st) Movement, women students organized demonstrations and distributed declarations. Yu Gwan-sun, captured and tortured for her leadership, died in prison at age 17 and became a national martyr. Her struggle also illustrates how religion, youth, and gender sometimes intersected in resistance.



Source Activity Eleven

ATL: Thinking Skills

Yu Gwan-sun

Source A

“Even if my fingernails are torn out, my nose and ears are ripped apart, and my legs and arms are crushed, this physical pain does not compare to the pain of losing my nation. My only remorse is not being able to do more than dedicating my life to my country.”

— Yu Gwan-sun

Source B

Yu Gwan-sun's Identity Card, 1919



Source C

Statue of Yu Gwan-sun in Seoul



Task:

1. Using all sources, analyze how Yu Gwan-sun's actions and the commemoration reflect both resistance to Japanese colonial rule and the construction of Korean national identity.

In your analysis, consider the following questions:

A. Perspective:

- How can Yu Gwan-sun's identity as a young, educated Korean woman under colonial rule enhance our understanding of resistance and personal sacrifice?

B. Values and Ethics:

- How does her statement reflect the emotional and ethical dimensions of resistance to oppression?
- What does it reveal about the broader fight for national independence?

C. Theory of Knowledge:

- To what extent do symbolic representations—such as monuments, documents, and personal testimony—shape our knowledge of historical resistance movements?
- How do symbolic representations such as a monument influence how individuals like Yu Gwan-sun are remembered as national symbols?

Women also supported armed resistance networks, smuggling food, intelligence, and weapons across borders. Some directly joined guerrilla groups, taking part in sabotage and combat. In urban centers, women participated in underground student organizations, printed pamphlets, and aided labor strikes. For example, women in Pyongyang helped distribute illegal newspapers and organize textile strikes, showing that activism extended beyond symbolic protest. In private life women preserved identity by teaching children Han'gŭl, maintaining Confucian rituals, and passing down folktales. These quiet forms of cultural continuity were arguably just as vital as public protest, ensuring the survival of Korean traditions in the face of assimilationist pressures.

Paper 1 Practice

Case Study: Competing Strategies in the Korean Independence Movement

Inquiry Question: How did diplomatic activism and armed/mass-mobilization strategies differ in advancing Korean independence during Japanese colonial rule?

Source A

Context: Shin Chae-ho, a radical nationalist who had turned toward anarchist ideas after fleeing Japanese repression, wrote this declaration while working with militant anti-colonial groups in China and Manchuria (1923).

Content: "Burglar Japan violently usurped our independent right and deprived our nation's right to live... Therefore we reject the begging of diplomats and the reform schemes of the elites. We shall rely upon direct action by the masses. The revolution must strike at the heart of the robber-state and its lackeys; we shall destroy the machinery of oppression, topple the traitors who feed upon the people, and reclaim our freedom by our own hands. Let the youth be the vanguard; let righteous men unite in fearless deeds. Only a fierce struggle can awaken the sleeping nation and break the iron chains that bind it."

Source: Shin, C.-h. (1923). Declaration of the Korean revolution. The Anarchist Library. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/shin-chaeho-declaration-of-the-korean-revolution>

Source B

Context: This 1929 directive came from the Comintern, the Moscow-based organization coordinating global communist movements and setting ideological priorities for colonial struggles at a moment when Korean communist groups were fragmented.

Content: "To the Revolutionary Workers and Peasants of Korea. Dear Comrades! ... Without the restoration and consolidation of the Communist Party a consistent and determined struggle for the emancipation of the country from the yoke of Japanese imperialism and for carrying out the agrarian revolution is impossible. The E.C.C.I. earnestly hopes that the Korean Communists will... establish the iron cohorts needed for this severe struggle demanding great sacrifices,

unshakable firmness, unbounded revolutionary devotion and readiness for struggle...Only through the mobilization and leadership of the working class and poor peasants can the national-liberation movement advance to victory."

Source: Executive Committee of the Communist International. (1929, February 15). Resolution on the Korean question [In International Press Correspondence, Vol. 9, No. 8]. Marxists Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/inprecor/1929/v09n08-feb-15-1929-inprecor.pdf>

Source C

Context: An extract from Korea's Appeal to the Conference on Limitation of Armament (1922), published by the Korean Mission in Washington, D.C., aligned with the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea. Led by Syngman Rhee, the Provisional Government pursued international diplomacy, appealing to the United States and League of Nations. The appeal was submitted during the Washington Naval Conference, a major post-World War I diplomatic gathering aimed at limiting naval buildups and creating a new structure for Pacific security.

Content: "All of the conferee nations, with one exception, are in a similar situation to the United States, for they have agreed by treaty with Korea to use their good offices in case of her oppression. Assuredly, we can assume that all of the ambassadors, delegates and advisors who participate in the grave responsibilities of your task are familiar with those treaties and with the interpretative diplomatic correspondence relating to them. However, for convenience of reference we have prepared an abstract of the governmental records, documents and treaties pertaining to the relations of each conferee nation with Korea, which is attached as Appendix No. 2 under the title 'What the conferee nations have said and pledged'. We solemnly affirm that justice to Korea constitutes an indispensable requisite to the permanent adjustment of far eastern affairs. How can there be peace in the Orient if a nation of 25,000,000 people are left to smart with the injustice of treaties "unkept"? When Her Majesty, the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and Empress of India ... said in the treaty of 1883 that there shall be perpetual peace and friendship with Korea, and that in case of difference with a third power Great Britain would step in to exert its good offices to bring about an amicable arrangement, Korea saw back of those covenants the integrity of England."

Source: Korean Mission to the Conference on Limitation of Armament. (1922). Korea's appeal to the Conference on Limitation of Armament. United States Government Printing Office. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/0/06/Korea%27s_appeal_to_the_Conference_on_limitation_of_armament._%28IA_koreasappealtoco00korerich%29.pdf

Questions:

1. Explain how the content of both source A and source B can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)
2. Analyse how the context of source C influences how it can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)
3. Examine how the perspectives in all the sources can be used to answer the inquiry question. (12 marks)

Summary

Korea experienced repression through authoritarian governance, pervasive surveillance, censorship, and violence. Yet resistance persisted in many forms, like secretive cultural work, nationalist organizing, guerrilla warfare, and women's activism. The Provisional Government in Shanghai symbolized Korea's claim to sovereignty, while the Battle of Cheongsanri and acts of militancy demonstrated armed determination. Writers, churches, and families sustained traditions under constant threat. For Koreans, repression was both daily suffering and a constant reminder of the need to resist, ensuring that nationalism endured and expanded throughout the colonial period.

Conclusion

After examining the Japanese annexation and colonial rule over Korea, including repression, resistance like the Samil Independence Movement, assimilation efforts, and developments in banking, industry, and infrastructure, we now shift to the Second Sino-Japanese War.

This war had significant impacts on Koreans, including forced labor, conscription, and the exploitation of comfort women. It also spurred the growth of nationalism and communism as Koreans resisted Japanese exploitation of their resources. The war's end led to Korea's liberation and the establishment of separate governments under Kim Il-Sung in the North and Syngman Rhee in the South.

Paper 3 Practice

Essay Skills Builder

To what extent do you agree with the claim that Japanese colonial rule transformed Korea politically, socially, and economically.

Your essay must incorporate:

- Your understanding of long-term historical development
- Evidence from the chapter (political, social, economic long-term factors)
 - **Specifically you must include the Samil Independence Movement (1919), assimilation policies, and the colonial economy (banking, industry, infrastructure)**

Your response must have the following:

Knowledge & Content	Accurate, relevant knowledge of colonial Korea
Concepts	Show cause & consequence, continuity & change
Regional study skill	Evaluate arguments & perspectives
Argument	Develop a clear, evaluative judgment

Stage 1 – Annotation

When annotating, mark directly on the document using highlights, margin notes, and symbols.

Annotate your partner's paper for:

- Thesis & argument- highlight the thesis in yellow, comment if it answers “to what extent” and states an evaluative stance
- Use of evidence- highlight evidence in blue, comment whether the evidence is specific and effectively uses
- Continuity/long-term consequences- highlight these moments in green, comment on whether they clearly link to pre colonial Korea changes or long-term impacts
- Counterargument- underline, comment on the effectiveness with which they evaluate alternative perspectives and/or limits to their argument
- Conceptual language (cause, change, significance)- bold these terms, comment on whether these concepts are used meaningfully (not simply named)

Your annotations should help your partner see which parts are strong and where deeper analysis or clarity is needed.

Stage 2 – Apply IB Paper 3 Rubric

Model Thesis Frame

Although Japanese colonial rule introduced economic and infrastructural development in Korea, these changes primarily served imperial interests and required harsh assimilation policies that suppressed Korean identity. The Samil Independence Movement of 1919 reveals that Korean resistance grew in response to repression, suggesting that the transformation of Korea under Japan was significant in scale but limited in benefit for Koreans themselves.

Checklist Aligned to IB Markbands

- Clear, evaluative thesis answering ‘to what extent’
- Explicit and sustained line of argument
- Accurate, relevant historical regional study content knowledge – accurate use of Samil Movement, assimilation policies, economy
- Incorporation of historical concepts (cause, continuity/change, consequence, significance)
- Balanced analysis of long-term factors and other causes
- Use of specific evidence (from colonial Korea)
- Evaluation of competing interpretations and factors
- Clear structure, academic tone, and historical vocabulary
- Clear paragraphs and analytical topic sentences
- Conclusion offers a reasoned final judgment

Peer Feedback Stems

- The most convincing part of your argument is...
- To strengthen continuity/change, connect this more to pre-1910 context by...
- Your strongest use of evidence is when you reference...

- Your analysis of assimilation could be deepened by considering...
- Your continuity/long-term connection works when you...
- This moment in your essay effectively links Samil to larger nationalist resistance because...
- You could evaluate the economic changes further by explaining whether...
- To improve evaluation of arguments, try...

Selected Embedded Approaches to Learning (ATL)-

Task Component	Matching ATL
Build a sustained thesis about the extent of transformation.	Draw conclusions and generalizations
Select evidence: Samil movement, education decrees, banking/industrial data, infrastructure.	Use critical-analysis skills to select and evaluate sources
Line of argument judged by HL Paper 3 rubric.	Develop coherent, logical arguments
Peer-mark using Paper 3 descriptors; highlight strengths and growth areas.	Give and receive meaningful feedback
Review rubric results and adjust argumentation and evidence depth.	Reflect on strengths and areas for improvement

Paper 3 Practice

Additional Paper 3 Style Questions (Regional Study: Asia & Oceania)

1. To what extent do you agree with the perspective that Japan successfully eliminated Korean sovereignty through direct colonial rule?
2. To what extent do you agree with the view that Japanese assimilation policies in education, language, and religion were effective in consolidating colonial control in Korea?
3. To what extent do you agree with the claim that Korean cultural identity ultimately survived Japanese assimilation efforts?
4. To what extent do you agree with the statement that the Samil (March First) Movement of 1919 was a turning point in the development of Korean nationalism?
5. To what extent do you agree with the argument that Korean resistance strategies—including armed struggle, labor protest, and exile diplomacy—were effective in challenging Japanese colonial rule?
6. To what extent do you agree with the view that memory, martyrdom, and symbolism (e.g., Yu Gwan-sun, the Battle of Cheongsanri) were essential in sustaining the Korean independence movement?
7. To what extent do you agree with the claim that the Samil (March First) Movement was a crucial symbolic victory rather than a failed uprising?

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

To what extent did colonial legacies contribute to the causes of the Korean War (1950–1953)?

The decades of Japanese colonial rule shaped the trajectory of modern Korea and laid the groundwork for the eventual division and conflict that resulted in the Korean War. The authoritarian legacy of colonialism intensified nationalist movements and ideological divides. The repression and forced assimilation policies implemented by the Japanese not only suppressed Korean identity but also ignited widespread resentment and resistance. Events such as the *Samil* (March 1st) Independence Movement of 1919 did not merely symbolize a rejection of foreign rule, but also nurtured an enduring spirit of nationalism that later informed both communist and nationalist visions for an independent Korea.

During the colonial era, Japan's aggressive assimilation efforts of eradicating the Korean language in schools, enforcing the worship of Shinto, and rewriting history in favor of Japan's imperial narrative left a deep cultural scar. Cultural suppression under colonial rule persisted in memory and influenced later ideological clashes. These attempts to erase Korean heritage, though ultimately unsuccessful, generated a backlash that manifested in divergent movements for Korean sovereignty after Japan's defeat in 1945. The North, under Kim Il-Sung, capitalized on the narrative of revolutionary resistance against both colonial and capitalist oppression, while the South, led by Syngman Rhee, emphasized national restoration through anti-communist, Western-aligned policies.

Japan's development of Korea's infrastructure and industry further complicated postcolonial recovery. Though railways, ports, and factories had modernized parts of Korea, these were built to benefit the Japanese empire. After liberation, the South inherited much of the colonial economic infrastructure, while the North, having suffered greater destruction during the war with Japan and later occupation by Soviet forces, prioritized state-led industrialization. Economic disparities between North and South were both a result and a cause of political division. Furthermore, Korea's banking and agricultural systems had been reorganized to exploit rather than empower the Korean people, fostering social inequality and fueling revolutionary sentiment, particularly in the North.

The legacy of resistance under colonial rule also translated directly into the militarization of post-liberation Korea. Guerrilla fighters who had once battled Japanese forces, including those trained in Manchuria or aligned with communist China, became the foundation of the North Korean military and leadership. In contrast, the South Korean government, supported by American military advisors, attempted to suppress leftist movements that had roots in anti-Japanese activism.

Ultimately, the Japanese colonial period was not an isolated episode, but a force that shaped Korea's postwar identity crisis. The repression, assimilation, and economic exploitation endured by Koreans under Japanese rule produced lasting ideological, social, and economic

divisions that erupted into full-scale war in 1950. The Korean War was both a departure from colonial rule and a direct consequence of unresolved colonial legacies. Understanding the colonial experience is essential to understanding why the Korean peninsula, once united under a shared identity, became the site of one of the 20th century's most compelling divisions.

COLONIAL POLICY/RESULT	LONGER-TERM IMPACT TOWARD WAR
Forced assimilation	Generated anti-colonial nationalism; delegitimized foreign rule
Suppression of political rights	Radicalized factions; encouraged underground movements
Industrial and rail development	Post-1945 regional economic imbalances (North = industry, South = agriculture)
Land and banking restructuring	Tenant grievances lead to revolutionary appeal in the North
Guerrilla resistance (esp. Manchuria)	Basis of North Korean military leadership and ideology
Police networks and collaboration	South inherited colonial policing methods and elites



Conceptual Connections

Concepts Integration Chart

IB Concept	IB Style Student Thinking Task	Sample Thesis Starters	Chapter Evidence
Cause & Consequence	Explain how Japanese imperial goals and Korean structural weakness shaped annexation AND how resistance evolved.	Japan's annexation stemmed from... while its consequences included... driven by both state policy and Korean resistance.	• Decline of monarchy • Geopolitics • Japanese military rule & censorship • Land Survey-peasant tenancy • Samil Movement suppression & diaspora activism

Continuity & Change	Identify long-term continuity in coercion but also shifts in methods (military rule to “cultural” rule to wartime mobilization).	Although repression remained a constant, Japanese rule shifted from military to “cultural rule,” reflecting...	Continuities: hierarchy, repression, cultural control Changes: shift to “Cultural Rule,” student activism, industrial development, urbanization, Korean proletarian and agrarian activism
Perspectives	Compare and evaluate legitimacy of competing claims: modernization vs domination; reform vs coercion.	While Japanese officials framed annexation as modernization, Korean nationalists and later historians such as... argue...	Japanese narrative: modernization mission Korean moderates: cultural survival & education Korean radicals: armed struggle needed International observers: self-determination betrayed
Significance	Decide why Samil & cultural resistance matter today – not just immediate effect, but identity & memory in Korea.	The Samil Movement was historically significant because it... despite failing to...	Samil Movement = symbolic and strategic turning point Assimilation = identity suppression & resilience Industrialization = modernizing infrastructure for Japan, unequal benefits

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

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)**.

Inquiry Question 4: How was authoritarian rule challenged?

Cause and Consequence: When Repression Ignites Resistance

Korea's takeover by Japan was brutal and complete. After signing the annexation treaty in 1910, Japan installed a military-led government that stripped Koreans of their political rights, overhauled laws, and rewrote school curricula to serve imperial goals. Even language became a target as Japanese officials worked to replace Korean identity with imperial loyalty. These policies created immediate resentment and set conditions for backlash.

Internal opposition soon emerged among educated elites, students, and reformers who sought ways to preserve Korea's voice. **Popular resistance** exploded in 1919 with the Samil Independence Movement, triggered by Emperor Gojong's death and inspired by global talk of self-determination. Over two million Koreans marched peacefully and they expected to be heard. Instead, Japan responded with military force, arrests, and public violence.

The Samil Movement didn't succeed in creating an independent Korea, but it still revealed the **impact of policies**. Brutal repression showed how far Japan would go to maintain control, yet it also forced the colonial government to shift toward a façade of "Cultural Rule." Outwardly censorship loosened and limited Korean-language education returned, but surveillance and repression intensified beneath the surface. These contradictions planted the seeds for resistance that carried forward in classrooms, villages, borderlands, and exile.

Continuity and Change: Evolving Resistance in a Tightening Regime

When mass protests failed, **internal opposition** was adapted. When public protest became dangerous, Koreans shifted toward quieter but persistent cultural defense. Educators secretly taught Han'gŭl, and writers published banned works. Organizations like the Korean Language Society protected culture under attack. **Popular resistance** continued in smaller everyday acts, including refusing to bow at Shinto shrines, preserving rituals, and sharing Korean stories at home.

External threats also reshaped resistance. Leaders abroad formed the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai, lobbied foreign powers, and coordinated with militias in Manchuria. Guerrilla units, later including Kim Gu and Kim Il-sung, crossed borders to raid Japanese forces. These transnational efforts ensured the independence cause could not be contained inside Korea's borders. Continuity existed in the determination to resist and change appeared in the strategies used, with a shift from public protest to decentralized underground activism, international lobbying, etc.

Significance: What Resistance Meant Then and Now

The defiance of Koreans mattered far beyond the 1930s and 1940s. The Japanese tried to erase Korean culture, but popular resistance in daily life including families teaching Han'gŭl and mothers preserving history ensured the "imagined community" survived. Resistance came from every sector, including students, farmers, laborers, and women like Yu Gwan-sun. **The impact of policies** meant repression failed to break Korea's identity; instead, it reinforced the determination to resist.

After 1945, both North and South Korea built their legitimacy around these memories of **internal opposition** and **popular resistance**, while the role of **external threats** (Manchurian guerrillas, exile governments) helped shape Cold War politics.

Potential Paper 2 Comparisons to Explore

- Internal Opposition
 - Japan in Taiwan – police networks, suppression of local political groups
 - Stalin's USSR – secret police, censorship, liquidation of rival elites
 - Chiang Kai-shek's China – crackdown on student protests, repression of left-wing groups
 - French Algeria – limitation of Indigenous political rights, surveillance of Muslim leaders
- Popular Resistance
 - India under Britain – mass civil disobedience, student mobilization, moral protest language
 - Vietnam under France – student associations, clandestine presses, urban radical networks
 - Burma (1920s–30s) – student strikes and anti-colonial boycotts, youth networks
 - Poland under Nazi occupation – underground schools, cultural preservation & covert resistance
- Impact of Policies
 - French Indochina – plantation economy and rail lines geared to export profits, limited local uplift
 - Stalin's USSR – centralized planning, industrial output expansion tied to regime power
 - Poland under Nazi occupation – cultural suppression, language bans, identity control and forced assimilation
 - Meiji Japan – state-led industrial development and rail expansion, but nationalist benefit
- External Threats
 - Vietnamese exiles in China – cross-border organizing, safe bases in Guangzhou and later Yunnan
 - Irish nationalist diaspora (U.S. & Britain) – fundraising, press campaigns, lobbying abroad
 - Cuban dissidents under Batista (U.S. & Mexico) – exile organizing in Mexico/U.S., targeted as regime threat
 - Chinese KMP vs CCP – competing claims of legitimacy and political recognition overseas

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06

Social, Economic and Political Impact of the Sino-Japanese War

IB Lines of Inquiry

Inquiry Questions

Political developments, including growth of nationalism and communism

To what extent did the Second Sino Japanese War intensify political control over Korea from 1937-1945?

**Economic impact of exploitation of industry and resources for Japanese war effort
Independence Club (1896-1898)**

To what extent did wartime mobilisation during the Second Sino-Japanese War drive industrial and economic change in colonial Korea?

Economic impact of exploitation of industry and resources for Japanese war effort

To what extent did Korean society change as a result of the Second Sino-Japanese War?

Liberation and establishment of the governments of Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee

To what extent did the circumstances leading up to and during Korea's liberation in 1945 enable the establishment of Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung's regimes?

Introduction

In 1910, Korea was annexed by Japan and subjected to a repressive colonial government that attempted to stamp out Korean national identity through aggressive assimilation policies. This produced significant reactions of Koreans both at home and abroad, demanding Korean independence. Key examples include Syngman Rhee and the Treaty of Versailles, the March First Movement, student protests, communist guerrilla fighters, and the Provisional Government. This colonial time period had waves of repression and loosening in response to Korean reactions and protest. The Korean population continued to resist, as well as sought to survive, colonial rule up to 1937 and the outbreak of the Second-Sino Japanese War.

This chapter focuses on the consequences for Korea of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937. This triggered the mobilisation of the Japanese Empire, including its colonial possession, Korea, to fight on Japan's behalf. The war had profound and multifaceted impacts on Korean society politically, economically, and socially. Korea was forced to contribute to the Japanese war effort through military conscription, forced labor and

the institutionalized system of sexual slavery, also called the “comfort women” system. These abuses were possible because Koreans were denied citizenship rights and political agency, which allowed Japan to strengthen its authoritarian control over the peninsula. A key focus is on how Korea’s political, economic and social landscapes changed as a result of the Sino-Japanese war. These elements fueled both nationalist and communist mobilization and later division.

Timeline of Key Events

Year	Sino-Japanese War — Stages	Korea
1931	Japanese invasion of Manchuria after Mukden incident	
1932-1937		Increased militarization and cultural suppression by Japan
1937	Marco Polo Bridge Incident Japan invades China development of full-scale war	
1938	Stalemate and war of attrition	National Mobilisation Law extended to Korea
1939		Korean language banned from public schools Draft ordinance
1940		Koreans organized into “Patriotic Neighborhood Associations” Forced name changes
1941	Globalization of the conflict Start of the Pacific War	
1942	Allied Counter-offensive	
1943		Koreans drafted into Japanese military All Korean cultural expressions banned
1944	Nov. 27: Cairo Declaration Full Scale Total War	
1945	February: Yalta Conference June/July: Potsdam Conference Aug 8: Soviet Union invades Manchuria Aug 15: Japan surrenders December: Moscow Conference	Aug 10: Soviet Union was invited by the US to occupy the Northern half of Korea Sept 2: US Army 24th Corps occupies Southern half of Korea

Key Terms

Assimilation	The process of forcing one culture to adopt the customs and language of another.
“Comfort women”	Girls and women from Korea and other occupied territories that were coerced into forced “sexual slavery” by the Japanese military during WWII.
Comintern	The Communist International was an international organisation run through Moscow with the aim of promoting world communism through revolution and halted during WWII.
Euphemism	A mild or indirect word used to replace a word considered harsh.
Government General of Korea	The colonial government of Japan over Korea from 1910–1945.
Greater East Asia Co Prosperity Sphere	Japanese wartime propaganda campaign promising for Asian unity and “prosperity” while exploiting colonies for people and resources.
Kim Il Sung	Korean guerrilla leader who fought against the Japanese forces in Manchuria during the late 1930s and 1940s, he was later supported by the USSR and became leader of North Korea.
Kim Ku	An independence activist, guerilla and president for the Korean Provisional government.
Korean Provisional Government	The government in exile formed in 1919 to advocate for Korean independence from Japan.
Lyuh Woon-hyung	A left wing Korean nationalist and independence leader who was a major part of the The Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence. He worked to unify the factions.
<i>Naisen Ittai</i>	Meaning Japan and Korea as one body was Japan’s assimilation policy used to justify erasing Korean culture under occupation.
National General Mobilisation Law	1938 Japanese law that granted the state total control over people and resources for war.
Operation Napko	The OSS and Korean independence fighters’ 1940s plan to infiltrate and attack Japanese wartime facilities.
Second Sino-Japanese War	Major conflict between China and Japan after full-scale invasion of China in 1937. It later merged with World War II in the Pacific and ended with the Japanese surrender in 1945.
Shamanism	Traditional Korean spiritual practice as a part of indigenous religions that was suppressed under Japanese rule but still secretly observed.
Shinto	The Japanese state imposed religion focusing on ancestor and emperor worship.

Sōshi-kaimei	The assimilation policy that stipulated name changes for Koreans from 1939-1940.
Syngman Rhee	Exiled Korean independence activist who lobbied for American and allied support for the Korean Provisional Government against Japanese colonial rule.
The Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence	An organization that was formed in August 1945 to organise Korea's self rule after Japanese surrender before American occupation forces arrived.
Totalitarianism	A political system where the state holds absolute control over all areas of life.

REGIONAL MAP OF KOREA DURING THE SECOND SINO-JAPANESE WAR



I. Political Developments in Korea during the Second Sino-Japanese War

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the Second Sino-Japanese War intensify political control over Korea from 1937–1945?

To implement and consolidate political control over the Korean population and promote cultural and ideological integration, the Government General of Korea (GGK) or the Japanese colonial government, employed a variety of strategies. These efforts rapidly intensified with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and the GGK adapted its policies to further align with Japan's expanding imperial ambitions.

In 1938, the GGK issued a White Paper and administrative directives outlining guidelines and goals for the colonial government. These documents emphasized the importance of Korea's forced cooperation in the effort to defeat China. This was to be achieved by stricter assimilation policies as well as increased control of economic and political decisions. A range of measures including strict censorship and intensified economic exploitation of Korea were implemented. The political policies became more oppressive and exclusionary as the war progressed to a colonial form of totalitarianism.

By the 1940s, approximately a quarter million Japanese civil servants were part of the Japanese colonial administration that ruled over roughly 21 million Koreans, according to Bruce Cumings. Although a small number of wealthy Koreans were part of provincial and city assemblies, the upper echelons of Korean society were systematically excluded and their influence was diminished. The majority of the Governor-Generals, or heads of the colonial government, were Japanese military leaders.

Colonial Ideology and Assimilation Policies

The GGK followed a strict assimilation policy based on the Japanese authority assertions that they were racially superior and hence entitled to lead Asia. While accepting ethnic similarity between the two cultures, Koreans were still considered inferior by the Japanese. Following *Naisen Ittai* policies (meaning Japan and Korea as one body), Koreans were expected to accept their 'true identity' as imperial subjects. This in turn was used as an ideological basis to justify the incorporation of Korea into the Japanese "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," which was Japan's plan to control much of Asia. After October 2, 1937, Koreans had to recite the "Oath as Subjects of the Imperial Nation" during public events. This ritual reinforced the expectation that Koreans should abandon their national political identity and accept being a part of Japan's empire. Assimilation policies will be more deeply explored under the segment on social effects of colonial rule.



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skills

The Oath as Subjects of the Imperial Nations

Context: This document embodies the ideological ultra-militaristic and ultra-nationalistic atmosphere of wartime Japan in 1937. The Japanese engaged in aggressive expansion across East Asia and supported this through domestic campaigns on the home island as well as in Korea, to encourage service for the empire. The oath occurred in civic and educational settings to shape the public's behavior and attitudes for social cohesion and mobilisation for war. However, the oath was not instituted in Taiwan, another country that was forced under long term Japanese colonisation.

The Oath as Subjects of the Imperial Nations

1. We are the subjects of the imperial nation; we will repay His Majesty as well as the country with loyalty and sincerity.
2. We the subjects of the imperial nation shall trust, love, and help one another so that we can strengthen our unity.
3. We the subjects of the imperial nation shall endure hardship, train ourselves, and cultivate strength so that we can exalt the imperial way.

Quoted in Chou, "The Kominka Movement," 43.

Questions:

1. What were the causes behind the creation and distribution of the Oath in Japan's empire?
2. What were the consequences of imposing oaths on Korean citizens during Japanese colonial rule?
3. How and why might Japanese officials and Korean citizens have viewed this oath differently?
4. What is the significance of the Oath in understanding the role of ideology and education in authoritarian states?

TOK Connection: To what extent can language shape, justify or obscure during colonial rule?

Research Task: Explore the "Greater East Asia Co Prosperity Sphere" in depth: How did the Japanese utilise this terminology in not only Korea but other lands they controlled during the Second Sino Japanese War?

Limits of Political Participation

Throughout the colonial period, Koreans were largely excluded from meaningful political participation. A small group of pro-Japanese Korean elites, like the Koshi Club, attempted to gain some political representation in the 1930s, through means such as electing Korean aristocrats to the Japanese Diet or attempting to create a Korean Legislative Assembly in 1938. However, these efforts were limited and abandoned with the start of the Second Sino-Japanese War. For the vast majority of Koreans, political rights were severely restricted. According to Jun Uchida, in 1935, only 2.4% of the population could vote in local elections due to strict property and class requirements which favored only the elites.

To enforce control and compliance, the GGK divided the country into about 350,000 Neighborhood Patriotic Associations, each including 10 families. These groups monitored their communities and reported anyone who disobeyed Japanese rules, creating a society under constant surveillance. The Associations also promoted Japanese education and Shinto religious practices. In rural areas, the GGK worked closely with both elite Korean leaders (yangban) and ordinary local leaders to maintain order, weakening Korea's traditional social structures and ensuring loyalty to the Japanese colonial government. This in turn hurt the chances of yangban as leaders for resistance. About half of the police force was made up of Korean nationals from lower classes tasked to carry out GGK directives. Together, these political restrictions and surveillance systems limited Korean self-governance and strengthened Japanese authoritarian control.



Source Activity Two

ATL: Thinking Skills

Hong Eul Soo describes his experiences under Japanese colonial rule.

"In the early 1940s, the colonial government put more and more restrictions on Korea. If three adults wanted to get together, they had to have a permit to assemble, or else they would get hauled into jail for anti-Japanese activities. About this time, I met a newspaper reporter, and we struck up an immediate friendship. We shared frustrations over the suffering inflicted by the Japanese and in spite of the restrictions, decided to form a secret society.... As a goal, we planned to educate and sensitize others about the oppressive Japanese rule.... To meet like this was extremely dangerous and required great secrecy and preparation. At each meeting we shared information about the domestic and war situations, the forced draft, unfair taxation, and changing names from Korean to Japanese. Then we tried to find ways to publicize all this information." Mr. Hong was warned by a friend in the police that his name was on a black list of educated and anti-Japanese Koreans and the Japanese intended to round up and execute him. As a result, he retreated to the countryside."

Questions:

1. How does Mr. Hong's willingness to risk his life for spreading information reflect the values or priorities of many Koreans living under occupation?
2. What can we infer about the overall strength and reach of Japanese control from both the strict regulations and the fact that some Koreans still found ways around them?

Political Resistance: The Growth of Communism and Nationalism Inside and Outside Korea

During the earlier formalised independence movement in Korea, the nationalist groups took two separate ideological forms: the liberal Nationalists (Korean Provisional Government or KPG) and the Communists. As a result of the preparations for war and the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War, Imperial Japan quelled resistance with increasing force with the arrests peaking in 1940. This resulted in the independence groups moving abroad to orchestrate underground attacks or by lobbying help from sympathetic countries abroad to further the Korean Independence movement.



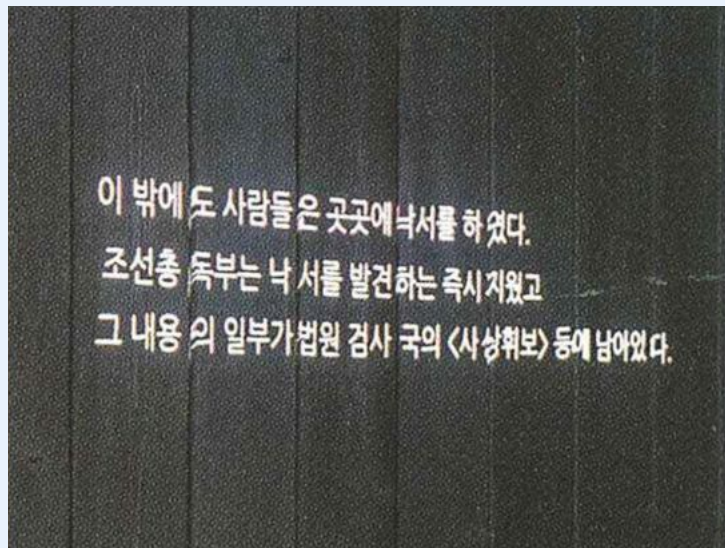
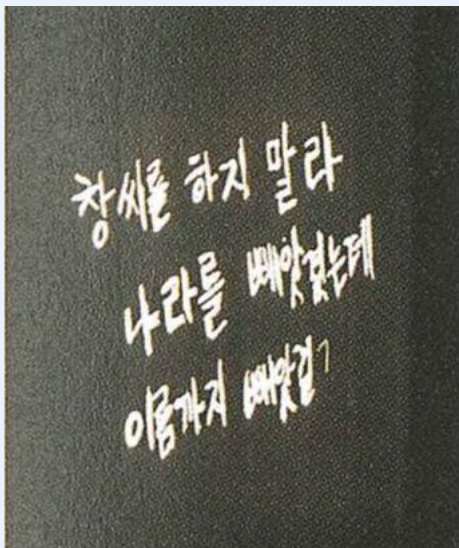
Source Activity Three

Everyday Resistance

ATL: Thinking Skills

Context: During the colonial time period, Korean nationalists and ordinary citizens secretly scrawled messages, slogans, and symbols on walls, fences, and public buildings to express opposition to Japanese rule. These writings often included calls for independence, encouraged resistance, praised Korean identity, or displayed the banned Taegukgi (Korean national flag). Graffiti was quick to create, easy to spread, and difficult for Japanese officials to completely suppress. Even after the colonial authorities attempted to remove the graffiti, the residual messages stayed to inspire resistance.

Pictures of Anti-Japanese Graffiti (1940s):



⏏ Left: "Big Josun Country Victory (Mansei)"

Right: "Don't change your name. We already lost the country, how can we lose the name?"



1940s – A volunteer from the Korean Volunteer Corps
 Translation “Let's make an alliance between Koreans and Chinese to overthrow Japan”
 From: Museum of Contemporary Korean History page 101, 107, 2011.

Question:

1. What does this anti-Japanese graffiti suggest about the nature and extent of resistance within Korea from 1937–1945?

The Groups and Strategies

The Korean Communists sought independence through class revolution, aiming to establish a socialist state aligned with international Marxist movements or Comintern. The hope was to build a grassroots revolutionary movement. The 1934 *Platform of Action* outlined four main goals:

1. Complete national independence by violent overthrow of Japanese rule
2. Establishment of a workers' and peasants' Soviet government
3. Confiscation (without compensation) and distribution of all land and property of landlords
4. An eight hour work day and a radical improvement in labor conditions

Quoted in Suh, Dae-sook. *Korean Communist Movement 1918–1948*. Princeton University Press, 1967, 200.

The Liberal Nationalists was a coalition with diverse constitutionalist and republican strands formed in April 1919 after the harsh Japanese repression of the 1919 March First Movement. Their efforts centered on anti-Japanese sentiment and promoting Korean patriotism, often without specifying the structure of a future independent Korean government. They mainly advocated for Korean independence based on national Korean identity, often appealing to western democratic ideals. However it is unclear whether they envisioned a fully democratic postcolonial Korea.

Some activists remained in Korea in the 1930s and 1940s to resist directly, while others, such as the nationalist KPG operated in exile, most notably in China and the United States. Kim Koo, the KPG president, operated in China while Syngman Rhee, a prominent figure in the KPG, lobbied the US government for support (see photo below). Within both the nationalist and communist movements, divisions existed over whether to pursue armed struggle or seek international diplomatic recognition. However, Japanese repression, especially through the “submission campaign,” weakened both movements. Between 1937-1940, widespread arrests, torture, and surveillance dismantled many resistance networks and imprisoned key leaders.



► See Chapter 4 page 139 to see the leader profile of Syngman Rhee.

« A photo of Syngman Rhee and Kim Ku, key leaders of the Korean Provisional Government in the 1940s. Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a5/Syngman_Rhee_and_Kim_Koo.jpg

The Korean Provisional Government in the 1930s-1940s

The Korean Provisional Government ran into financial issues operating from Shanghai and later Chongqing, and also had leadership disputes prior to the outbreak of war. After 1937, there was a gradual shift towards forming a united front with the communist influences of Kim Won-Bong and the Korean Volunteer Army. The KPG aligned itself with the Allied powers and declared war on Japan and Germany in 1941. During World War II, Kim Ku sought international recognition, ultimately gaining support and recognition of Jiang Jieshi and the Chinese Nationalists (GMD). However, the KPG struggled with limited resources and manpower, as well as poor connections to the diverse classes within Korea and intense factionalism due to their position abroad and a lack of centralized leadership. Furthermore, the Japanese targeted the KPG headquarters and forced multiple moves, which showcases the ongoing persecution the KPG faced, even while in exile, as illustrated by the photo below.

The Korean Liberation Army was the military arm of the KPG. Initially, it started with guerilla operations but shifted towards conventional warfare after 1940. There were around 3,000 troops and coordinated limited operations with the USSR and China, mainly remaining behind the front lines. The KPG requested

weaponry from the US in 1944, but the USA refused to supply and declined to recognize the KPG. In 1945, the KLA broadcasted shortwave radio messages into Korea, calling on people to resist Japanese forced labor and military mobilisation. Rhee also delivered nationalist messages via these broadcasts, which enhanced his status as a politician.

Over the course of the war, the KPG sought multiple times for the US to acknowledge Korean independence. According to Dr. David Fields, in 1942, Rhee requested for the KPG to be recognized as the legitimate government but the United States declined, fearing it would alienate the USSR and China. The U.S. doubted Korea's ability to defend itself if granted independence prematurely and were concerned of igniting a balance of power politics in the region over the strategic location of the Korean Peninsula. Again in 1944, Kim Ku reached out to Roosevelt to acknowledge Korea as an independent nation, but Roosevelt ignored Ku's query.

In 1943, the Office of Strategic Services (forerunner to Central Intelligence Agency, CIA) reached out to Rhee, and the KPG to train Koreans for clandestine operations in the Pacific as a part of Operation Napko. The goal was to disrupt Japanese intelligence and sabotage as well as advance soldiers for the US invasion of the home islands, Manchuria and Korea. However, the USA dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6-9, 1945. This was a significant factor for Japanese surrender before Operation Napko could go into effect. Despite the fact that the operation did not occur, it still gained some American influence for Rhee, Kim Ku and the KPG as allies. However, the KPG leaders were concerned about the extent of control over the future of Korea they could exert.



Source Activity Four

ATL: Thinking Skills

In his diary, Kim Ku, a founder and the president of the KPG from 1940–1944, expressed concern about the amount of action that the KPG accomplished during World War II on August 10, 1945.

“This felt less like happy news and more like the sky was falling. Years of trials and tribulations preparing for a war in vain. [...] [W]hat worries me is that because we have done nothing in this war, our voice on the international stage will be weak.”

Kim Ku, Diary of Kim Ku Vol. II August 10, 1945

Questions:

1. What is the context around the date August 10, 1945?
2. How does the intended audience of this source affect the content? Does it make the source more or less reliable? Justify your response.
3. What can historians learn from this source regarding Kim Ku's perspective on the Korean Independence movement in August, 1945?

Rise of Communism in Korea

The 1917 Russian Revolution inspired many Koreans to pursue communist ideals. Disillusioned with the failures of the peaceful March First Movement, they searched for an alternative path of liberation that would allow for a social revolution that broke with Confucianism. The communists had a potentially large base of dissatisfied peasants, younger generations, intellectuals, and workers that welcomed revolution for a new classless society. However, the violent Japanese crackdowns in the later 1930s resulted in a shift towards underground resistance.

Korean communists worked to rebuild the Korean Communist Party, with some success at placing members in GJK institutions such as the Ministry of Communication, Seoul Electric Company, and the National Broadcasting Company. They hoped to sabotage the colonial overseers, however, the colonial police arrested most members by 1941. Within Korea, underground communists organized strikes, sabotage, and supplied intelligence to comrades abroad. But, as historian Suh argues, "For the most part the communist movement within Korea slowly faded away" during World War II due to severe repression.

Communists Guerrilla Warfare

Kim Il Sung, a key leader in the Northeast Anti-Japanese United Army, rose as a communist guerrilla leader in Manchuria. Operating with limited Chinese and Soviet support, Kim Il Sung led small mobile units that attacked the Kwantung Army and then integrated into local peasant communities for survival.



Photo of Kim Il Sung from 1946.

Kim Il Sung

Kim Il Sung was born Kim Song Ju in 1912, near Pyongyang. As a youth, he and his family fled to Manchuria to escape oppressive colonial Japanese rule. His family was active in anti-Japanese resistance, which resulted in his father being imprisoned for activism. As a student in Manchuria, Kim Il Sung was influenced by political radicals, especially communists. He joined an underground Marxist group, was arrested as a youth, and came to believe that Korean independence required collective action and armed struggle based on Marxist

Leninist ideas. In 1931, he formally joined the Chinese Communist Party.

In the mid-1930s, Kim Il Sung was involved in guerrilla warfare against Japanese forces in Manchuria. In 1935, he adopted the name Kim Il Sung ("Kim the Sun") which was also the name of a legendary Korean nationalist. This created a mythic persona that he later used to bolster his authority.

After increasing Japanese pressure, Kim and his unit retreated into the USSR where he received military and ideological training. By the end of WWII, he became a Soviet trained Korean leader, whom the USSR viewed as a suitable figure to help shape postwar Korea under communist influence.

Historiographical Note: The name Kim Il Sung is disputed by some historians. Consider researching this further and debate why this name is contested.

Paper 1 Practice

Inquiry Question: To what extent did Kim Il Sung affect the outcome of the Battle of Pochonbo?

Source A:

Context: Published in 1972 during the Cold War, *Communism in Korea* earned Robert Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee the prestigious Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award for the best book on government, politics, or international affairs.

Content: ““On June 4, 1937, Kim Il-song led a small force of partisans in an attack upon the village of Poch'onbo, Crossing the Yalu, Kim's band struck at about ten in the evening, destroying the police station, town office, forestry branch office, agricultural experiment station, post office, and other government buildings. Seven policemen were killed, and seven others wounded. Propaganda leaflets were distributed and supplies collected. The village residents were then assembled to hear Kim deliver an impassioned speech, after which the guerrillas retreated across the river ...to Manchuria.

No doubt this raid bolstered partisan morale. The costs involved in such bravado were high. Naturally, the Japanese conducted the most painstaking investigation. The result was to expose Communist informers and sympathizers, making it possible to identify underground agents and uncover the local apparatus. Indeed, so many arrests followed the raid that local Communist activities practically ceased. Despite the praise that the North Korean Communists now lavish upon this operation, it was undoubtedly harmful to the movement in general. In fact, it was another example of 'blind adventurism.'”

Source: Robert Scalapino, and Chong-Sik Lee, *Communism in Korea*. 1: The Movement, pages 241–242.

Source B

Context: Prominent American historian, Bruce Cumings excerpt from his 1997 *Korea's Place in the Sun* is known for his revisionist approach on Korean history.

Content: “Outside of North Korea hardly anyone has heard of this clash, but it consisted of a brief takeover of the town by Kim and his guerrillas. P'och'önbo held one of seven branch agricultural stations that Japanese technicians used to improve farming; this one dealt especially with fire-field farming, a group of peasants that was very important to Kim's slim base among Koreans in Manchuria. They were among the poorest but also the freest of Koreans during the Japanese period, escaping into the mountains to live a hardy existence.” ...

There are ridiculous myths about this guerrilla resistance in both Koreas today: the North claims that Kim single-handedly defeated the Japanese, and the South claims that Kim is an imposter who stole the name of a revered patriot. Nonetheless, this experience is important for an understanding of postwar Korea. The resistance to the Japanese is the main legitimating doctrine of the DPRK; the North Koreans trace the origin of the army, the leadership, and their

ideology back to this founding moment. Today the top North Korean leadership still includes core leaders who fought the Japanese in Manchuria, even if most of the others have died by now."

Source C

Context: An excerpt from North Korean leader Kim Il Sung's autobiography written in the early 1990s during a period of transition for his country. The collapse of the USSR cut off critical political and economic support, leaving the country struggling to adapt. Kim's domestic and international legitimacy was increasingly questioned. By documenting his life story he hoped to solidify the ideological foundation of his regime and shape the historical narrative. He died in 1994.

Content: "As one who organized and commanded this battle [of Pochonbo], I clearly recall my mental processes, together with the events that took place. Scenes of battle from half a century ago still unfold clearly before my eyes. The Battle of Pochonbo can be compared to the reunion of a mother and her children who have been separated by force. The gunshot at Pochonbo precipitated the reunion between my motherland and her loyal sons and daughters who had loved her most. In other words, this battle marked a decisive turning point in the liberation of my conquered nation.

In a broad sense, our attack was designed to bring about the revival of the nation; in a narrow sense, it was to open up a decisive stage and make a leap forward in the revolutionary struggle against the Japanese. The history of the Korean nation had been streaked with blood and tears, brought about by the Japanese imperialists. It was in reaction to this that our nation started its resistance. Armed struggle not only expressed the will of the sons of Korea to fight against Japan but it was a means to an end as well. Under the banner of anti-imperialist, anti-feudal democratic revolution, we waged the armed struggle; at the same time we promoted the building of the party and launched a united-front movement and an anti-imperialist common front movement..."

Source: Kim, Il Sung, *With the Century: Reminiscences of Kim Il Sung*. Volume 6. Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2007. Page 141.

Questions:

1. Explain how the content of both source A and source B can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)
2. Analyse how the context of source C influences how it can be used to answer the inquiry question. (6 marks)
3. Examine how the perspectives in all the sources can be used to answer the inquiry question. (12 marks)

The 1937 Battle of Pochonbo, in which Kim Il Sung briefly took control of a small Northern Korean town, became the foundational myth of DPRK ideology. In reality, the battle had limited strategic importance. However, North Korean propaganda elevated it as a turning point in communist resistance history.

Kim Il Sung was one of the few resistance leaders who remained active in the border areas of North Korea. According to Japanese Kwangtung Army reports, there was a special task force sent out to stop both nationalists and communist rebels in Manchuria. Kim Il Sung was mentioned by name and it was ordered that he should be captured or killed. In 1940, Kim Il Sung and his men retreated to the USSR, training and consolidating forces until the war's end. His work in the training camps led to Kim Il Sung gaining the trust of the Soviets and ultimately for him to become a part of the short list to lead in North Korea at the end of the war.

Kim Il Sung and his new group of communists crushed the original more Marxist ideological communists that arose after the March First Movement. This new communist group focused on plotting on how to consolidate their power over the peninsula after the Japanese defeat.

Everyday Resistance

The leaders in exile and resistance groups pushed back against the Japanese and hoped to form new ideological systems for a future independent Korea. At the same time, there were individuals that sought out to continue political resistance through everyday actions. Some supported the resistance fighters through providing intelligence, funds, food, or shelter. Or they would create underground networks to spread the ideas for Korean liberation through graffiti, underground schools, or continuing to learn Hangul (Korean script). The people faced a great cost of jailtime, loss of rations, jobs or even facing collective punishment as a community. The idea of *gwangbok* (liberation) became a powerful hope, even for those that had little national political voice. Everyday resistance was not only spurred through political motivations but also as a response to the assimilation policies and the fight to maintain Korean culture and identity.

Conclusion

Between 1937 and 1945, Japanese political wartime policies transformed Korea into a highly controlled colony. The Second Sino-Japanese War intensified political domination, forcing the independence movements abroad and driving resistance underground. While Japan achieved significant levels of control, the persistence of both nationalist and communist networks both in exile and in everyday life ensured that the spirit for independence endured.

Paper 3 Practice

There were other nationalist groups and leaders that were active in exile including Kim Ku and the Korean Independence Party, and Kim Won-bong and the Korean Volunteer Corps. After completing additional research, along with the information you have learned about Kim Il Sung and Syngman Rhee, create an ideological continuum of Korean independence leadership.

1. “Colonial Korea during the Second Sino-Japanese War developed considerable political autonomy.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?

Create an essay frame based upon this prompt. Consider the role of Korean resistance and how far the colonial government was able to control Korea politically at an international, national, local, and individual level.

II. Economic Developments in Korea during the Second Sino-Japanese War

Inquiry Question

To what extent did wartime mobilisation during the Second Sino-Japanese War drive industrial and economic change in colonial Korea?

Before the Second Sino-Japanese War, Korea was developed by Japan as both a logistical base for military expansion into Manchuria and as a market for Japanese goods. Korea absorbed only a small portion of Japan's industrial output, approximately 10% of cotton textiles and 3% of total manufactured goods. Its role in Japan's imperial strategy was pivotal. Governor-General Minami, who oversaw Korea's industrial development, emphasized the need for coordinated economic policies between Japan, Korea, and Manchuria. He likened Japan to a living body, with Korea as the arm and Manchuria as the fist, suggesting Korea's role was to develop industry, be Japan's rice bowl and facilitate the transport of Japanese goods and troops. More broadly, Japan aimed to extract raw materials and Korean economic surplus to sustain its total war effort.

Forced Labor Mobilisation as a “Population Hemorrhage”

Historian Bruce Cumings describes Korea's wartime labor mobilization as a “population hemorrhage,” or an uncontrolled loss, with approximately four million Koreans sent to work outside the peninsula by 1944. The Japanese accomplished this through enforcing the 1938 National General Mobilization Law (NGML) and the 1939 National Draft Ordinance which coerced millions of Koreans into forced labor and military mobilization until the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, as shown by the chart.



Source Activity Five

ATL: Thinking Skills

Chart 1

Estimates of Korean Population “Relocation”

Manchuria	Japan	Sakhalin	Occupied China	Other occupied areas
1.475-2.16 million	1.45- 2 million	40,000-45,000	100,000	Taiwan – a few thousand Dutch East Indies; Philippines; Hong Kong – noted as a few hundred with at most a few thousand in each region

Source: US Joint Intelligence Report quoted in “Occupations of Korea and Japan and the Origins of the Korean Diaspora in Japan,” Mark E Caprio and Yu Jia in *Diaspora without a Homeland Being Korean in Japan* pg. 21.

Caprio and Jia note that these numbers are probably too low as it does not account for Korean births abroad.

Questions:

1. Where were most Koreans forcibly relocated during the war?
2. What other factors could contribute to this being an “under count”?
3. What does this undercount suggest about the challenges of tracking displaced people during wartime?

As a result of the 1938 NGML edict, the imperial government retained full control over the empire’s economy, including labor and its disbursement within Japan. Japan had legal means to enforce “mobilisation” although some labor recruitment had occurred prior to the NGML. There were three stages of “recruitment” that align with the intensification of the war.

Between 1938 and 1945, Japan's labor recruitment system for wartime industry evolved through three distinct stages. Initially the 1938–1941 recruitment was company-directed under the NGML and relied on informal methods like advertisements and word of mouth. Most workers were young men who were “volunteers” in theory and could quit, although pressure to remain working was growing. By 1942–1943, the government directed recruitment took a more active role alongside private companies. Legal frameworks expanded with registration laws, and recruitment became more formalized. Movement was increasingly restricted, especially for men aged 16 to 40 and unmarried women ages 16 to 25, with false promises and national duty used as incentives. By 1944–1945, forced labor conscription was in full effect under centralized government control. Recruitment was conducted through legal conscription notices, mobility was heavily restricted via a two-passport system, and coercion was extreme. Males aged 13 to 50 were targeted, quitting was illegal, and fulfillment quotas were met entirely through legal force and surveillance.

Colonial authorities used the Chosen League Patriotic Units and police to enforce labour quotas. Food rations were often withheld from families who resisted. Some Koreans were tricked into signing contracts, with illiterate men particularly vulnerable. There were even some reports of kidnapping. Compliance often stemmed from fear of starvation or threats to one's family and livelihood. Additionally, the “recruiters” received bonuses for each person that they signed up, which monetarily incentivised coercive measures.

The atomic bomb that contributed towards ending the war also took a toll on Koreans. The bomb killed around 80,000 Koreans, including an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 Korean forced laborers working at the Mitsubishi Heavy Industries at the Nagasaki Shipyard and the Kawanami Industry plant. The remaining Korean survivors received no support from either the Japanese or post-war Korean governments.

At the end of the war, many Korean forced laborers were stuck far from home. Many could not afford to pay for their return trip, and in some cases, were sent away from work sites without receiving wages. A few Koreans managed to find passage on a ship called the *Ukushima Maru* to return to Korea, but on August 24, 1945, the ship exploded, killing almost everyone on board. This tragedy discouraged some from trying to return home by sea. While there were a few rare cases, like workers at the Nakajima Aircraft Plant who were helped with transport, most forced laborers across the former Japanese Empire were left to survive on their own, forgotten by both the wartime authorities and the governments that followed. For example, the Korean miners on Sakhalin Island remained there until the end of the Cold War.

Wartime Industrialisation and Exploitation

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 and the shift to total war, industrial production intensified. Korean foreign trade grew from 35 million yen in 1931 to 229 million yen in 1939, with most trade occurring with Manchuria and Japan. Overall, industrial production rose sharply with the establishment of hydroelectric power plants, railroads, chemical, fertilizer, and metal factories. Korea was tasked with supplying raw agricultural and mineral resources to support Japan's militarism but also to enrich the wealthy Japanese that owned 90% of the large businesses in Korea.



TOK Connection

History as an Area of Knowledge

Historical methods include utilizing qualitative (interpreting perspectives, narratives and meanings) and/or quantitative (numerical or statistical data) methods to decide what evidence to use. As you read through the segments on wartime industrialisation and economics, consider the following questions:

- What are the values and limitations of quantitative methods including statistics for understanding late colonial Korean economic history?
- What ends up being left out when trying to understand events in this manner?
- How can a more comprehensive understanding of Korean economic history during the late colonial period be found?

Chart 2

Manufacturing Output by Industry in Percentages

Industry	1930	1936	1939
Textile	12.8	12.7	13.0
Metal	5.8	4.0	9.0
Machine and Tool	1.3	1.0	4.0
Ceramic	3.2	2.7	3.0
Chemical	9.4	22.9	34.0
Lumber and Wood	2.7	2.7	1.0
Products	3.1	1.8	1.0
Food	57.8	45.2	22.0
Gas and Electric	2.4	5.6	2.0
Others	1.5	1.4	11.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Ki Baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, pg. 351.

From 1911 to 1938, Korea's industrial output grew at 3.57% annually. However, profits primarily flowed to Japanese companies. The Japanese zaibatsu (large Japanese business conglomerate), working with the GGK, monopolized key industries. They developed infrastructure that encouraged raw material extraction but restricted Korean access to capital, confining Koreans to small, local manufacturing ventures. This is evident in chart 4. Even these local ventures were often taken over by the Japanese due to the heavy borrowing they required from Japanese banks.



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skills

Chart 3

Capital Investment in Manufacturing Industries by Nationality, 1938.

unit: 1,000 yen

Industry	Paid-up capital (and percentage)				Average capital per company	
	Korean Companies (and %)		Japanese Companies (and %)		Korean Companies	Japanese Companies
Textile	6,075	(20.8)	23,103	(79.2)	164	593
Metal and Machinery	1,852	(7.3)	23,654	(92.7)	32	249
Brewing	12,054	(46.7)	13,772	(53.3)	38	107
Pharmaceutical	1,676	(64.2)	934	(35.8)	51	37
Ceramic	432	(2.7)	15,791	(97.3)	36	395
Flour and Rice Celaning	2,526	(20.4)	9,860	(79.6)	27	141
Processed Food	217	(2.2)	9,621	(97.8)	13	128
Lumber and Woodworking	594	(5.3)	10,553	(94.7)	31	129
Printing	625	(30.0)	1,461	(70.0)	14	35
Chemical	2,954	(2.8)	100,736	(97.2)	80	1,340
Others	1,193	(18.6)	5,220	(81.4)	18	39
Total	30,198	(12.3)	214,705	(87.7)	41	267

Source: Ki Baik Lee, A New History of Korea, pg. 354.

Questions:

1. Using the information from chart 3, identify two industries in which Japanese companies dominated paid-up capital in Korea in 1938.
2. According to the chart, which Korean companies held a comparatively higher share of capital?

Between 1929 and 1941, Korean industrial output rose 267%. Heavy industry concentrated in the north, while the south remained mainly agrarian with light industry. Most managerial and technical positions were held by Japanese. Only 12–20% of Korean workers were skilled, and a limited mobility existed for Koreans, with only 1–6% holding supervisory roles.



TOK Connection

Ethical Considerations on Interpretations of Korea's Economic Developments in the Late Colonial Time Period

The question of economic development under colonial rule can be seen as complex and problematic as it can intensify existing tensions and underscores painful experiences for colonised peoples such as the Egyptians under the British, the Algerians under the French, or indigenous populations under the Spanish. This is no different for Korea's rapid economic development. Several historians have offered differing interpretations and perspectives of Korean economic development, notably Kijimuri Hideki, Pak Kyong-Sik, Carter J. Eckert, Brandon Palmer, and Mitsuhiro Kimura. These different approaches raise intense debates and are contested in the present.

As a class think about the following questions:

1. Who benefited from Korea's economic development under Japanese rule?
Did Koreans benefit directly, or was the economy structured to benefit Japan?
2. Can one consider forced labor and resource extraction a form of "development"?
Is it appropriate to describe economic growth under these conditions in positive terms?
3. How can economic outcomes be separated from political oppression? Is it possible to acknowledge economic progress without justifying the negative impact of colonial rule?
4. Do you think Japan's economic legacy had a lasting impact on Korea after 1945?
What parts (infrastructure, factories, trade systems) lasted? Which did not?
5. How should historians talk about development under authoritarian or colonial rule?
Should we evaluate development by the results, the methods used, or both?

Conditions within Forced Labor Mobilisation in both Korea and Abroad

Around two million Koreans were employed in waged labor by 1944 as shown by Chart 4. Factory workers and miners typically worked 12-16 hour shifts, seven days a week and were paid 60 – 80% less than Japanese workers. These wages made it difficult for families to maintain a decent standard of living. Many suffered malnutrition and abuse, and withheld wages prevented Koreans abroad from returning home.

Koreans were treated as expendable, with over 10% of the workforce dying during forced labor. Korean miners made up two-thirds of the workers who worked the extraction point to extract the minerals, which is the most dangerous area. For example, a coal dust explosion in 1944 killed 33 Koreans at the Mitsubishi Iisuka coal mine. As a result of the harsh, dangerous conditions, mass desertions occurred, with 40%-60% of workers from Fukuoka and Aso Mines fleeing to urban ghettos where many pre-war Koreans had migrated. Companies responded by utilizing local police forces and soldiers to track down and forcibly return some workers. Koreans were estimated to be 20% more likely to die while working than their Japanese co-workers.

Chart 4

Composition of Korean Wage-Labor Force by Industry from 1943-1945.			
Industry	Number of laborers	Percentage	Date of report
Manufacturing	591,494	27.9	1945
Mining	346,424	16.3	1944
Construction	437,752	20.6	1944
Forestry	205,911	9.7	1944
Marine products	211,520	10.0	1944
Transportation	198,896	9.4	1944
Agriculture	130,377	6.1	1943
Total	2,122,374	100.0	

Source: Ki Baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, pg. 358

Many Korean laborers resisted the forced labor mobilization that occurred in 1944 with 12,000 violations of missing conscription orders reported by the police to the GKK. Others protested by threatening officials, striking for better conditions, or slowing their work to sabotage production. Some even damaged tools and machinery to hinder industrial output in the mines. Resistance by the forced laborers came at a high cost. In May 1945, Korean workers at the Nakajima Aircraft Handa plant rioted after demanding more food. The military police suppressed the uprising, then beat the original demonstrators to death, underscoring the potentially severe consequences for resisters.

Agricultural Exploitation

80% of Koreans were a part of agriculture as Korea was primarily an agrarian economy before the war. The systemic inequality that Japan employed intended to keep Koreans in crushing poverty. Although agricultural output increased six fold by the late 1930s, it was due to Japan's need to solve food shortages on the home island and not to feed the local population.

Additionally, Korean tenants were expected to pay for fertilizer, irrigation, and the costs for transporting the harvest. What little harvest was left was seldom enough to support the peasant family for a month. As a result of the combination of these factors, rural livelihood was uprooted, and many farmers were forced into a nomadic lifestyle with 1,469,000 migrants moving to Manchuria by 1941 with the hopes of a better life.

Korean consumers were left with lower grade Manchurian grains while the superior Korean rice varieties were exported to Japan. Korean farmers were expected to deliver their rice harvests directly to the GKK, Mitsuhiro Kimura referred to this as "starvation exports," noting that rice exports to Japan often exceeded domestic rice production and left most peasants at near starvation levels.



Source Activity Seven

ATL: Thinking Skills

Source: Excerpt from Cho'oe Chonghui, author of *The Cry of the Harp and Other Korean Stories*, 1983. She grew up during the Japanese occupation. She wrote her autobiography based on experiences during the war years and described tenant farmers' experiences. Quoted in Kornel Kang, *A Fractured Liberation*, 24

"They had worked this land which belonged to the landlord and each year had returned his quota of rice. What remained was far from enough for one year, six months, or two months. In fact, it wasn't sufficient for even one month... When someone died the only comment made by those who watched the funeral procession was 'now you won't have to starve, that's good.' These conditions, resulting from colonial policy, drove hundreds of thousands of Korean rural families off the land. Uprooted, they wandered to Japan, Manchuria and Siberia in search of work or food."

Questions:

1. What does the passage reveal about the power relationship between landlords and tenant farmers under Japanese colonial rule?
2. How do the farmers' experiences reflect broader social or economic patterns of the colonial period?
3. In what ways do the farmers' struggles expose larger consequences of colonial exploitation?
4. What are the strengths and limitations of this source?

In 1939, the textile industry was the third largest industry based upon the value of output in Korea. This was mainly focused on weaving the raw cotton produced in Korea. As a result of the war, there was a decrease in production for Korean consumption.

From 1937, rural workers were increasingly conscripted for industrial labor. By 1942, 80% of new labor recruits came from the countryside. Southern peasants were often relocated to the north to sustain industrialisation, yet the remaining agricultural workers were expected to maintain agricultural output. Crop failures from 1939 to 1942 worsened food insecurity, prompting many peasants to accept conscription due to poverty and false promises of education and higher wages. In 1944, food was continually extracted from Korea and sent to Japan, worsening the conditions for Koreans.

Mining and Resource Extraction

Korea played a role in sustaining the Japanese war effort and industrial output, especially since Japan lacked key wartime resources. This resulted in Japan extracting valuable resources like coal and heavy chemicals from Korea.

Chart 5

Extraction of Korean Mineral Resources

Value of output of Korean mines over time in Yen.

1930	1936	1942
24,650,000	*110,430,000	445,420,000

*About half of the worth of the 1936 mines (59,350,000 yen) was extracted in gold.

Source: Ki Baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, pg. 352.

Korea had significant gold reserves that Japan wanted to finance their purchases abroad to fully fund their war machine. After the war with the US broke out in 1941, there was a shift towards mineral extractions for war material. Chart 6 shows the extent of resources extracted for use by the Japanese.

Pyongyang, known as the “Coal Capital,” held vast coal reserves, including 500-600 tons of coal dust in the 1930s. This was transported to Japan and turned into briquettes to heat homes and fire locomotives for rail transport. The Sanchoku Tanko Mine was the only mine in Korea that had the right type of coal to produce weaponry. This mine fed the Heijo Heiki Seizosho munitions plant in Pyongyang, a facility under direct Japanese military control that employed 450 workers to produce artillery shells, bombs, rolling stock, leather goods, and materials for military equipment.

Heavy chemical industrialisation became central to Korea’s wartime economy, accounting for 37% of total industrial output. Chemicals used in fertilizer, such as ammonium sulfate, were also essential for bomb production, while chlorine soda, vital for batteries and fertilizer, was used in military vehicles. This provides further evidence of the exploitation by Japan of Korean resources. The chart below shows the extent of increased production before and during the war years.

Chart 6

Increased Production of Major Minerals from 1930-1944

unit: metric tons

Year	Gold	Iron ore	Coal	Tungsten	Graphite	Molybdenum	Magnesite
1930	5,876	532,497	884,138	12	20,073	26	—
1940	22,060	1,185,426	5,740,941	4,218	94,581	195	73,540
1944	0,598	3,331,814	7,048,776	8,333	103,306	760	157,745

Source: Ki Baik Lee, *A New History of Korea*, 352.

In 1965, Korea and Japan signed the Treaty of Basic Relations, under which Japan provided \$800 million in grants and loans to support Korea's economic development as a form of compensation for its colonial rule. The Treaty stipulated that this payment would settle all claims, preventing individuals from seeking further compensation. However, the amount was far from sufficient to address the extensive economic damage, exploitation, and suffering endured by Koreans under Japanese occupation. Chart 6 demonstrates the extent of the increase of mining in Korea. The Treaty failed to account for the extensive loss of non-renewable resources extracted. This unresolved issue continues to hinder progress for bilateral relations between the two nations.

“Volunteer” Soldiers and Military Conscription

Korean Soldiers were accepted in the Japanese Imperial Army starting on April 3, 1938. Japan introduced a special army “volunteer” system allowing men, aged at least 17, over 160 cm tall, physically fit, educated, and fluent in Japanese to enlist in the Imperial Army. These soldiers were placed within existing Japanese units, occasionally even outranking Japanese troops. However, due to mistrust, the majority of Koreans were incorporated into the rear units rather than frontline combat. The Japanese feared that front-line combat experience would cultivate Korean military nationalism, potentially fueling future uprisings upon soldiers' return. Although 802,047 Koreans “volunteered,” only 17,664 were actually enlisted over the course of the war. This disparity may reflect both Japanese reluctance to train Koreans and Korean resistance, with some Koreans volunteering to meet quotas while knowing they were ineligible due to age, physical impairments or not speaking Japanese. This system “recruited” 17,664 soldiers, and it was replaced by military conscription in 1944. By war's end, over 200,000 Koreans forcibly served in the Japanese Army and another 20,000 served in the Japanese Navy.

Some Koreans sought equal treatment or hoped military service would lead to political advancement. For example, an officer named Park Chung Hee, graduated from the Manchurian Military Academy as an outstanding soldier. His story was utilized to encourage other Koreans to become model cadets like him. He became South Korea's president after a 1961 military coup. Park Chung Hee was among Koreans who joined the army for strategic reasons in the hopes of being a future leader within the independence movement. Other Korean officers included the Korean Princes, although they avoided combat roles.

While some Koreans joined out of fear of punishment for their families, some joined due to conscription but then deserted after facing harsh discipline and discrimination for minor infractions. Furthermore, Koreans experienced the most dangerous assignments and were often denied battlefield rescue or medical care. Towards the war's end some Japanese officers forced Korean soldiers into suicide missions. As a result of the war, at least 22,182 Korean soldiers died in service to the Japanese Imperial Army. Most historians agree that the numbers were most likely much higher, especially if considering the military civilians and soldiers. Higuchi Yuichi estimates that the combined deaths and missing in action were 50,884 of the 363,465 (14%) military civilians and soldiers.



Source Activity Eight

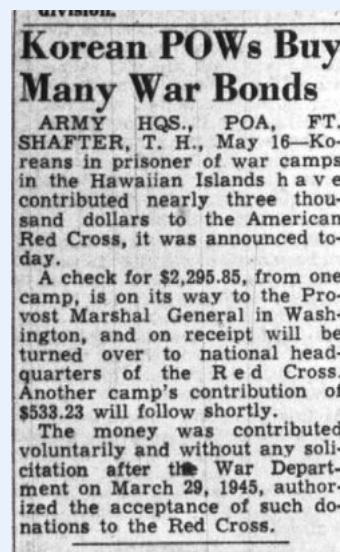
ATL: Thinking Skills

Source A:



⤴ Kwajalein Island; Korean laborers help Americans to locate Japanese troops. 2 February 1944, US Army in World War II, Seizure of the Gilberts and Marshalls, 1993
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Korean_laborers.jpg

Source B:



⤴ "Korean POWs Buy Many War Bonds," The Honolulu Advertiser, May 17, 1945, Morning edition.

Note: Captured Koreans were placed into US prisoner of war (POW) camps in Hawaii and were provided with jobs where they were paid \$1 a day.

Questions

1. Using Source A, identify two details that reveal the role played by Korean labourers during the US military campaign in the Pacific.
2. What message does Source B convey about Korean prisoners of war in US custody? In your answer consider
 - a. the language used in the article
 - b. the emphasis on financial contribution and voluntarism
3. Using the sources and the information from this chapter, how do both sources reflect the complex situation of Koreans under Japanese rule during World War II?

Conclusion

The Second Sino Japanese War had a multifaceted impact on the Korean economy, transforming it into a militarized arm of Japan's imperial war machine for both material and human resources. While industrial output in Korea expanded rapidly, this growth was neither autonomous nor equitable. Ki Baik Lee notes, "Korea's industrial economy was built in pursuit of Japanese goals, on a foundation of Korean suffering and sacrifice." It overwhelmingly served Japanese strategic interests by creating a system of exploitation with profits flowing to Japanese companies and colonial administrators. The war accelerated industrialisation but did so under coercive conditions, including forced labor (both militarily and for factories,) restricted mobility, and harsh working environments, resulting in widespread suffering and the death of thousands of Koreans.

By the end of World War II, the Korean economy was severely strained. U.S. military observers reported that factories were in poor condition due to the intense pressure to maximize wartime production. Equipment had deteriorated from overuse and insufficient maintenance. Additionally, extensive chemical production, particularly nitrogen-based compounds used for fertilizers and explosives, led to significant soil nutrient depletion, negatively impacting agricultural productivity. Overall, most Koreans found themselves trying to survive and improve their lives under an authoritarian colonial regime that prioritized the extraction and exploitation of labor and resources. Submission to colonial demands was often the only viable path under a system designed for economic exploitation, not development.

Paper 3 Practice

1. To what extent do you agree with the perspective that wartime mobilisation during the Second Sino-Japanese War had detrimental effects on the economic and industrial development of Korea?
 - Consider both short- and long-term effects.

III. Social Impact on Korea of the Sino-Japanese War

Inquiry Question

To what extent did Korean society change as a result of the Second Sino-Japanese War?

During wartime, the Japanese sought to incorporate all Koreans into the empire, which warrants an investigation into how gender roles shifted and particularly how women experienced the Second-Sino Japanese War. Furthermore, Korean identity was suppressed by the Japanese through an imperialisation

policy aiming to secure Korean support for its war goals. As Korea's economic role grew, Japan expanded its assimilation policies to impose Japanese values, language, and institutions. Strategies included educational reform, religious control, and language control, with the intent to destroy Korean national and social identity. Consider the extent of success that Japan had enforcing these policies and consider researching how many of these policies continued once the Japanese lost control of the peninsula.

Gendered Experiences

Gender roles and experiences are a key way to view and measure societal change. Women's history is integral to understanding Korea from 1937-1945, especially in light of the horrific experiences of "comfort women" while still recognising that this sexual slavery does not represent all Korean women's experiences.

Korean Women under Japanese Forced Sexual Slavery

An estimated 80,000 to 200,000 Korean girls and women experienced the system of sexual slavery, known euphemistically as the "comfort station" system. Yoshiaki Yoshimi defines it as, "...a system of officially recognized sexual violence that victimized particular women and trampled upon their human rights." The "comfort system" was not the wartime experience that all Korean women had, however, it is important to acknowledge the significance of this human rights abuse and war crime. The consequences of the Japanese military actions and the failure of the Japanese government to acknowledge legal responsibility as well as the government's refusal to grant compensation to these victims continues to affect Japan and Korea's international relationship to this day.



TOK Connection

Language and Knowledge

How does contested language shape the way historical narratives are constructed and promoted?

Task

With your neighbour, discuss these following:

1. Consider the term "comfort women" – what are the connotations of this word?
2. Does this align with the reality of what these girls and women experienced?

In this chapter, the terms "comfort women" and "comfort station" have been placed in quotation marks to emphasize the fact that these terms have been used as a euphemism, which conceals and normalises the violence used against the women and girls in this system.

There are many survivors who reject this terminology being used to describe their experiences.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Investigating Historical Methods

Historians use a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to understand arguments. In this segment you will see how both qualitative and quantitative data is used to support analysis of the system of forced “sexual slavery.” Consider Yoshimi's usage of Hata Ikujiro's statistics in his book *Comfort Women* pages 91–93 in the chart below.

The Japanese Imperial Army attempted to cover up the “comfort women” system by destroying documents, which makes it difficult to know the number of women affected. Hata Ikujiro created a formula to try to grasp how many women were affected by using survivor testimony and military planning documents to show upper and lower limits. Ikujiro averaged the number of army soldiers as 2.3 million in 1942 and 3.51 million in 1945. It is important to consider the turnover assumption, as the conditions were so horrific that many women died, fled, or were rotated out of the stations. This resulted in the following estimates by Ikujiro.

Chart 7

Estimates of Number of “Comfort Women”

Location Or Context	Soldiers	Ratio of Soldiers to women	Turnover assumption	Calculation method	Estimated number of women affected
General overseas Troops in Asia- Pacific War	3,000,000 (rounded average from 1942-1945)	1:50	none	3,000,000 divided 50	60,000
General Overseas Troops in Asia-Pacific	3,000,000	1:50	50%	60,000×1.5	90,000
Lowest possible Adjusted for smaller unit procurement	3,000,000	1:100 *Underestimate*	50% turnover	45,000 + ~5,000	Estimated 50,000
Upper limit assumption Based upon 1:29 slogan	3,000,000	1:30	100% turnover	3,000,000 divided by 30×2	~200,000
Occupied territories	Army movements so no fixed numbers	Not fixed but reports of kidnapping and sexual violence	Several hundred percent turnover	Reported captivity from days to 2+ years	Unknown but potentially very high number of additional victims

Questions:

1. What surprises you about the data?
2. When using quantitative data, why might historians provide both minimum and maximum estimates?

Source A

A “comfort woman’s” testimony from 1944 quoted in Yoshimi, *Comfort Women*, 148.

“I was deceived by an agent from the Korean Peninsula. I thought that comfort for the army meant comforting the troops by dancing and singing, and that would be all right. And the agent told me the same thing. When we crossed the border into China, [he] ordered me to “Take customers.” Without understanding what “taking customers” meant, I went to a customer’s house. With no warning, they raped me. I became desperate.”

Questions

1. What does the testimony in Source A reveal about the recruitment and coercion of “comfort women”?
2. How does this source challenge Japanese claims that women “volunteered” during the war?
3. What power dynamics between the agent, the army, and the women are made visible here?
4. How does this account help us understand the broader system of “sexual slavery” during WWII?
5. How should historians deal with highly traumatic sources?

Being a Historian

Historians work to synthesize the data from primary and secondary sources as well as from quantitative and qualitative data to develop a more complete analysis and understanding of events.

Questions:

1. How do historians balance the interpretation of qualitative narratives with the quantification of data taken from incomplete records?
2. In what ways can qualitative data underscore the social, cultural, or psychological impacts of historical events?

Established in 1931, the Japanese military set up 400 to 2,000 “comfort stations” across Asia as places for Japanese soldiers to have sexual relationships with girls and women. Girls as young as twelve were entrapped in this system that lasted the duration of the war. The majority of the girls and young women came from Korea. They were deceived or coerced into these stations under false promises of education or work [See source above] that were supported by the GGK and local police. Some survivors later testified that they were kidnapped and sold into enslavement. Once the women arrived in the military camps, the girls and women endured harsh and dehumanising conditions. Survivors reported being forced to have sexual intercourse from 10 to 60 times per day, depending on if battles were occurring. If women resisted, they were physically beaten into submission. This repeated sexual violence and physical abuse left many with deep and lasting trauma.



TOK Connection

History as an Area of Knowledge – Ethical Considerations

1. What responsibilities do historians have when teaching or discussing testimonies of sexual violence?
2. How does the sharing of personal testimony raise ethical tensions between re-traumatization, remembrance, justice, and healing?

Furthermore, many girls and women were required to pay off loans for their living expenses. They were required to pay exorbitant prices for food, clothes, make up, and daily living expenses, and 40 to 60% of their wage was garnished illegally. For most women, there was no money left after the fees, if they received wages at all.

Some Korean “comfort women” attempted to escape from the stations. It was quite difficult, because if they were located in other parts of the empire, they were easily identified as non-native citizens and ran the risk of being killed as an enemy combatant. Most did not speak the local languages or know where to seek shelter. If caught, they were severely beaten, punished or even killed. Some sought to escape the physical and mental torment through the use of illegal drugs. Others attempted to fight back by kicking, screaming, and physically fighting and as a result, were often beaten harder.

At the end of the war, most “comfort women” were abandoned wherever they were located within the Japanese empire. There were a few instances where the US army helped to relocate women, but for the most part, many women stayed where they had been left to try to create a new life. Many women suffered lasting effects from sexually transmitted diseases and sterility as well as lasting mental health issues.



« Photo of “Comfort women” taken by the US Army with a Chinese soldier in 1945. The pregnant woman, Young-shim Park, on the far left was one of the first women to testify in the 1990s about her experiences. She, along with others, sought justice for the thousands that could not speak up.

Source: US War Department, “Prisoners of War—Japanese Women”:, September 3, 1944, Photo, September 3, 1944, SC-230417, US National Archives.

The Japanese government listed the women as “military material” rather than by name and destroyed almost all records of the “comfort women” system. This erased their identities and obscured the scale of abuse. Testimonies by survivors like Gyeonsaeng Lee and Youngsook Kim first shared in the 1990s revealed the inhumanity they endured and challenged Japanese efforts to ignore or deny the past. This experience was not a uniquely Korean experience, as women from other conquered territories also experienced similar conditions while under sexual enslavement. The issue of forced sexual slavery remains a point of political contention between Japan and Korea.



TOK Connection

History as an Area of Knowledge: Historians and shaping of historical narratives

The work of Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki on comfort women and sexual slavery in the Japanese military provides a significant example of how historians can question predominant historical narratives.

After the former victims of sexual violence came forward in 1991, Japanese historian Yoshimi Yoshiaki grew frustrated with his government’s denial of legal responsibility for compensating the victims of sexual violence from the Second Sino-Japanese War. Aware that most records of the “comfort system” had been destroyed at the end of the war, he turned to the archives of the National Institute for Defense Studies Library in search of surviving evidence. There, he initially discovered six documents that the Japanese government and military had organised and maintained this system of sexual slavery. Over time, 62 additional documents were

discovered. The document's discoveries combined with victim testimonies brought this issue to the forefront of public debate. In response, the Japanese government issued a later walked-back apology in 1993.

Reflect on Yoshimi Yoshiaki's discoveries and consider these knowledge questions:

1. How do ethical questions shape modern debates about historical injustices, apologies or reparations?
2. What ethical questions emerge when a government or organizations within a country try to deny or revise history for their own narratives?
3. What is the responsibility for historians on shaping historical narratives and creating knowledge by shaping the narratives?



Source Activity Nine

ATL: Thinking and Research Skills



This “comfort woman” statue is located in Seoul across the street from the former Japanese Embassy. It has its own police that guards the statue and is encircled by a protective barrier.

Questions:

1. Why are particular locations chosen for the placement of these statues?
2. What form of symbolism is present in these statues, how are they intended to be interpreted?
3. How do these statues function simultaneously as memorials and as political statements?
4. How does the physical and political location of the statue impact the meaning and reception?
5. How can statues keep historical memory alive when official records, acknowledgements, or apologies remain incomplete or contested?

Extension: “Comfort Women Statues”

Research “comfort women” statues – consider using The Contested Histories Initiative, “Statue of Peace in South Korea”, Contested Histories Case Study #142 (January 2022), retrieved from <https://contestedhistories.org/resources/case-studies/statue-of-peace-in-seoul/>.



Source Activity Ten

ATL: Thinking Skills

Fighting for Justice - Hak-sun Kim's Story

"I couldn't come out and speak out when I was young, because of the shame. Shame was the first thing in my mind then. Now I'm older and it's easier for me... since I've overcome those thoughts. But when I was younger, I was ashamed.. Wouldn't you feel the same? The fact that you were taken to the Japanese military and used as a "comfort woman" instead of leading a life as others do. Is it acceptable? No, never! It's ridiculous. Then the Korean people should've understand it and the high officials should've have done something about it. But instead, people disdained us, ignored us, treating the victims to be disgraceful and worthless. That's why I kept weeping day and night behind the closed doors. I wept in secret; I had no one to talk to. That's how we lived... Because we survived, now the whole world (will know)..."



Now [2016] my mind is simple. All I want is revenge. To hear the words of repentance from those Japanese... that they are truly sorry for what they did to us. That is my only wish. I have nothing else."

Questions:

1. Why is Hak-sun Kim's testimony significant for understanding wartime sexual violence?
2. How did Kim's decision to testify publicly transform public awareness, memory and activism surrounding the issue of 'comfort women'?
3. Why is knowledge of the historical context essential for interpreting Kim's statements in 1991 and 2016?
4. How can Kim's expressed desire be understood as pursuit of restorative justice?

Source: Park, Jeongnam, dir. TS-2. Hak-Sun Kim, a Korean Survivor Who First Broke Silence Publicly. UCLA CKS - Comfort Women Resource Center, 2016. Video Transcript. https://international.ucla.edu/cks/care/comfortwomen_speakup/267562.

Photo Source: Wikimedia Open Access, 1991 Kim Hak-sun testifies about the Japanese military comfort women on MBC's "PD Notebook" aired on February 20, 1991. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:%EA%B9%80%ED%95%99%EC%88%9C.jpg>

To What Extent did the Roles of Korean Women Change Under Japanese Rule?

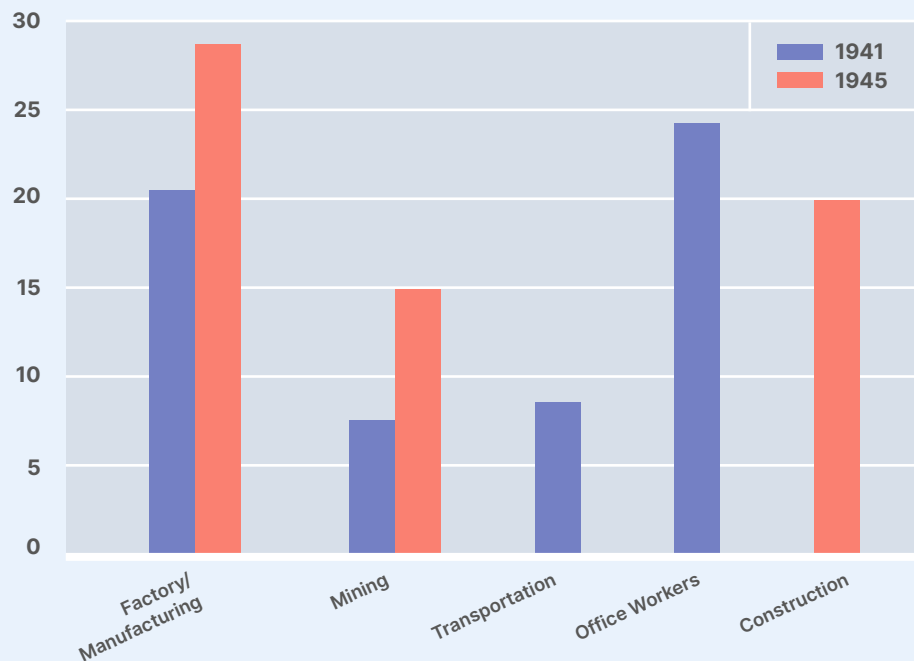
Between 1937-1945, the role of women in Korea shifted in some areas and remained the same in others. While women under forced sexual slavery faced immense change and trauma in their experiences, this was not the experience for all Korean women. The Japanese continued to encourage Koreans to dismantle traditional Confucian gender separation, gain Japanese gendered education, and work for the Japanese war aims. Despite the coercion of colonial capitalism, there were Korean women that worked to further their own wellbeing and improve their station in life.



Source Activity Eleven

ATL: Thinking Skills

Chart 8



⏏ The Change of Percentage of Korean Women in Industries on the Korean Peninsula 1941-1945. This chart represents available data found in, *Fighting for the Enemy*, Palmer, 169.

By 1945, there were 1.2 million Korean women employed in industry within Korea.

1. What factors can help to explain the changes over time for Korean women workers in Korea during the Second Sino-Japanese War?

Women were increasingly integrated into wartime industries, filling the positions of men sent to other parts of the Japanese empire. By 1945, over 1.2 million Korean women worked in areas such as mining, manufacturing, and construction as well as expanded roles in society such as teachers, shopkeepers, midwives, nurses, and radio announcers. Women tended to be placed into labor that was seen as more female in nature such as textiles, light industry, or food processing. As the war intensified, the GGGK mandated women aged 13 to 50 to be called up for labor. This was especially harsh for rural female agricultural workers as they were expected to maintain levels of production, raise children, and work on the communal farms with less support as the men in their communities were mobilized for war. Furthermore, the poorest classes experienced the largest levels of mobilization showing an uneven experience of women from different classes. The semi-skilled and unskilled female workers had extremely low wages due to their gender and ethnicity.

As a direct result of the introduction of the “volunteer” labor system, more families returned to the early marriage system after 1937. This meant that more girls and women were placed into arranged marriages to avoid conscription. The GGGK allowed this because they hoped that Korean women would have more children to serve the Japanese empire. The purpose of empowering Korean women into the “modern” way was to ensure that these women became obedient, productive imperial citizens who produced obedient productive imperial citizens. Even though women gained skills and some education they previously did not have access to, were able to leave strictly domestic roles, and earn wages, the extent of change depended on class for many women.



Source Activity Twelve

ATL: Thinking Skills

Source A: Chŏng, Hyŏn-baek. *A History of Korean Women*. The Academy of Korean Studies, 2021.

“Women were also included in the Navy. Subjugated by the state and the military as “second-class citizens (female),” women with healthy bodies and special skills could be employed with the permission of the pertinent minister. Nurses constituted the largest group, and most women who were mobilized were brutally overworked as office workers, telephone operators, and as women who prepared meals, did the laundry, and handled cargo.”

https://www.aks.ac.kr/ikorea/cms/usr/wap/selectAplctnData.do?siteAplctnId=koreaReferenceCiaEng&referenceSeq=5301188&menuNo=5010110000&lang=eng_page_192.

Source B: Yi Okpun lived in the Kyonggi Province and was a part of the urban poor. This woman describes her experiences of trying to survive the war in a city.

“They sent my husband to Nagasaki, to a coal mine. He was gone for about a year. While he was away, we really had a hard time. Aigo, it was hard. If it hadn’t been for my mother’s mother, on

the farm where I grew up coming up to Seoul and bringing with her some rice and other farm produce, we really would have starved. In those days, there were a lot of checkpoints and they were very careful and checked everything, but grandmother somehow got past them all and brought us food.”

Under the Black Umbrella, 131.

Source C: Kim Il Sung’s Autobiography – Written based upon earlier manuscripts and notes, his 7th volume of *With The Century* was finished and published after Kim Il Sung’s death.

“In the days of the anti-Japanese revolution, women guerrillas also worked harder. They took part in every battle and cooked meals in addition. They carried most of the cooking utensils and provisions. When the men guerrillas sank with fatigue and fell asleep around the campfire, women did the needlework to mend the torn uniforms of the men. Tears could be stitched up, but burnt parts had to be patched. When pieces were not available, they cut the edges off their own skirts to patch the holes... They overcame difficulties as persistently as men guerrillas. In some aspects, they were even more persistent.”

Kim, Il Sung, and The Central Committee of the Worker’s Party of Korea. *With the Century: Reminiscences of Kim Il Sung*. Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2007, 152–153.

Questions:

1. According to Source A, what roles did Korean women perform within the Japanese war system?
2. What does Source B reveal about the impact of war on the daily lives of Korean women, particularly those from urban and poorer backgrounds?
3. How does Source C present the role of women in the anti-Japanese struggle?

IV. Continuity vs Change in Japanese Assimilation Policies

Inquiry Question

To what extent did Japan succeed in socially transforming Korea?

Japan attempted to assimilate Koreans in all areas including taking their brassware dishes to create weapons for the war and replacing them with ceramic dishes and utensils (See photos). The social policies expanded outside of the home and into attempted control of religion, naming, language, and education policies. The question for you to consider is how far these policies created lasting change in Korea.



Source Activity Thirteen

ATL: Thinking Skills

Source A:



Source B:



◀ ▶ Source: Photo Delivery of Brassware and replacement ceramic cup, Museum of Contemporary Korean History, 95.

Koreans were forced to “donate” their tableware and brassware to help the Japanese war effort, and that was turned into torpedoes as shown above. People were then provided with ceramic replacements that had “decisive war” in Chinese characters and a torpedo stamped on them.

Question:

1. How did Japan’s wartime requisitioning of Korean household metalware function as a form of authoritarian control over everyday life and identity?
2. How does the symbolism stamped on the ceramic bowl (Source B) reflect the political and ideological aims of the Japanese wartime regime?

Religious Assimilation Policies

Starting in 1937, Japan intensified its effort to erase Korea’s spiritual and cultural identity for attempted unification with the Japanese Empire. The GGK labeled Confucianism, Shamanism, and Christianity as “uncivilised,” promoting Shintoism to center Korean identity on loyalty to the emperor.

Shinto shrine worship became mandatory by 1938, and it was framed as a patriotic act to force participation. Shaman shrines were converted into Shinto shrines and cultural rituals were replaced with imperial rites. Children in schools were forced to bow to the east, pray for Japan’s success, and revere the emperor as a divine figure. Even ration coupons were distributed at shrines to link survival with submission.

Christian doctrine, which emphasized the worship of one God, directly conflicted with enforced participation in Shinto rituals. Christians viewed this as idolatrous. Refusal of Shinto worship led to church closures, arrests, and torture. In 1938, the Presbyterian General Assembly was coerced into passing a resolution declaring shrine worship a “patriotic” act rather than a religious one. Over 2,000 Christians were arrested and at least 50 ministers died in prison. There were some religious leaders that complied while under duress. Shamanistic and Confucian traditions were also dismantled as shrines were destroyed or absorbed into the imperial cult.

Japan’s religious policies aimed to break communal identities and enforce submission. Resistance, especially in urban areas, was met with harsh repression through school closures, arrests, prison, torture, and social exclusion. Ultimately, the Japanese regime’s religious policies were a tool of cultural erasure and control, and religious groups bore the brunt of state violence for their refusal to abandon their faiths. However, after Japan’s surrender, most Shinto shrines in Korea were abandoned or destroyed.



Source Activity Fourteen

ATL: Thinking Skills

Hildi Kang describes an interview with a Korean man about his experiences with liberation in Korea in August of 1945

“Another person, remembering that day [August 15] seemed to speak for all Koreans. ‘I never talk about it,’ he said. ‘To talk is to remember - dare I remember? Even after all these years, I will see and hear it again.’ His gaze became unfocused, he paused, and finally continued. ‘Surprise - Joy- anticipation- fear - pathos- anger! All of them. All at once. I remember...’ Tears began to slide from his eyes to his cheeks.

‘I remember the bonfires,” he said. “Many Shinto shrines quickly became objects of that anger. Crowds rushed up the steps, past the Torrii gates, carrying axes and ropes. They tore down the wooden shrines, hacked them to pieces and right there on the wide courtyards they burned them to the ground.’

Bonfires! What an appropriate way to help extinguish the gloom cast for over thirty-five years by the black umbrella of Japanese rule.”

Under the Black Umbrella, 147.

Questions:

1. How does the destruction of shrines represent a change from the past and what continuities may have remained after liberation?
2. How might the sudden collapse of Japanese authority have contributed to both celebration and anger for Koreans in August 1945?

Name Change Policies

In 1939, GGK issued Ordinance number 19, ordering Koreans to create a Japanese style family name or *sōshi*. This was followed by Ordinance number 20, or *kaimei*, in February 1940 to encourage Koreans to change their first names prior to August 1940 to Japanese style. Although these policies were voluntary, there was increasing coercion carried out by the Japanese. The Japanese discriminated against those that did not adopt the new system by connecting the naming policies with being able to have waged labor, access to healthcare, and attending schools. The Japanese goal was to try and break Korean ancestral ties that is normally a key part of Korean naming conventions as a form of erasing Korean cultural identity.

Some Koreans complied by finding ways to incorporate their Korean name into the new Japanese one, either by translation or finding a similar character. Rural Koreans often ignored the policy, while others mocked and resisted the policy by adopting absurd or demeaning names like “dog,” or “cow.” Some used subversive names like *Sungil* meaning “victory over Japan,” though they were quickly forced to change them. The name law had little lasting impact, as resistance was widespread and the timeframe was too short to erase the long term kinship naming traditions. Choe Yisan stated that the day after liberation, teachers took roll at school and changed student names back to Korean. Furthermore, the US military government legally reinstated Korean names in 1946.

NAME CHANGES — KOREAN TO JAPANESE		
Korean Name Character and Meaning	Japanese Name and Meaning	Reason for Choice
Kim 金 gold	Kanekuni 金國 gold country	Retain “gold” 金 but use its Japanese pronunciation
	Kanczawa 金澤 gold pond	Retain “gold” 金 A popular Japanese name
	Kaneshiro 金城 gold castle	Retain “gold” 金

⬆ Some Koreans took Japanese names in an arbitrary fashion, often defiantly illogical. In the name changes that follow, however, one can see the effort made by interviewees to hold on to their Korean heritage.

Education Policies

The largest assimilation policy in colonial Korea focused on education and language to unify Korea and Japan. In 1937, only a third of Korean children attended school, but GGK policy expanded public education and mandated Japanese as the sole language. Korean was banned in schools and after the war, some students had to relearn it. The GGK linked Hangul to nationalism, punishing those who used it. In 1942, 33 leaders of the Korean Language Society were arrested and tortured for promoting Hangul.

Students were trained to be loyal Japanese subjects, taught to value the group over the individual, revere the emperor, and embrace the Japan-Korea “brotherhood.” Education reinforced Korean “inferiority,” stressing cooperation, industrial labor and obedience to colonial law as patriotic duties. Japanese language instruction aimed to prepare Koreans as soldiers and workers, while martial arts was introduced after 1940 to foster military spirit. However, these policies were undercut by wartime disruptions, for example, schoolchildren were mobilized into working in factories in 1944 and 1945. Many Koreans were illiterate or left school or attended secret Korean language schools, raising doubts about how effective GGG’s language assimilation policies truly were.

Despite pervasive attempts at cultural assimilation and profound wartime suffering, especially among women, the fundamental fabric of Korean society, including both its language and national identity, proved resilient. This indicated that the social changes, though deeply felt, were not wholly enduring.

Paper 3 Practice

Essay Skills Builder

Timed Full Essay Practice

Approaches to Learning Skills: Self Management and Planning

Up to this point, you have learned how to plan, outline, develop well reasoned arguments and how to apply the paper 3 rubric. The final step is to be able to accomplish these steps in an hour time frame as required for your IB exam. Time management is essential for success in the paper 3 exam. Depending on your writing speed, this is a suggested time breakdown for one essay.

Suggested Time Breakdown for Paper 3

2 Minutes	Reading and selecting the question carefully
8 Minutes	Brainstorming and planning your answer
5 Minutes	Write introduction with thesis statement
35 Minutes	3-4 body PEEL paragraphs ensuring inclusion of a counter argument (around 8-11 minutes per argument)
5 Minutes	Reasoned Conclusion
5 Minutes	Review and Edit

Select One of the Paper 3 Practice Questions:

1. “Korean society was fundamentally transformed by the Second Sino-Japanese War.” To what extent do you agree with this statement?
2. To what extent did lives change in Korea during the Second Sino-Japanese War?

V. Liberation and New Governments

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the circumstances leading up to and during Korea's liberation in 1945 enable the establishment of Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung's regimes?

By 1942, Korea's strategic location made it central to US, Soviet, and Chinese interests, but each envisioned a different postwar future. The US, wary of Soviet influence and mistakenly estimating 30,000 communist guerrillas in Manchuria, feared a failed trusteeship and prepared for full military occupation, asserting the need for primary control of Korea and ousting the Japanese colonizers. The consequences of the decisions starting in 1942 had long term consequences for Korea.

Allied Planning and the Conferences

Korea had a long history of capable self rule and governance of which Americans were quite ignorant. According to Kornel Chang, President Roosevelt claimed that Korea would "need some period of apprenticeship before full independence might be attained, perhaps forty years." The idea was that a more "civilized" nation would "tutor" another nation. Roosevelt had already followed the 47 year tutelage in the Philippines, which guided his thought process. Therefore, he wrongly believed that colonised peoples were not prepared to rule themselves. Furthermore, in 1942, Roosevelt wrote a letter to Jiang Jieshi stating that China, the US, Britain, and the USSR would become the "four big policemen of the world" after the war and would require all nations to be involved in a trusteeship with Korea. This was reaffirmed at a meeting in March 1943 with British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden and Roosevelt as they prepared for the December Cairo Conference.



Source Activity Fifteen

ATL: Thinking and Research Skills

Cairo Declaration

Tasks

1. Read the different draft versions of the Cairo Declarations and identify the differences between the versions.
2. Conduct further research to explain why Roosevelt and Churchill supported these proposed changes.
3. Analyze the final wording of the Cairo Declaration and assess its significance for Korea.

American First Draft — Cairo Declaration: "...Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed. The aforesaid Three Great Powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, at the earliest possible moment after the downfall of Japan, Korea shall become free and independent."

Quoted in Chang *A Fractured Liberation*, 58

Roosevelt Second Draft – Cairo Declaration: “...Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed. The aforesaid Three Great Powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined at the proper moment after the downfall of Japan, Korea shall become free and independent..”

Final Version with British Input, December 1, 1943-Records of the Department of State Relating to World War II, 1939-1945.

“...Japan will also be expelled from all other territories which she has taken by violence and greed. The aforesaid Three Great Powers, mindful of the enslavement of the people of Korea, are determined that in due course, Korea shall become free and independent.”

Recognizing it could not defeat Axis powers alone, the US coordinated wartime and postwar strategy with its allies. At the 1943 Cairo Conference, Roosevelt, Churchill, and Jiang Jieshi pledged that Korea would “in due course” become “free and independent,” though the vague timeline reflected Korea’s low priority. The Allies agreed to place Korea under tutelage after Japan fell. Stalin’s absence and US officials’ unfamiliarity with Korea underscored a lack of concrete planning from the series of allied conferences.

Atomic Bombings and Liberation

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, combined with the Soviet invasion of Manchuria on August 8, 1945, accelerated Japan’s surrender. On August 15, 1945, Korea was freed from Japanese imperial rule, but without an allied plan for immediate self-governance.

The Soviet advance forced the US to act quickly. On August 24, the Red Army crossed the 38th parallel. To prevent total Soviet control, American planners proposed dividing the peninsula at the 38th parallel, securing Seoul. Debate persists over whether this was a hasty military decision or the result of lobbying by Korean exiles such as Rhee to bring American support. When US forces arrived on September 8, 1945, the Soviets returned to the 38th parallel. At this point, both powers assumed the division was temporary.



Skills & Competencies of a Historian

Research and Reflection

1. Which countries were occupied and divided in the European and Asian theatres of World War II?
2. Which additional countries did the Allied powers plan to occupy, and for what reasons?
3. Research the main theories explaining why and how Korea was divided.
 - Consider the roles of wartime agreements, beginning Cold War tensions, and decisions made by external powers.

Political Vacuum and Factionalism: The establishment of Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung's Governments



⏏ A photo of released prisoners from colonial jails after Japan's surrender was announced. "Prisoner Release" August 16, 1945. Wikimedia open Access https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Liberation_Day_of_Korea#/media/File:Prison_Release_of_Korean_activists.JPG

Post-liberation Korea faced economic devastation and social dislocation. Widespread unrest followed, driven by returning Koreans demanding political and land reforms.

In September, nationalist leader Lyuh Woon-hyung was approached by the GGK to set up a new government. The Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence formed local people's committees across the peninsula. These bodies, backed by the Soviets, enacted reforms and chose Rhee as president to unite the different factions. The newly declared Korean People's Republic had 145 people's committees that issued a 27 point program for social, economic, and political reforms, including land redistribution. These committees, while having socialist leanings, represented what the Korean people wanted and were democratically elected, which showed a unified front government. The old guard Korean communist leaders remained in and around Seoul, which allowed for Kim Il Sung and the Yanan Korean Communists to gain more power influence with the Soviets.

The US made a number of missteps in the early liberation period. The first was the rejection of this self-declared government, preferring exiled nationalists like Rhee and supporting the conservative, elitist Korean Democratic Party to ascend after the American military government. The second was the US military retained Japanese colonial structures, including 80% of the hated colonial police force as the US reversed the decolonisation processes. This ultimately caused further unrest among the Korean people.

Rhee, seen as pro-American and anti-communist, gained American support. Meanwhile, Kim Il Sung, backed by the Soviets, emerged as the North's leader. Though neither leader was easily controlled by their patrons, both eliminated moderates and entrenched hardline ideologies, making compromise difficult as both sides wanted complete control of a unified Korea.

In late 1945, the US diverged from the trusteeship plan, creating the US Army Military Government in Korea (USMGIK) under the rigid General Hodge. This military government had been trained to occupy Japan but ended up being diverted to Korea. Civil servants arrived a month late with only one hour of training on the history of Korea, which resulted in Korea being treated as an enemy nation to be occupied, rather than as a nation that had suffered under exploitative colonial rule. The USMGIK outlawed Korean governments including the KPG and the Committee, while backing Rhee and rightist parties as future leaders. This deepened divisions. Furthermore, the military government reversed the reorganisation of factories and revoked the ability to strike. They also repossessed the 875,000 acres of formerly Japanese owned land that had been redistributed through the People's Committees and insisted that the land had to be bought at a fair price. The USMGIK could not provide adequate responses when Koreans asked why they had to pay when the Japanese had seized ancestral lands without payments. The unpopular military government treated Korea with an undeserved heavy hand for a country that was under occupation for 35 years, and anti-American sentiment continued to grow.

Entrenched Division and The Moscow Conference

The increased divisions on the peninsula prompted General Hodge to recommend that the US come to an agreement with the Soviet Union. The agreement stated both sides should withdraw from Korea and allow for Koreans to find their own path forward. Hodge did not believe that the situation would improve with both sides on the continent, and Hodge's advice was ignored by the US government.

The December 1945 Moscow Conference formalized a reduced five year joint trusteeship between the US and USSR. The US did not want to be responsible for a permanent division of Korea, which is why they compromised for a five year trusteeship, as the Soviets wanted immediate Korean freedom. Koreans across the political spectrum opposed trusteeship, saw the Moscow Communique as a betrayal, and demanded immediate independence. Ordinary citizens peacefully protested, with some ripping down American flags at night.

Meanwhile, the US and USSR continued to back rival governments, Rhee in the South and Kim Il Sung in the North, reinforcing the division. As Bruce Cumings notes, by then it was "too late," US support for elites and rejection of grassroots movements contrasted with Soviet support for local committees and reforms. This divergence cemented the political and ideological split on the peninsula.

The circumstances surrounding Korea's liberation, the wartime planning that excluded Korean voices, and the sudden absence of clear government authority created a power vacuum in August 1945 and the rapid US-Soviet occupation enabled the post war rise of Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung. Both men were products of external selection shaped by Cold War foundations. Yet their consolidation of power reflected the dynamics of Korean factionalism and resistance towards imposed trusteeship. The liberation process created conditions where superpower backed regimes emerged in 1948 and laid the foundation for division and the future ongoing conflict.

Paper 3 Practice

1. To what extent did internal domestic factors, rather than external influences, determine the political systems established under Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung in post-liberation Korea?

Conclusion

Korea experienced increased exploitation during the Second Sino-Japanese War. This time period deepened political repression, economic extraction, and attempted social assimilation policies. However, this time period also became a catalyst for Korean leaders abroad to redefine the Korean independence movement and position themselves as future leaders with Kim Il Sung in the North and Syngman Rhee in the US. Despite the social and economic repression Koreans resisted through underground movements and cultural preservation efforts. Ultimately, the consequences of the Second Sino Japanese War have had long lasting repercussions for the Korean peninsula.

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

To what extent was the Korean War a result of long term colonial legacies and post-liberation power dynamics rather than a sudden manifestation of Cold War rivalry?

The Korean War, which broke out in 1950, had roots extending well before World War II. From 1937–1945, Korea experienced political upheaval, social division, economic exploitation, and international decision-making that largely excluded Korean voices. Although the conflict started after the establishment of two rival governments, many causes were already in place at the end of World War II. Examining this period through political, social, economic, and international lenses reveals that the cause of the Korean War was not a sudden outbreak, but rather a combination of long- and short-term historical processes.

Socially, Japanese assimilation policies created widespread resentment and trauma. Forced labor and military mobilisation and displacement created hardship for most of the population. Yet, for some, collaboration with the colonial state was a path for advancement or survival, which led to stark political and social divisions post liberation. In the North, land reform and decolonisation efforts carried out by People's Committees were seen as addressing social needs more directly. In contrast, the South retained many colonial-era elites and collaborators, now backed by the US, which essentially halted the decolonisation processes and land redistribution. These social inequalities, combined with ideological and class tensions, made Korean society increasingly volatile and prone to conflict.

Economically, Korea's rapid industrial growth during the Second Sino-Japanese War had served Japan's imperial needs rather than Korea's development. The North became an industrial base while the South remained largely agricultural. Koreans were conscripted to work at home and across the Japanese Empire. By 1945, this left Korea economically imbalanced. The division at the 38th parallel further separated the industrial North from the agricultural South, creating two interdependent but politically opposed economies. This caused each regime to become, to a certain extent, reliant on its occupying power – Soviet support in the North and American support in the South – that caused a deepening of rivalry in the Cold War context.

Politically, Korea remained under Japanese colonial rule with little room for autonomous governance until the end of World War II. Nationalist groups were suppressed or forced into exile. Although some Koreans tried to work within the system, no single group emerged as a legitimate postwar government. Allied powers discussed the postwar fate of Korea at Cairo, Yalta, and Potsdam conferences, but without Korean representation. When Japan surrendered in August 1945, Korea was abruptly divided by the US and USSR at the 38th parallel. This division laid the groundwork for two separate regimes that claimed legitimacy over the entire peninsula. However, Koreans were not passive in this process, as Syngman Rhee and Kim Il Sung positioned themselves as national leaders to pursue reunification on their own terms. Their ambitions, supported by superpower backing, played a central role in escalating tensions into the 1950 war.



Conceptual Connections

Cause & Consequence

The concepts of cause and consequence examine both long- and short-term outcomes of historical decisions and actions. In the case of Korea under Japanese colonial rule the following points can be made:

- Korea faced exploitation in both labor and economics to fuel the Japanese industrial war machine.
- Developed mining, hydroelectricity and factories, but overuse caused equipment breakdown, rundown factories, and ecological damage.

Continuity and Change

The concepts of continuity and change focus on what changed and what persisted over time. Change can be qualified by time (the pace with which change happens) and intensity (how strong or profound the change is). Change and continuity can be evaluated as either positive or negative depending on the perspective.

Japanese rule brought significant changes to Korea's economy, education system, and social roles (particularly for women).

In order to evaluate change and continuity these points can be helpful:

- Forced religious, language and name changes were painful but largely reversed after liberation.
- 200,000 "comfort women" suffered lifelong trauma from sexual slavery.
- Women gained limited education and wage labor opportunities, yet social and gender hierarchies persisted.
- Continued industrialisation from the pre-colonial era accelerated further due to the Second Sino-Japanese War.

Significance

Historical significance explores why certain events or developments matter, both at the time and in the long term. In the case of Korea, the exclusion of Korean voices after World War II when decisions were made by the Allies had great significance for its short- and long-term development. When evaluating the significance these points should be taken into account:

- Korean agency was ignored by the Allied powers during the decision making process for Korean post-war independence.
- The political developments contributed to Korea's division and the 1950 Korean War and leads to continued division today.

Perspectives

This concept emphasises the existence of multiple viewpoints which are shaped by context, position, experience, and ideology. Multiple perspectives are visible in the context of Korean history:

- Korean responses varied: some collaborated and many resisted.
- Syngman Rhee focused on diplomatic resistance while Kim Il Sung and the communists focused on armed resistance.
- The economic, social and political consequences of Japanese colonial rule for Korea.
- Ordinary citizens resisted by preserving language, history, creating secret graffiti or slowing work.

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

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)**.

Inquiry Question: How did authoritarian rule affect people's lives?

Investigating how authoritarian rule affects people's lives focuses on the **consequences** and how deeply it changes people's lives. From 1937–1945, Korean society was tightly controlled under Japanese authoritarian rule. This period was marked by increasingly harsher attempts to erase Korean identity and culture and assimilate the population into the Japanese Empire.

Religion and Cultural Control

Korean religious practices were forced to change to state Shintoism which demanded loyalty to the Emperor. Christians faced persecution for refusing to bow at Shinto shrines with many pastors being imprisoned. Churches went underground, operating on weeknights with people singing songs in their head for fear of being discovered. Buddhist temples were reorganised to reflect Japanese institutions. Confucianism was discouraged as outdated and seen as a direct clash with imperial ideology.

Social Hierarchies

Koreans became second class citizens in their own land as Japanese settlers received preferential treatment in housing, jobs, and education. Koreans received strict surveillance and discrimination, often being paid half of a Japanese worker. Many Koreans were coerced into labor or the military as the war effort expanded. Furthermore, some Koreans experienced starvation levels of food rationing.

Naming and Identity

The 1939 naming policies coerced Koreans to adapt Japanese style names. The Korean names held special ancestral meaning by linking the name to a location. These were replaced or modified to follow the Japanese naming structures to create a new history linked to Japan. Many Koreans complied out of necessity, however, it was a deeply painful process.

Everyday Life and Resistance

Despite oppression, quiet acts of resistance persisted. Koreans found ways to dodge conscription notices. Some churches met in secret, while families continued to pray at home, and taught their children Korean history and Hangul. Underground cultural movements kept Korean identity alive.

Global Connections Case Studies to consider (1750-present)

Europe : Fascist Italy; Great Britain over Ireland

Americas: Augusto Pinochet in Chile; Papa Doc in Haiti; French in Haiti; Fidel Castro in Cuba

Africa: Belgium's Colonial Rule over Congo; Great Britain colonial rule over Kenya

Australia and Oceania: Australia's treatment of Indigenous peoples; Papua and New Guinea under Australian Administration 1906-1975; Fiji under British rule 1874-1970; Overthrow and annexation of The Kingdom of Hawaii

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Contributors



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Mid-Century Challenges

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02

Opening up of Korea and Regional Perspectives

Abigail Gometz, International School of the Stockholm Region – Page 45

Abigail Gometz is a teacher at the International School of the Stockholm Region in Sweden. She has been a History teacher for more than 25 years, working in schools in the UK and in Europe. Having completed an undergraduate degree at UCL, she then went on to complete a PhD in Medieval History at the University of Leeds. Since 2007 Abbie has been an enthusiastic convert to the IB system, and loves teaching about Authoritarian States and Europe in the interwar period. For the last three years, Abbie has been organising study trips to Berlin for her students to gain a deeper understanding of Weimar and Nazi Germany.



03

Impact on Regional Rivalries

Paul Grace, Park Lane International School – Page 83

Paul Grace is a teacher at the Park Lane International School in Prague, the Czech Republic. Paul, originally from Manchester, UK, completed his degree in History and American Studies at the University of Nottingham in 2003. Following this, he completed his postgraduate certificate in education with a specialism in history teaching. Paul has worked in London, Guangzhou, Hong Kong and Prague. While working internationally, Paul has developed experience with IB Diploma History, Theory of Knowledge and MYP Individuals and Societies. Paul has worked as an author of educational materials for schools, this has included writing articles on aspects of 20th-century history and producing course books for MYP Individuals and Societies.



04 Nature and Impact of Reforms under the Korean Empire

Bridget Martin, International School of Paris
– Page 116

Bridget Martin is a teacher at the International School of Paris, France. A Secondary History Teacher at the International School of Paris, Bridget also coordinates teacher training activities with EuroClio and is certified as an IB Workshop Leader. She holds a Master of Teaching from the University of Melbourne as well as a Master of Arts (History) from the University of Groningen. She has produced peer-reviewed research on topics such as history curriculum debates and approaches to oral history in education. Bridget also spent 4 years on the Scientific Advisory Council of the Observatory on History Teaching in Europe, an initiative of the Council of Europe.



05 Nature Of, and Social, Economic and Political Impact of Japanese Rule

Allison Cecil, duPont Manual High School
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Allison Cecil is a veteran social studies educator and department chair at duPont Manual High School in Louisville, Kentucky. With over twenty years of classroom experience, she specializes in inquiry-based instruction that helps students connect historical events to geographic context, civic decision-making, and lived human experience. Allison has extensive experience in curriculum design, teacher professional development, and national educational leadership. She has contributed to published instructional resources, served in leadership roles within Advanced Placement programs, and has been recognized at the state and national level for excellence in teaching and curriculum leadership, including being named Kentucky High School Teacher of the Year.



06

Social, Economic and Political Impact of the Sino-Japanese War

Lexi Oudman, Rotterdam International Secondary School – Page 214

Lexi Oudman is an IB History Educator at Rotterdam International Secondary School in the Netherlands. She originates from the USA and holds her MA in Global History and International Relations from Erasmus University, Rotterdam, where she wrote her thesis on

sensitive and controversial history in international schools. She has taught history and social studies for a total of 11 years in the US system and in Dutch International schools. Additionally, she volunteered for an education-focused NGO in St. Jean du Sud, Haiti, for a year.

Reviewers

María Angelica Salazar – The English School in Colombia

Hyeseong Ahn – Taipei Municipal Xisong High School in Taiwan

Hyowoo Lee

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