



Traditional Korean islanders encounters with the British navy in the 1880s: The Port Hamilton Affair of 1885–1887

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Abstract This article deals with the encounters between a traditional Korean rural and island population and western military forces when the British navy occupied Geomundo, an archipelago known to them as Port Hamilton, for 22 months between 1885 and 1887. The paper first outlines the sometimes painful process of East Asian countries being opened up to trade and outside influences in the 19th century, a process sometimes urged upon them by naval weapons in this era of gunboat diplomacy. This provides the setting for the Port Hamilton Affair itself when in preparation for possible war with Russia, a British naval squadron steamed into Port Hamilton and took it without reference to the local people or their national government. After brief reference to the political consequences of this action, the focus is then on what the records from the occupation and earlier investigations by the British, who had long coveted the islands' strategic harbour, reveal about the life of the islanders. The article considers both their traditional life, from a time rather before western travel accounts were written about the Korean mainland, and how the islanders fared under the British.

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The reluctant opening up of East Asia

Korea, the Land of the Morning Calm, bore also another sobriquet in the 19th century as the 'Hermit Kingdom'; 'hermit' was used, for example, by William Elliot Griffis in the title of his book, *Corea: the Hermit Nation* (1882). A hermit is

isolated and inwardly focused and a British naval officer, Cyprian Bridge (1876: 101) was imputing such characteristics to Korea some years before Griffis's book appeared when he wrote: 'Korea is the last semi-civilised state which has resisted the attempts of foreigners to open intercourse with it'. Bridge's spatial context was the nations of East Asia, which one by one, and with much reluctance, over the previous decades had been forced to come to agreements with aggressive western nations to open themselves up to trade and other influences. China, defeated in the First Opium War of 1839–1842, had been forced to sign the 1842 Treaty of Nanking with Great Britain,

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which led to the opening of a number of treaty ports. Japan was forced into its own unequal treaties from 1854 when the Convention of Kanagawa (strengthened into the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1858) was forced upon the reluctant Asian nation by the USA under the threats of the ‘black ships’ of Commodore Matthew Perry in a classic example of gunboat diplomacy. As was the case with China, Japan’s first treaty was soon followed by others with western nations and a number of treaty ports were opened up for trade and foreign residence.

Prior to the appearance of Commodore Perry off its coasts Japan had been just as hermit-like as Korea. Its policy of national seclusion, *sakoku*, imposed from the 1630s had kept the country almost completely isolated. A British diplomat of the period compared Japan to Sleeping Beauty, whose dreams were then interrupted by the ‘eager and vigorous West’ (Satow, 1921: 90). Before the interruption, Japan had had just four points of contact and trade with the outside world: with Hokkaido to the north, which was then peopled by the Ainu and was not brought fully into the Japanese realm until being colonised from 1869; with the Ryukyu kingdom (Okinawa) to the southwest, which was annexed by Japan in 1879; with Korea through a trading post at Busan managed through the strategic and sometimes contested island of Tsushima, and finally with Europe in the form of the Dutch East India Company, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC). The VOC was allowed access to Dejima (Japanese for ‘exit island’), an artificial island off Nagasaki, where both their trade and their employees could be carefully monitored and controlled. (Dejima is now in the process of being reconstructed as a heritage project and tourist attraction).

Being opened up by the treaties undoubtedly stimulated East Asian development and industrialisation. For example in Japan, the Scottish entrepreneur, Thomas Blake Glover who moved to Nagasaki in 1859, was involved with railway development and coal mining. He helped to found what are now the Mitsubishi manufacturing empire and the Kirin brewery. However, the transition towards a modern state in Japan was certainly not smooth or peaceful. There was reluctance amongst some traditionalists to accept the new arrangements and the new, foreign, people. One example was the Namagugi Incident on September 1862 when a British merchant was killed in what could be read as a dispute over precedence on the public road near Kanagawa when his party of westerners clashed with the train and retinue of Daimyo Shimadzu Hisamitsu, father and regent of the Prince of Satsuma (the name for southern Kyushu, around Kagoshima). The Namagugi Incident led directly to the brief Anglo-Satsuma War of 1863, when British warships bombarded Kagoshima. That action and other clashes with the west led some in Japan to realise that it had to modernise and the Meiji restoration of 1868 (and the violent response to it) was one result. After a somewhat bloody and contested journey Japan became a simulacrum of a western nation with a readiness to adopt colonialist attitudes – also gunboat diplomacy – in its interactions with other East Asian nations: the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895; the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, and its colonisation programme. Before such major events, Japan had imposed upon Korea the latter’s first foreign – and unequal – treaty, the Treaty of Ganghwa in 1876. This was classic gunboat diplomacy (Kim, 2012), ‘diplomacy with a gun to the temple’ (Cumings, 1997: 102). Actual warships were involved, Japan sending ships and troops to Busan and Gangh-

wado in January 1876 with demands for a treaty in retaliation for what may well have been a rather too convenient incident in September 1875 when its warship, the *Unyo Maru*, ostensibly on a surveying mission, had attracted Korean fire from Gangh-wado. As with Japan and China, Korea’s first foreign treaty was soon followed by a number of others and western trade, people and influence challenged traditional Korea.

Many elements within the ‘Hermit Nation’ were antipathetic towards foreign influences, including significant people such as the conservative Yi Ha-eung, always referred to (under various spellings) as the Daewongun, Prince of the Great Court and regent to his young son, King Gojong (Yi Myōng-bok). Korea had for centuries given tribute to China in a Confucian-style familial relationship, China serving as its vassal’s ‘big brother’. However, China had largely left Korea to its own devices and had not imposed strong controls. It is significant that the Treaty of Ganghwa, which recognised Korea as a sovereign state, was signed after the more progressive Gojong had assumed rule himself in 1873. After the treaties there was unrest: the *Imo* Incident of 1882 and the *Gapsin* Coup of 1884. These included Japanese involvement, countered by China which began to assert a much more directive approach to its ‘little brother’. These two nations were to fight over – in both senses of that word – Korea in 1894–1895 in the Sino-Japanese War and a decade later, after its decisive victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905, Japan took control of Korea, first as a protectorate and then from 1910–1945 as colonial ruler. In Qing China the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the 19th century was only one example of anti-foreign unrest.

The Port Hamilton Affair

It is against this situation of East Asian enforced interaction with outside powers, which often stimulated strong, sometimes violent reactions within and between the nations, that the Port Hamilton Affair took place. This brought onto the stage two other nations with Asian pretensions: Great Britain and Russia. Russia at this period was actively involved in engagement with Asia, following its defeat in its European theatre in the Crimean War. Territory had been obtained from China under the Treaty of Peking (Beijing) in 1860, after which its Pacific port of Vladivostok – a name that means, somewhat challengingly, ‘Ruler of the East’ – was founded. Vladivostok became the base for a Russian fleet in 1872. In 1884 and into 1885 Russia had become active in its undefined border region with Afghanistan. Russia occupied the Merv oasis and, more significantly, in March 1885 clashed with Afghan troops further south at Panjdeh. This was seen to endanger Herat, a strategic town of western Afghanistan, the possession of which by Russia would threaten British India. Britain could not accept such a possibility and for a few months it seemed likely that Britain and Russia would go to war. That had an impact much further east, for Britain, properly called then the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, took pre-emptive action against Russia by seizing the Korean archipelago now called Geomundo. This group of islands encloses an extensive water body known to the British, who had surveyed the area in 1845, as Port Hamilton. The British had thought of seizing this strategic asset in both 1860 and, more seriously in 1875. Finally, in April 1885 it was taken. Two principal reasons can be advanced for the action at this time. Firstly British possession

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