

4. KOREA AND THE 1ST SINO-JAPANESE WAR

The Gabo Reforms: beginning of Korean modernization

Because Korea objected strenuously, with enthusiastic Chinese support, to domestic reforms proposed by Japan, the Japanese decided to take matters into their own hands. They ousted Queen Min's government and established a pro-Japanese government with the Daewongun at its head. The Japan-led domestic reforms instituted by the new government during the 1st Sino-Japanese War are referred to as the Gabo Reforms.

At the core of the Gabo Reforms was a provisional government run by a collegial body called the Deliberative Council, whose members each had an equal voice and whose decisions were made by majority vote. The Council existed for less than five months (from July 25, 1894, immediately after Japanese demands succeeded in putting an end to China's suzerainty over Korea, until December 17 of that year). Still, a great many reforms were accomplished during that brief period. They represented Korea's first attempt at modernization, and included the following:

1. The Chinese calendar was replaced with a Korean calendar that begins in 1392, the year the Joseon dynasty was established
2. Hiring was to be done without regard to social class or lineage
3. Slave trade was banned
4. Widows were permitted to remarry regardless of social class
5. Common people could now express their opinions to the Deliberative Council; those with significant talent could be hired as government officials
6. Government officials guilty of acquiring ill-gotten gains would be punished
7. Arrest and punishment unsupported by judicial authority were prohibited
8. Stevedores, actors, and leather workers were no longer be considered outcasts
9. Torture was prohibited
10. Taxes were to be paid in cash
11. Talented students would have opportunities to study abroad
12. Foreign advisers would be hired
13. The use of opium was banned

The decision was made to implement 208 reforms. An examination of the 13 listed above tell us how stagnant and backward Korean politics and society had been. Even so, equally backward China would never have countenanced such reforms.

Unfortunately, internecine strife in Korea presented a serious obstacle to the reforms. The Daewongun and the Deliberative Council were at odds. In August Kim Hong-jip and Eo Yun-jung, both moderate gradualists, formed a cabinet, reportedly to assuage the friction between the new government and the Daewongun.

The conflict between the Daewongun and the Deliberative Council was not over policy; it was nothing more than factional strife. But since the new cabinet was unable to support or control either side, domestic reforms stagnated. Ōtori Keisuke, the Japanese ambassador to Korea, was recalled to Japan, and in mid-October Inoue Kaoru replaced him.

The first thing Inoue did was to remove the Daewongun from the government. He then presented a 20-item domestic reform proposal to the Korean government, commenting that “the administration must form a united front.” However, Queen Min’s followers, eager to regain power, prevailed upon King Gojong who, without consulting either the prime minister or Inoue, appointed four members of the queen’s faction to ministerial positions. Inoue took issue with the queen’s interference in government affairs. In December he launched an essentially pro-Japanese cabinet (for instance, he selected Pak Yong-hyo as home minister) and reshaped the government bureaucracy by abolishing the Deliberative Council.

In January 1895 King Gojong announced his 14-article reform charter called “Exemplary Rules,” which included the reforms listed below. They are quite reminiscent of modernization policies implemented during the Meiji Renovation.

Article 1: Korea will suppress the tendency to depend upon China, and establish a basis for autonomy.

Article 3: Neither the king nor the queen may interfere in government affairs.

Article 4: There will be separation between royal and government affairs.

Article 5: Official boundaries shall be set between the State Council and the various government offices.

Article 6: Law will govern all taxation.

Article 11: Talented young people will be given the opportunity to study abroad.

Article 12: A conscription system shall be established

Article 13: Civil and criminal laws shall be enacted.

Article 14: Persons from a variety of backgrounds shall be hired; social class alone will no longer be the deciding factor.

Impediments to Korean independence

Unfortunately, domestic discord in Korea engendered an atmosphere of hopelessness. On February 11, not long after the reform charter was promulgated, it collapsed due to disputes between old-school politicians like Prime Minister Kim Hong-jip and Minister of Revenue Eo Yun-jung, and progressives like Minister of the Interior Pak Yong-hyo. This situation was exacerbated by Gojong’s and Queen Min’s secret plan that involved using Pak Yong-hyo, their archenemy since the Gapsin Coup, to help them supplant Kim Hong-jip and Eo Yun-jung and recover their former power.

The 1st Sino-Japanese War, waged while the Gabo Reforms were in progress, ended with an overwhelming Japanese victory. But Japan’s deferring to Russia in the Triple Intervention gave

rise to an anti-Japanese, pro-Russian proclivity at the Korean court. The conflict between the progressives and the conservatives continued to worsen and ultimately became one between pro-Japanese and pro-Russian factions.

On June 4 Japan's Diet passed a resolution concerning Korea policy. Japan would, in the future, avoid interfering in Korean affairs, and allow Korea to achieve autonomy on its own. However, this policy change was interpreted by Queen Min as a manifestation of Japan's fear of Russia. She began to attempt to rein Japan in through pro-Russian policies, and to acquire more strength for her faction.

Russia took full advantage of the discord between the progressives and conservatives. Russian Ambassador Weber made overtures to Queen Min and her followers, boasting about Russia's might. What ensued was a seemingly endless, secretive feud that festered and grew within Korea, and soon caused political upheaval.

Readers may feel that I have devoted an inordinate amount of space to the Gabo Reforms and to the domestic situation in Korea, which obstructed those reforms. But it is important to realize that this was the starting point of Japan's relationship with Korea in the modern era, and it is impossible to portray Korean history equitably unless we delve into these events. If it had not been for Korean internal conflict, reforms based on the Meiji Renovation model would have proceeded steadily, and Korean independence and modernization would certainly have made great strides forward. Since Japan's victory in the 1st Sino-Japanese War had rid Korea of its Chinese yoke, domestic reforms had gotten underway with Japanese guidance, and Japanese interference was limited under the world's watchful eyes, this was the perfect opportunity for Korea to achieve independence as a modern nation. However, the Koreans wasted that opportunity.

The Koreans forgot about independence during this most opportune moment, instead allowing themselves to be distracted by domestic discord. They rejected modernization, claiming it was a Japanese plot. There is a propitious time for the independence of a nation or a people. When it comes, they must sense it, and use it to their best advantage – that is the wisdom of a people. A good example of that phenomenon was Japan's Meiji Renovation. The fact that the Koreans were unable to effectively use this precious opportunity, when it presented itself to them, the way to independence and modernization showed to them by Japan, is totally their fault. Blaming Japan for their failings is exceedingly reprehensible, and grossly unfair.

In any case, after Russia began to cast its shadow over Korea, international politics abruptly turned a cold shoulder toward Korea. The opportunity for independence was never again to arise.

Pro-Russian, anti-Japanese environment worsens; Eulmi Incident

After the 1st Sino-Japanese War, the Korean political situation took another, major turn. When Japan submitted to the Triple Intervention, pro-Japanese elements in Korea were in turmoil. Meanwhile, the Russians, conspiring with Queen Min, toppled the pro-Japan cabinet, and the pro-Russians began maneuvering their way toward control of Korea. At that time the palace was protected by a corps of guards under the command of Americans. But the guards themselves were undisciplined, old-style soldiers. There was also a Military Training Division with proper discipline, consisting of two battalions (800 men) trained by a Japanese instructor. To get rid of

all Japanese sympathizers, the Russians abolished the Military Training Division and confiscated their weapons, infuriating the officers and their men.

I have alluded to Queen Min innumerable times thus far, and must needs allude to her once again. She was reputed to be a harridan, and was often characterized as intelligent, wily, deceitful, envious, and ruthless. She was certainly a strong-minded woman, and is often compared to the Chinese Empress Dowager Cixi. She became King Gojong's consort, and having won his affection, began to meddle constantly in state affairs. When the king received foreign dignitaries, Queen Min, hidden behind a folding screen, would whisper suggestions to him. Her whims would more often than not cause upheavals in Korean politics. After the 1st Sino-Japanese War, she was instrumental in creating an anti-Japanese, pro-Russian climate.

“Bury the queen!” became the war cry not only of Japanese idealists in Korea, but also of Korean politicians who opposed the queen's faction. Through Japanese idealists, pro-Japan Koreans like Gen. I Ju-hoe, Military Training Division Commander I Du-hwang, and U Beom-seon approached opponents of the queen who were ready to take action. Their efforts resulted in the formation of a federation of Japanese and Korean volunteers.¹

On October 7, 1895 the Korean government announced that the Military Training Division would be disbanded and its weapons confiscated. Early the next morning, the Military Training Division and Japanese and Korean partisans, under orders from Japanese Ambassador Miura Gorō, who had pledged to do away with Queen Min, entered the palace with the Daewongun. The Military Training Division clashed with palace guards and an altercation ensued in the palace during which Queen Min was killed. This series of events became known as the Eulmi Incident. The pro-Japanese faction took control of the government, replacing the pro-Russian faction. But when the Japanese government learned that Japanese nationals had been involved in the incident, it conducted an investigation, recalled more than 40 Japanese, including Ambassador Miura, to Japan, and put them in prison.

Korean condemnation of the incident was extremely severe. The Military Training Division was dissolved, and its commanders I Ju-hoe and U Beom-seon discharged. Thirty-three persons allegedly complicit in the murder of Queen Min were arrested and tried. Three Koreans who had played pivotal roles were executed, including I Ju-hoe.

I Ju-hoe reacted to the news that Ambassador Miura and other Japanese had been arrested as follows. “It is quite obvious that the entire nation of Japan did its utmost to help my country, Korea. Many of our Japanese partisans have been imprisoned. It would be extremely immoral to turn a blind eye to this situation.” He then calmly submitted to arrest and execution. I's dying for what he believed was right moved Japanese partisans so deeply that later they had a stone monument

¹ Kokuryūkai (Black Dragon Society), *Tōa senkaku shishi kiden, jō* (Biographies of pioneer East Asian patriots, vol. 1) (Tokyo: Hara Shobō, 1966).

erected to honor the three Koreans who had been executed: I Ju-hoe, I Du-hwang, and U Beom-seon, thus preserving the heroic deeds of I Ju-hoe for future generations.²

The killing of Queen Min was an extraordinary event. But at that juncture nearly every event that transpired in Korea was equally extraordinary. These were far from normal times.

Russian “protectorship” of Korea

Pro-Russian elements in Korea wasted no time in exacting revenge upon the pro-Japanese faction. In November, after the Eulmi Incident, the pro-Russia faction conspired with American military instructors, hatching a plan to kidnap the Korean king and confine him in the Russian legation. However, the kidnappers were thwarted by imperial guards, and most of them fled to the Russian and American legations. As far as strife involving the king and queen was concerned, the abortive abduction was an incident just as extraordinary as the murder of the queen, but Russia’s manipulation of King Gojong took its most bizarre form during the following year when the king’s internal exile to the Russian legation began.

Soon after the death of Queen Min, Kim Hong-jip formed a new pro-Japanese cabinet, and once again began implementing reforms. The new government did away with the calendar Korea had inherited from China, and replaced it with the solar calendar on November 17, 1895; 1392, the year marking the beginning of the Joseon dynasty, was designated year one. Following the Japanese model, the government also established the first elementary schools in Seoul, four of them, set up a system for vaccinating children, and established a postal system. Additionally, it limited the era name to one for each ruler’s reign, and settled upon Geonyang as the era name beginning with 1896, the 505th year of the Joseon dynasty. Another reform was the Short Hair Act, which involved the cutting off of men’s topknots; King Gojong set an example by being the first to submit to the shears.

But the fact that the Short Hair Act was compulsory alienated the Korean people, and in 1896 uprisings cropped up all over the nation. In January the military response to these uprisings left the capital without a robust defense. Russian Ambassador Weber took advantage of that situation by bringing 100 Russian sailors into Korea supposedly to protect the Russian legation. Conspiring with pro-Russian Koreans, Weber kidnapped the king on February 11 and escorted him to the Russian legation. The king’s sojourn there is referred to as Gojong’s internal exile. Americans too were instrumental in carrying off this plot.

Now that the pro-Russian faction had the upper hand, government leaders Kim Hong-jip and Eo Yun-jung were murdered, and many members of the pro-Japan faction fled to Japan. According to Daily Mail correspondent F.A. MacKenzie, abnormal acts were rampant: “Two ministers were dragged into the street and slaughtered there with every accompaniment of brutality.” One man even carved a piece of flesh from one of the corpses and put it into his mouth.³

² *Ibid.*

³ F.A. Mackenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1908), 81.

Gojong issued edicts from the Russian legation, ordering the arrest of Japanese sympathizers and annulling the Short Hair Act and other reforms. The disorder in Korea reached crisis level. During the turmoil more than 30 Japanese were killed, and Japanese assets valued at more than ¥10,000 were stolen or destroyed. Japan's authority in Korea had sunk to historical depths. Korean government affairs were decided at the Russian legation, where the king was ensconced, and Russia controlled the Korean political situation.

Russian military personnel protected the pro-Russian cabinet, and two advisers arrived from Russia to control Korean financial and military affairs. Twenty Russian officers trained the Korean military, and weapons and ammunition were imported from Vladivostok. The Russians continued to gain power as Russian language schools sprang up, and Russia acquired mining rights in Hamgyong province. For the year during which the King lived at the Russian legation, Russia steadily reaped the fruits of its "protectorship." Russian accumulation of interests served as a stimulus to other great powers. During Gojong's internal exile, Korea made a great many concessions to Russia and other powers.

Gojong's internal exile meant that Korean policy was drafted at the Russian legation, another extraordinary circumstance. Korea's political future looked very worrisome.

At this point Japan was exploring two options: (1) collaborate with Western powers in guaranteeing Korean independence, or (2) enter into an agreement with Russia for joint administration of Korean domestic affairs. Since the Western powers were uninterested in Korea's problems, the only option for Japan was to collaborate with the Russians to prevent them from making further inroads into Korea. The resulting agreements were the Komura-Weber Memorandum (May 1896), named after Japanese Ambassador to Korea, Komura Jutarō, and his Russian counterpart, Karl Ivanovich Weber, and the Yamagata-Lobanov Agreement (June 1896), named after its signatories, former Japanese Prime Minister, Yamagata Aritomo, and Russian Foreign Minister Alexei Lobanov-Rostovsky.

A balance of power had been achieved between Japan and Russia, and stability was restored in Korea. In February 1897, Gojong departed from the Russian legation and returned to the palace.

Russia's bad faith

Unfortunately, subsequent Russian behavior was nothing short of deceitful. Foreign Minister Lobanov, while entering into an agreement with Japan, almost simultaneously signed secret pacts with China (the Li-Lobanov Treaty) and Korea. The one with Korea enabled Russia to send Russian military instructors to the Korean court and to acquire lumber options in the Yalu River valley, thus trampling on the agreement with Japan. In April 1897 the Koreans signed a contract with Russia for the hiring of 60 Russian officers, revealing that their attachment to Russia was still very much alive. The Japanese asked the Koreans to desist from employing Russian officers, but the Koreans ignored the request. In September King Gojong announced that he should now be addressed as "emperor." He changed the name of his country to Daehan jeguk, or Great Korean Empire, and by doing so he had succeeded in creating, at least superficially, an independent country.

At about the same time, Alexey Shpeyer replaced Weber as Russian ambassador to Korea.

According to the aforementioned F.A. MacKenzie, Shpeyer was a dynamic Russian expansionist. He “plainly had orders to quicken the pace, and he did so. He assumed a most aggressive and unpleasant attitude towards other foreigners, and this quickly brought matters to a crisis.”⁴

Shpeyer, unlike Weber, came out with uncompromising Korean policies, supported by the secret Russo-Korean agreement. In 1897, after painstaking efforts, the Japanese managed to acquire a copy of that secret agreement, forged in 1896. The agreement included a provision stating that the king of Korea was welcome to reside at the Russian legation for as long as he liked, as well as Korean promises to hire Russian military and financial advisers. To make matters even more interesting, Foreign Minister Lobanov later said that Russia would enter into a defensive alliance with Korea: Russia would send troops to Korea in the event of a domestic uprising or a threat from another nation that might jeopardize the autonomy and independence of Korea.

But high-pressure Russian diplomatic tactics backfired when they incurred the enmity of the Korean people. In meetings held in February and March of 1898, criticism of Russia intensified. It was during that period that Shpeyer told Japanese Ambassador Katō Masuo that in his personal opinion, the Korean court could not be saved unless drastic measures were taken, that Korea would never achieve independence, and that Japan and Russia should form a joint protectorate to administer Korea.

Shpeyer, enraged by Korean animosity, told the Korean court that he would not tolerate sudden Korean lack of appreciation for Russian goodwill, reminding them it was upon Korea’s request that Russia had sent military instructors and financial advisors. He asked whether they still wanted help from Russia. If the answer was yes, Russia would take the necessary action, but he needed a decision within 24 hours. When the shocked Koreans sought advice secretly from Japan, the Japanese advised them to politely decline Russian aid, and the Koreans took their advice. As a result, on March 23, Russian military and financial advisors departed from Korea.

Russian influence over Korea had subsided, but the ever-vigilant Russians now shifted their focus to a new target – a southward advance to Manchuria. Russia leased Port Arthur and Dalian from China on March 27, only four days after its military and financial advisers had left Korea.

Needless to say, Port Arthur and Dalian were pivotal locations on the Liaodong peninsula, both for military and commercial reasons. After all, it was those areas that Russia, France, and Germany had successfully pressured Japan to retrocede to China. Russia felt compelled to obtain Japanese acknowledgement for its unethical leasing of the retroceded territory. The resulting agreement was the Nishi-Rosen Agreement, named after Foreign Ministers Nishi Tokujirō and Roman Romanovich Rosen, and concluded in April 1898.

According to that agreement, both nations agreed to desist from interfering in domestic Korean affairs, and promised to obtain prior approval from the other party before supplying military or financial advisers in response to requests from Korea. It was an instrument that served as a

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92-93.

framework for Russian acknowledgement of Japanese commercial interests in Korea, and therefore Japan's sphere of influence in Korea, and Japan's implicit recognition of Russia's leasing of Port Arthur and Dalian.

Still, as Japanese ambassador to the UK, Katō Takaaki, put it, it soon became clear that “the promise not to interfere in Korean domestic affairs is an empty one.” In other words, Russia certainly did not abandon its inroads into Korea as stated in the agreement. The Russians eventually completed the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern railways, and when the finishing touches had been put on Russian preparations for invasion of the Far East, they sat back and waited for the right time to once again pounce on the Korean peninsula.