

Early American Perceptions of Korea and Washington's Korea Policy, 1882-1905

Andrew S. JOHNSON

Abstract

This study explores the cultural and ideological factors that conditioned U.S. policy in Korea during the early period of U.S.-Korean relations (1882-1905) and Washington's de facto pro-Japan policy. Key officials in Washington possessed negative perceptions of Korea that influenced their policymaking on an ideological level. These men perceived Korea to be a backward country averse to progress and generally believed that Japan should guide Korea to civilization. This article suggests that Washington's perceptions of Korea were firmly rooted in a cultural discourse on Korea, which was shaped largely by dominant representations of Korea in popular texts of the period. Representations of Korea in newspaper articles and commercial texts were influenced by Americans' early hostile encounters with the "hermit nation," colored by ethnographic descriptions of Korea's "backwardness," and informed by racial stereotypes and the ideologies of imperialism prevalent in the West. It was also mediated by Japanese information channels. These texts generated a popular discourse on Korea that likely impacted Washington's perceptions of Korea and conditioned its pro-Japan policy. They help to explain the perceptual rift that developed between policymakers in Washington and the American diplomatic community in Korea. In focusing on the nature and origins of the early American discourse on Korea, the purpose of this article is to contribute to scholarship on early U.S.-Korean relations by exploring how cultural facts may have conditioned U.S. foreign policy in Korea. It also aims to start a conversation about public awareness of Korea during the period and the importance of public opinion as a political force in the United States.

Keywords: Korea, hermit nation/hermit kingdom, early U.S.-Korea relations, U.S. popular texts about Korea, U.S. ethnographic reporting on Korea

Andrew S. JOHNSON currently serves as a philanthropy consultant at Give2Asia, San Francisco, CA. He received his M.A. in East Asian Studies from Stanford University in 2010. E-mail: andrewj1@stanford.edu.

“A singular feature of the Korean troubles is that so few true reports of them get abroad. I have hardly seen a single article in any paper which was at all correct. The greatest error, and the most damaging one, about Korea, is the comment that the government and people bitterly oppose Western progress.”

(George Foulk, 1884)¹

Introduction

U.S. policy in Korea during the early period of U.S.-Korean relations (1882-1905) and Washington's response to Korea's troubles vis-à-vis its aggressive neighbors has been well documented in the diplomatic history of the period. Though the United States often paid lip service to the ideal of Korean independence, it remained officially neutral in the Sino-Japanese (1894-1895) and Russo-Japanese Wars (1904-1905) while lending behind-the-scenes moral, political, and financial support to Japan (Kim 1975; Lee 1999). The United States, in other words, adopted a *de facto* pro-Japan policy in the decades leading up to Korea's annexation in 1910. Existing studies of the period address the United States' rationale for supporting Japan in these conflicts and show that U.S. national interest favored a pro-Japan policy (Kim 2009). Cultural and ideological factors, however, also conditioned Washington's policies. High-level U.S. officials like Theodore Roosevelt and William W. Rockhill, one of the most influential architects of U.S. policy in Asia throughout the period, regarded Japan highly but had rather low opinions of Korea (Akifumi 2007). These men perceived Korea to be a backward “Oriental” country averse to progress, and much like the Japanese themselves, generally believed during this period (prior to annexation) that Japan was destined to carry the torch of Western civilization to Korea and the rest of Asia.

Why did officials in Washington tend to regard Korea as a backward nation unprepared to join the world of civilized nations, except through Japan's tutelage? One plausible explanation is that during this

1. George Foulk to his parents and brothers, August 12, 1884, in Hawley (2008, 50).

period Korea's ruling class, the *yangban*, largely advocated isolationism vis-à-vis the West and that the country was, in fact, economically and technologically weaker than Japan. Two sets of facts, however, complicate this explanation. First, throughout the period, despite *yangban*'s opposition, King Gojong repeatedly demonstrated to Washington and the U.S. legation in Seoul his desire to modernize his kingdom. Through a series of treaties with Western nations in the 1880s, beginning with the U.S.-Korean Shufeldt Treaty of 1882, he widely diverged from the staunch isolationist foreign policy of his predecessor, the Prince Regent Heungseon. Gojong not only oversaw the opening of his kingdom to the West, but often communicated to Washington through the U.S. legation in Seoul his desire to see Americans, whom he regarded as distant and disinterested allies, to play the leading role in modernizing his kingdom (Lee 1999). On several occasions, he implored Washington for military advisers to help modernize the Korean military. Significantly, he offered American companies his kingdom's most lucrative business concessions in areas such as gold mining, railroad construction, and Seoul's first electrical system.² In addition, American Protestant missionaries found Korea to be fertile ground for the development of Christianity in Asia, which spread rapidly in Korea beginning in the 1890s (Park 1992). The second set of facts that complicates this explanation is that the Korean court's openness to modernization and favorable disposition to the United States were not lost on American diplomats in Seoul, who overall viewed Korea and Koreans in far more positive terms than did policymakers back home. American diplomats in Seoul generally perceived Korea to be open to the West's modernizing influences, and they worked tirelessly to take advantage of Gojong's desire to see the United States play a leading role in the protection and development of the Korean peninsula. Particularly after the assassination of Queen Min in 1895, the U.S. diplomats in Korea came to perceive Japanese designs on Korea as naked aggression rather than a "civilizing mission" and "actively supported

2. By building up America's economic stakes in Korea, Gojong hoped to strengthen its commitment to defending Korea from its enemies (Lee 1999).

the continuance of Korean independence” (Swartout 1982). In short, given the Korean court's increasing engagement with the West and explicit desire to modernize with American assistance, the spread of Christianity in Korea, and the American legation's eagerness to take advantage of the climate in Korea to develop Korea and advance U.S. interests, why did Washington regard Korea as little more than a backward “Oriental” country averse to Western civilization?

This article suggests that Washington's perceptions of Korea, as described above, were similar to those shared by the American public, and, like public opinion, were shaped largely by dominant representations of Korea in popular texts of the period—commercial books and newspaper articles about Korea. Prior to the late nineteenth century, Korea was *terra incognita* to Americans. In the 1860s and 1870s, however, newspapers began to report on Korea; after Korea and the United States formed relations in 1882, newspaper reports increased and Americans began to write books about Korea for popular consumption. Representations of Korea in these texts were influenced by Americans' early hostile encounters with the “hermit nation,” colored by ethnographic descriptions of Korea's “backwardness,” and informed by racial stereotypes and the ideologies of imperialism prevalent in the West. These texts generated a popular discourse on Korea that likely impacted Washington's perceptions of Korea and conditioned its pro-Japan policy. They help to explain the perceptual rift that developed between policymakers in Washington and the American diplomatic community in Korea.

As mentioned above, other scholars have already examined the calculations of national interest that led policymakers in Washington to adopt a pro-Japan Korea policy during these years. In light of the fact that U.S. policymakers held negative perceptions of Korea, which differed significantly from the views of the U.S. legation in Korea and were sometimes expressed to justify Japan's ascendancy in Korea, this article will focus on the nature and origins of these perceptions in the early American discourse on Korea as it emerged in this period. Its purpose is to contribute to scholarship on early U.S.-Korean relations by exploring how cultural facts, in addition to “raw” calculations of

national interest, may have conditioned U.S. foreign policy in Korea. More generally, it aims to start a conversation about public awareness of Korea during the period—a subject that historians have barely touched despite the importance of public opinion as a political force in the United States in the late nineteenth century.³

Vehicles of Discourse: Books and Newspaper Coverage about Korea

Although Craig S. Coleman's *American Images of Korea* (1990) contains a chapter on early American perceptions of Korea, and other scholars have published articles that contain useful insights, by and large this subject remains unexamined.⁴ During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, discourse about Korea emerged in American books and newspapers, and this discourse would have important political implications. The first encounters between Korea and the United States took place during the 1860s and 1870s. The General Sherman Incident occurred in 1866, when a merchant ship carrying American crew members sailed into Korea demanding trade and was torched by Koreans. The American Expedition to Korea, in which the United States sent a naval force to Korea to open trade, verify the fate of the *General Sherman* and seek a shipwreck treaty, followed in 1871. These conflicts produced the first waves of American news coverage about Korea. The opening of Korea to the United States in 1882 inaugurated a twenty-three-year period of sustained interaction between Koreans and Americans. During this period especially, a growing number of books and newspaper articles about Korea emerged and constructed "Korea," for the very first time, in the American national consciousness.

Horace Underwood's 1931 bibliography of Korean-related sources

3. For example, newspaper coverage, public opinion about Spanish atrocities in Cuba and the sinking of the *Maine*, and popular jingoism were factors in leading the United States into the Spanish-American War in 1898.

4. See Coleman (1990), McCune (1982), and H. Kim (1995).

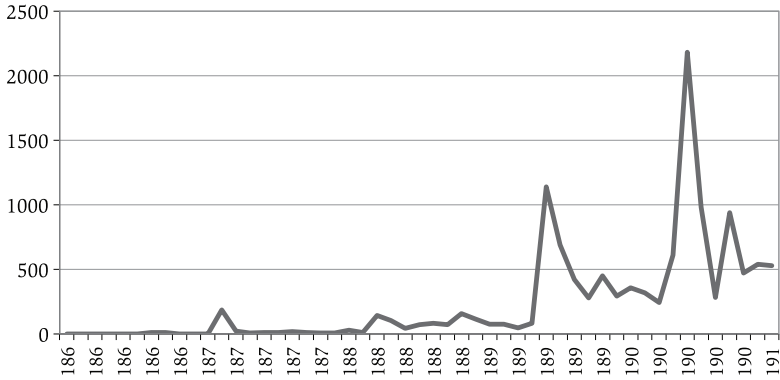
provides insight into when books about Korea began to emerge and what kinds of books were available to American readers at the time. Of the 2,842 works Underwood identified, only 152 (or 5 percent) were published before 1880 (Underwood 1931). Starting in the early 1880s, however, the United States witnessed a surge in publication of histories, travel books, political treatises, Korean-English dictionaries, translations of Korean literature, and other types of literature about Korea. The most widely read and highly regarded books about Korea during the period were John Ross's *Corea and Its History, Manners and Customs* (1880), Ernest Oppert's *A Forbidden Land* (1880), William Elliot Griffis's *Corea, the Hermit Nation* (1883), Percival Lowell's *Chosön: The Land of the Morning Calm, A Sketch of Korea* (1886), and Henry Savage-Landor's *Corea or Cho-sen, the Land of the Morning Calm* (1895).⁵ Journals and magazines such as *Korean Repository*, *Korea Review*, *Korea Magazine*, and *Korea Daily News* also appeared around this time (Coleman 1990). After Korea opened relations with the United States, American readers appear to have consumed such texts with enthusiasm. As *The New York Times* observed in 1882, "so little is known about the remote and long-secluded country of Corea that any new contribution to the world's stock of information concerning that portion of the human family is greeted with curiosity and eagerness."⁶ Indeed, these books provided Americans with a wealth of information about Korea. Generally, they portrayed Korea as backward and underscored feelings in the United States that Japan ought to take over Korea. For example, Griffis portrayed Korea as an inferior nation to Japan in his highly influential monograph (which popularized the epithet "hermit nation"/"hermit kingdom") and advocated a Japanese takeover of Korea.

Newspapers also began to report on Korean affairs during this period and played an even more important role in bringing Korea into the national consciousness and constructing dominant perceptions.

5. Korea was spelled variously as "Korea" or "Corea" throughout this period, although "Corea" was the more common spelling.

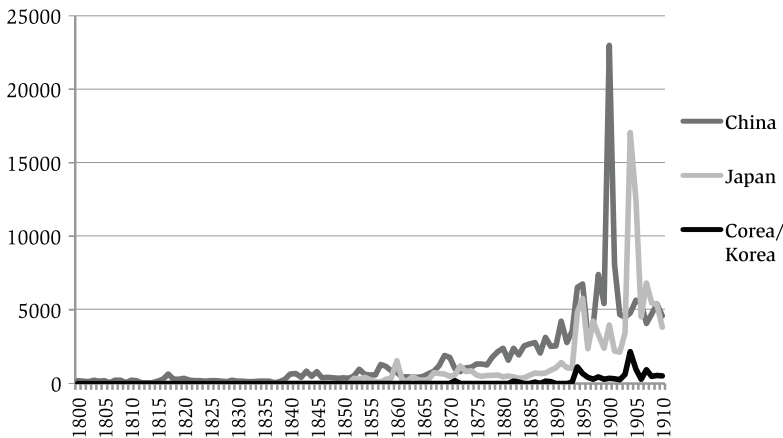
6. *New York Times*, "A New Book about Corea," November 6, 1882.

Figure 1. Headlines Mentioning Korea 1860-1910 (AHN)*



* America's Historical Newspapers (AHN) is an online newspaper database of roughly 2,000 historic American newspapers.

Figure 2. Headlines Mentioning China, Japan, and Korea 1800-1910 (AHN)



Figures 1 and 2 show the number of news and editorial headlines per year from 1860-1910 mentioning “Corea,” “Corean,” “Korea,” or “Korean.” For comparison, Figure 2 also shows headlines mentioning

“China” or “Chinese” and “Japan,” or “Japanese.” Korea made its first appearance in American newspapers in 1866 as a result of the General Sherman Incident and the French invasion of Korea. It then reemerged in 1871 as a result of the failed American expedition to Korea. In both cases, media coverage was minor and sporadic. The establishment of diplomacy and trade between the United States and Korea in 1882 catalyzed a period of sustained news coverage mostly spurred by the tense international situation among China, Japan, and Russia for influence in Korea. The Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars produced unprecedented spikes in news coverage. American newspapers tended to rely on correspondents stationed in Japan (and to a lesser extent China) for their information in Asia, meaning that Japanese propaganda and information channels often mediated American coverage of Korean affairs. As I will demonstrate, their reporting on current events often revealed a pro-Japan bias. Interestingly, American coverage of Korea never came close to approaching levels of reporting on China and Japan (see Figure 2). This would suggest that despite the emergence of “Korea” in the American consciousness, Korea remained a relatively obscure nation to many Americans throughout the early period of U.S.-Korean relations.

In addition to factual reporting, American newspapers published many articles about Korea of an ethnographic nature, and these too played an important role in popularizing notions of Korea. During the late nineteenth century, American newspapers evolved from local publications with political affiliations into profit-oriented dailies with large circulations (Baldasty 1992). Newspapers in the late nineteenth century featured sensational ethnographic articles about non-European peoples to entertain readers and increase their circulations. Articles employing the conventions of ethnography and describing Korea’s “queer” people and customs, as well as its poverty and squalor, proliferated almost as soon as Americans got their first glimpses of Korea after 1882. Many of the first American travelers to Korea were in fact residents of Japan, and newspapers often published their biased descriptions of Korea. Here too, readers were exposed to Japan’s influence on popular American perceptions of Korea. Significantly, a wave

of texts about Korea emerged during the early period of U.S.-Korean relations and constructed the first American perceptions of the previously unknown kingdom.

First Impressions: The “Hermit Kingdom,” 1860-1870s

The Korea that Americans first encountered was the Prince Regent Heungseon (Heungseon Daewongun)’s exclusionist Korea: “The Tae-won’gun [Daewongun] had a simple foreign policy: no treaties, no trade, no Catholics, no West, and no Japan” (Cumings 2005). The Prince Regent Heungseon’s exclusionism combined with America’s determination to gain an “open door” to trade in Korea, as it had done in Japan during the 1850s, led to violent clashes that precipitated negative perceptions of Korea in the United States (and *vice versa*). The first of these was the General Sherman Incident of 1866. When the *General Sherman* and its crew of Americans, British, and Chinese brazenly sailed up the Daedonggang river toward Pyeongyang demanding trading rights, Koreans destroyed the ship and killed the crew. The American press decried the incident as “an outrage upon our flag.”⁷ Newspapers widely derided Koreans as savage and xenophobic “Orientals” and called for swift retribution. The widely read *New York Tribune*, for example, chided Koreans:

Of Corea, a country in North-Eastern Asia, little is known. It is nominally tributary to China, and is inhabited by a semi-barbarous people, extremely jealous of foreigners, with whom they hold but a very limited intercourse . . . we suppose the commander of our squadron in the East will not be backward in seeking satisfaction for the horrible massacre, the actors in which deserve condign punishment.⁸

In their outrage, and given the lack of virtually any information about

7. *Albany Evening Journal*, “Corea,” November 10, 1866.

8. *New York Tribune*, “Atlantic Cable; French; Corea; Americans; North-Eastern Asia; China; Frenchmen,” November 7, 1866.

Korea at that time (newspapers sometimes described Korea as an island), writers constructed a highly imaginative and derogatory image of Korea by resorting to preexisting stereotypes about “Orientals” often hurled at the Chinese. Koreans were bloodthirsty and vicious, with little regard for human life; they were unfriendly and xenophobic; their government was feeble and despotic; and, above all, they were “savages” opposed to progress and intercourse with the civilized world, as demonstrated by their violent clashes with the United States and France. This, sadly, was how Korea entered into the American consciousness. Importantly, American officials shared these popular perceptions from an early stage. As Gordon Chang (2003) observes, “The dominant American attitude, as expressed in official as well as personal records, was that the Koreans were mendacious, backward, and simply barbaric.”

The failed American expedition to Korea in 1871 simply reinforced these perceptions. In May 1871, five American warships carrying several hundred armed soldiers descended on Korea, demanding redress for the General Sherman Incident and an open door for American merchants (Chang 2003). When Prince Regent Heungseon spurned the expedition by refusing to open his country to Western “barbarians,” armed conflict and bloodshed ensued. The Americans, convinced that nothing short of all-out war would persuade Koreans to capitulate, withdrew without accomplishing their objectives, only managing to harden Prince Regent Heungseon’s isolationism (Kim 1980). When word of the expedition’s failure reached the United States that summer, the press reviled Koreans by employing the same stock stereotypes it had used in 1866. The *New York Daily Tribune* reported:

If our fleet had killed every Korean soldier and had left the region of the Salee a howling wilderness, we should be no nearer the solution of the difficulty than before. Those fatalistic Orientals have less regard for human life—their own or others—than the beasts that perish. A few score thousand people, more or less, killed or captured, is of less account to the Korean Government than a similar disaster to the shoals of fish which crowd their coasts. The average

Oriental submits to the bowstring, or rips up his own bowels, with absolute composure.⁹

Coleman notes in *American Images of Korea* that American perceptions of Korea have historically been shaped by events of a “violent and tragic nature.” This was true from the very beginning. Early encounters between Korea and the United States poisoned American perceptions of Korea (not to mention Korean perceptions of the United States). Though the bitter hostility with which Americans regarded Korea throughout the 1860s and 1870s disappeared after 1882, the perception that Korea was backward, isolated, and averse to Western civilization would persist throughout the early period of U.S.-Korean relations. Ironically, it was soon after the opening of Korea in 1882 that William Elliot Griffis’s *Corea, the Hermit Nation* (1883) popularized the epithet “hermit nation” or “hermit kingdom” that came to epitomize and perpetuate these perceptions.

Ethnographic Reporting after 1882

The United States opened Korea through the Shufeldt Treaty of 1882, and the ensuing period of sustained U.S.-Korean interaction generated an ethnographic discourse on Korea. After an initial failed attempt to secure a treaty with Korea, Commodore Robert Shufeldt enlisted China to mediate the treaty. After several months of negotiations with Chinese officials, he secured Korean signatures on the Shufeldt Treaty on May 22, 1882 (Deuchler 1977). The treaty opened trade, established diplomatic and consular relations, protected sailors shipwrecked off the Korean coast, and assured Koreans of America’s “good offices” if they were dealt with “unjustly or oppressively” by a foreign power. The treaty inaugurated a period of sustained news coverage on Korea that would grow throughout the early period of U.S.-Korean relations, and had a tremendous impact on American perceptions of Korea. A few

9. *New York Daily Tribune*, “Our Korean Elephant,” August 15, 1871.

writers expressed misgivings about the good-offices provision of the treaty, which as one writer put it, “almost amount[s] to a political alliance.”¹⁰ A minority also criticized the “opening” of Korea as an act of imperialist aggression. Yet the overall response of the American media was positive and self-congratulatory. *The New York Times* declared it “a wonderful finale to a long, discouraging, and costly series of attempts to bring Corea into friendly relations with other portions of the civilized world.”¹¹

Ethnographic reporting on Korea emerged immediately upon the opening of Korea, debating whether or not Korea would prove to be profitable to American businesses now that they had gained an open door. Some writers believed it would. These writers felt that the United States could profit by making American industry the backbone of Korea's modernization, much like Gojong and the American diplomatic community envisioned. Prior to the opening of Korea, a rumor emerged that Korea was an Asian El Dorado of sorts abounding in precious metals. Some writers cautiously hoped that Americans would discover large gold deposits on the peninsula, not yet extracted by Koreans who lacked the modern technology to do so. Other writers were appalled by initial reports of squalid Korean villages and backward customs in Korea unbecoming of a civilization rich in gold or economically advanced enough to make a profitable trading partner. As more and more of these ethnographic descriptions found their way into newspapers, the latter school of thought came to dominate, and soon there was no more room for debate. These ethnographic images convinced Americans that Korea was a backward “Oriental” nation that, given its reputation for rejecting Western civilization, could not be expected to become a profitable place for Americans to do business. In no small part due to these convictions, the entire American community in Korea was only about three hundred strong in 1899, with only fifty working in the gold mines despite Gojong's eagerness to give mining concessions to Americans (a source of great frustration

10. *New York Times*, “The Treaty with Corea,” July 7, 1882.

11. *New York Times*, “The Treaty with Corea,” July 7, 1882.

to the American minister to Korea at the time, Horace Allen).¹² The following editorial from 1883 expresses the dominant view of Korea as an “immovable Asiatic kingdom” (note the comparison to Japan):

It is not likely that the treaty negotiated with Corea will have any large commercial results. Perry’s treaty with Japan opened up a country that had been closed to European commerce for centuries, with the exception of a limited trade with the Dutch. The change since then has been marvelous, for the Japanese have caught the spirit of progress, and are welcoming every new thing and every improvement that tends toward a higher civilization. Corea is altogether different. It is one of those immovable Asiatic kingdoms which has until now hated foreigners and resisted all efforts made to trade with it.¹³

The ethnographic reporting that underscored this perception originated largely from the pens of American residents of Japan, who traveled to ports in Korea aboard Japanese steamers, and other early Americans who visited Korea. In their writings to American newspapers, they described Korea’s bizarre customs, squalid villages, dirty people, and general backwardness. Their reports were so unflattering to Koreans that Horace Allen felt compelled to write his first book about Korea, *Korean Tales* (1889), “to correct the erroneous impressions I have found somewhat prevalent—that the Koreans were a semi-savage people.” Allen was particularly nettled by the reports from American residents from Japan, whom he disregarded as “globe trotters” with no real knowledge of Korea:

“Globe trotters,” in passing from Japan to North China, usually go by way of the Korean ports, now that a line of excellent Japanese steamships covers that route. These travellers see the somewhat barren coasts of Korea—left so, that outsiders might not be tempted to come to the then hermit country; perhaps they land at Chemulpoo

12. Allen to Hay, December 28, 1899, in U.S. Department of State (1949).

13. *Sun*, “The Treaty with Corea,” March 2, 1883.

[Jemulpo] (the port of the capital, thirty miles distant), and stroll through the rows of miserable, temporary huts, occupied by the stevedores, the pack-coolies, chair-bearers, and other transient scum, and then write a long article descriptive of Korea. As well might they describe America as seen among the slab shanties of one of the newest western railroad towns, for when the treaties were formed in 1882 not a house stood where Chemulpoo [Jemulpo] now stands, with its several thousand regular inhabitants and as many more transients (Allen 1889, preface).

As previously mentioned, the American community in Korea generally held more favorable impressions of Korea than did Americans at home, and there was a perceptual rift between men like Allen and policymakers in Washington. Allen was not the only American diplomat in Korea who detested ethnographic reporting on Koreans in the United States. The American legation in Korea subscribed to two newspapers, *The New York Herald* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and the ministers regularly read them. George Foulk, who like Allen had relatively positive view of Koreans and wished to cultivate American business on the peninsula, read these newspapers along with clippings sent to him by his family in the United States. He shared Allen's disdain for the American discourse on Korea and blamed Japan-influenced media coverage for Americans' distorted perceptions of Korea and their lack of interest in business opportunities tied to Korea's natural resources and modernization efforts. In a candid letter to his family from 1884, Foulk vented his frustration:

Every day there is some new evidence appearing of the wealth of Korea in gold I could almost guarantee a great money making scheme to a company of American capitalists if they could get the right (and they could) to do business here. Yet no Americans seem to care what goes on here at all. The government is taking steps to make many improvements which will necessitate large purchases from abroad. These projects are the building of a short railroad, erection of telegraph lines, establishment of a stock farm, lighting the palace with gas or electricity, etc. The trouble we have is that

all these things will probably fall into the hands of English firms, as not a single decent American has yet made any forcible proposition to do anything for Korea. Americans seem to have been greatly influenced by the newspaper accounts of Korea. These all emanate from Japanese, who of course lie to keep Western people out of the country.¹⁴

It did not take long for the press to come up with explanations for why Korea was economically backward, and these reinforced the notion that Korea was incapable of modernization on its own. The press attributed Korea's backwardness to its stubborn adherence to "Oriental" ways and opposition to Western civilization, as well as to the alleged laziness of Korean men. To Americans, men were supposed to embody the work ethic and enterprising spirit that was the engine of progress; when they observed *yangban* men lounging and studying while their wives worked their homes and fields, they were appalled. As one writer wrote: "The story is told by those who have seen it that it takes three able-bodied Coreans to run a common spade. The people are extremely indolent and as a consequence miserably poor."¹⁵ By contrast, the press depicted Korean women as hardworking victims of Korea's unenlightened gender relations and condemned their abject status as "slaves" of their husbands. In fact, the figure of the "Korean woman" was one of the most popular subjects in ethnographic reporting about Korea, and the emphasis on her abject status in Korean society was, in no small part, an effect of the feminist movement in the United States, which by the late nineteenth century had succeeded in making women's rights a mainstream political issue. Headlines such as "Corean Women: Noble Ladies and Degraded Slave Girls of

14. George Foulk to his parents and brothers, August 12, 1884, in *America's Man in Korea: The Private Letters of George C. Foulk, 1884-1887*, ed. Samuel Hawley (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2008), p. 50. The reader will also recall the epigraph to this article. The American legation in Seoul subscribed to *The New York Herald* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*. While stationed in Korea, Foulk regularly asked his family to mail him any newspaper clippings about Korea.

15. W. C. Kitchin, "Christianity in Corea," *Northern Christian Advocate*, January 31, 1884.

the Hermit Kingdom: They are More Secluded than Turks and Have Few Rights Respected by Man” were common. The oppressed Korean woman became a symbol of unenlightened society in Korea in the American national consciousness.

Ethnographic reporting also included a wide variety of articles about Korea’s “queer” customs, which exoticized Korean culture and reinforced the notion that Korea was a backward “Oriental” country. Newspapers around the country, urban and local, published everything from accounts of Korean superstitions, to Korean marriage rituals, to Korean garb and hats. For whatever reason, Korean hats fascinated Americans, and the texts written about them serve as an example of how American books and newspapers commodified and exoticized Korea’s “queer” customs. Perhaps no American was ever as fascinated by Korean hats as Percival Lowell. In *Chosön: The Land of the Morning Calm, A Sketch of Korea*, Lowell features a chapter on “Hats” that is longer than his chapters on government, religion, or geography. Lowell called Korea the “land of hats,” another epithet that would later find its way into the press. Sensational headlines like “Queer Costumes in the Land of Hats” were numerous. These corroborated with other books and news articles the construction of Korea as a bizarre and backward nation.

News Reports on the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars

The majority of writing about Korea from the turn of the century to the end of World War II consisted of “sympathetic reviews of Korea’s fate and/or efforts to rally Western support for Korea’s independence movements” (Coleman 1990); however, the majority of writing from 1882-1905 was pro-Japan. Writers threw their moral support behind Japan during the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars and showed hardly any concern when Japan made Korea a protectorate following its victory in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905. There are two overarching reasons for this. First, as discussed earlier, Japanese information channels significantly mediated the press’s information. In many cases,

newspapers simply published press releases issued in English by the Japanese government; by contrast, they rarely sought out or published the official positions of Koreans, or Japan's adversaries. Accordingly, American newspapers portrayed Japan as regrettably engaging in war against its aggressive neighbors and strengthening its position in Korea seeking only to spread Western civilization. Second, the American discourse on Korea as a backward nation opposed to a nation accepting Western progress and the idea that these wars constituted a battle between the forces of Western civilization and "Oriental" backwardness made Americans receptive to Japanese propaganda.

The Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1894 as a result of the Donghak Rebellion in Korea, and reporting exhibited a strong pro-Japan bias. In the spring of 1894, persecuted adherents of the Donghak religion joined peasants upset with governmental corruption and the increasing foreign presence on the peninsula, and launched a large-scale armed insurrection, the largest in Korean history (Larsen 2008). In a panic, the Korean government asked China for military assistance to put down the rebellion. When the Japanese learned that China had landed 3,000 troops in Korea, they sent 8,000 troops to Incheon in June 1894 (Eckert 1990). The Japanese provoked a war by seizing Gyeongbokgung palace on July 23, and war officially began on August 1 (Weems 1964). It ended with a Japanese victory on April 17, 1895. The press vilified the Chinese and their "backward" influence in Korea and threw its moral support behind Japan. American newspapers claimed that a Chinese victory would hinder progress in East Asia and threaten the "open door" system upon which American interests in Korea depended. A Japanese victory, on the other hand, would be a boon to ensure the maintenance of the open door system and bring Western civilization to Korea.

The New York Herald, one of the most influential newspapers in the United States, took an overtly pro-Japanese stance in the war and actually went so far as to advocate American involvement on Japan's behalf. In an article called "Our Duty in Corea," published on July 21, 1894, it declared:

[Japan] has the right to occupy Korea in the interest of the commerce and civilization of the Western world. She will remain in Korea as warder of the little kingdom just emerging from the Chinese darkness, assisting her in moral, intellectual and material development, leaving the country when her work is done, when the Hermit Kingdom has been placed on the proper pathway of good government. Like Japan, and through Japan, Korea must be made the outpost of Western civilization and commerce against Mongolian decrepitude and exclusiveness.¹⁶

Another *Herald* article that month called for the United States to deploy war ships to assist Japan, “in her task of wresting these twelve millions of Korea’s inhabitants away from the degrading influence of China.”¹⁷ It stated: “Let Korea be led through Japanese tutelage into a development that will bring her people into touch with our civilization and commerce. To permit the people of the Hermit Kingdom to become a vassal of China would be a crime.” Many other newspapers across the country echoed a similar pro-Japan bias, with Korea playing the role of recalcitrant “Oriental” country and Japan being cast as the bearer of Western civilization.

Interestingly, given the success of the early Christian missionaries in Korea, Christian publications in the United States also supported the Japanese war effort and reinforced the pro-Japan discourse, along with unflattering images of Korea that enveloped the American public. Christian publications often lent moral support to Japan’s “civilizing mission” in Korea and hoped, in particular, that Japan would advance the Christian mission there. Many of these publications’ contributing writers were missionaries in Japan. One such writer for *The Missionary Herald*, an influential Christian publication, opined: “Japan does not seek to subjugate Korea, but to secure her independence and also thorough reform in the administration of her government. May God grant that the bloodshed, suffering, and death incident to this war shall be the means in his hands of hastening the coming of Christ’s

16. *New York Herald*, “Our Duty in Korea,” July 21, 1894.

17. *New York Herald*, “Korea and the Asiatic Powers,” July 16, 1894.

kingdom in these three empires of the East!”¹⁸

Japan’s victory in the Sino-Japanese War in April 1895 greatly pleased the press, but the assassination of Queen Min a few months later dealt a blow to its otherwise unwavering faith in Japan and its “civilizing mission” in Asia. Initially, the press reported Tokyo’s version of the story that Japanese ruffians who had no connection to the Japanese legation in Korea carried out the assassination, and it dismissed other accounts. By the end of 1895, however, the press could no longer deny the truth that the Japanese minister, Miura Goro, was directly connected to the intrigue. Even John A. Cockerill, a staunchly pro-Japan reporter for *The New York Herald*, recanted his support for Japan in an article entitled “Blunders of Japan in Seoul”: “I am sincerely sorry, for I have hitherto had full faith in the good intentions of Japan To have her now, here in Corea, where the field is open to her best influences, adopting the methods of the barbarians of Asia—methods which would have shamed India and Thibet in their darkest periods—is deplorable indeed.”¹⁹

Yet the outburst of negative press generated by Queen Min’s assassination was short-lived, and the press adopted an even stronger pro-Japanese position in the Russo-Japanese War, which broke out less than a decade later. The Russo-Japanese War began in February 1904 when the Japanese attacked the Russians at Port Arthur. In a series of victories that shocked the Western world, Japan emerged victorious in the war. The Treaty of Portsmouth, in which Russia acknowledged Japanese supremacy in Korea, ended the war in September 1905 (Eckert 1990). All the major newspapers regularly covered the war as it unfolded, and the Russo-Japanese War generated an unprecedented spike in media coverage. As with the Sino-Japanese War, newspapers often obtained their information from war correspondents stationed in Japan and official statements issued by the Japanese government. They

18. J. D. Davis, “The War in Korea—Its Causes and the Present Outlook,” *Missionary Herald, Containing the Proceedings of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1821-1906)*, October 1, 1894.

19. John A. Cockerill, “Blunders of Japan in Seoul,” *New York Tribune*, December 24, 1895.

upheld their earlier pro-Japan position and did not object when Japan made Korea a protectorate in 1905. Interestingly, Gojong sent two representatives to the United States during the war to “inaugurate a newspaper campaign to interest Americans in Korea’s plight.” Sympathetic Americans in Korea also tried to sway public opinion. After Japan forced Koreans to sign the Eulsa Treaty in 1905, missionary Homer B. Hulbert interviewed with American newspapers and informed them that the treaty was in fact signed under duress and therefore invalid. His efforts, like those of Gojong’s officials, did little to counteract the popular American support for Japan and indifference to Korean independence.

Conclusion

Given Gojong’s progressive eagerness to modernize with American assistance along with the pro-Korea advocacy of American diplomats in Seoul, it is somewhat surprising that key officials in Washington, such as Roosevelt and Rockhill, possessed negative perceptions of Korea that influenced their policymaking on an ideological level. An examination of popular American perceptions of Korea and Korean affairs during the time reveals that these perceptions were firmly rooted in a cultural discourse on Korea, which emerged during this period as the first American texts began to proliferate throughout the country. This discourse was shaped by America’s early violent encounters with Korea under Prince Regent Heungseon, colored by ethnographic books and reporting upon Korea’s opening in 1882, and informed by the ideologies of Western imperialism. It was also mediated by Japanese information channels. George Foulk was right in 1884 (more right than he could have known at that time) when he wrote that Americans’ gravest misunderstanding of Korea was “the comment that the government and people bitterly oppose progress,” a misconception he himself blamed primarily on American newspapers. In the minds of Americans immersed in this discourse, including influential policy-makers in Washington like Roosevelt and Rockhill, it was desirable

that Japan should guide such an unenlightened and recalcitrant nation as Korea (that is, the Korea they imagined) to civilization.

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