

Korea's Entry into the Expanding European International Society: From the Treaty System to the Japanese Annexation



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Abstract

This article examines Korea's transition from a Sino-centric international society to its annexation by Japan in 1910, highlighting the injustices faced by the Korean people and the Joseon dynasty as a sovereign state. The study provides a historical context to understand Korea's struggle for justice within twentieth-century world politics. It begins by exploring the characteristics of the Sino-centric international society, centered around China, and its transformation under the influence of expanding European international society, characterized by institutions like sovereignty, diplomacy, and international law. The article critically analyzes the interactions between the East Asian and European systems, revealing how the European system's expansion marginalized Korea's voice and autonomy. It discusses the ideological and political dynamics of the Sino-centric tributary system and how the West-centric view overshadowed Korea's demand for justice. The study further delves into the geopolitical tensions between Qing China and Japan, examining how Korea's aspirations for sovereignty were compromised amidst regional power struggles and the imposition of European international norms, culminating in Korea's annexation by Japan. The article aims to shed light on Korea's historical struggle for justice, emphasizing the broader implications of international societal changes on weaker states.

Keywords: East Asia, Korea, Modernization, East Asian International Society, European International Society, Expansion of International Society

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I. Introduction

This article is about Korea's entry into expanding European international society and its eventual annexation by Japan in 1910, a great injustice done to Joseon as a nominally independent sovereign state and to the Korean people. The purpose of this article is to provide a historical context for understanding the Korean people's struggle for justice in the twentieth century world politics and international relations.

Korea's independent voice and struggle for justice and its historical process in the midst of East Asia's transition from a Sino-centric international society to the international society of sovereign states led by Europe, which is the main issue to be addressed in this thesis, must begin with the interpretation of the expansion of the European international society. In other words, priority should be given to the discussions of the characteristics of the Sino-centric international society composed of Korea, China and other countries that existed before the expansion/incorporation of the European international society and how the latter has challenged and replaced the East Asian international society.

This process can be understood by conceptualising the primary institutions that reflect the *nature* of the international society. Then, it is possible to distinguish various regional international societies other than Europe or to infer their characteristics (Buzan 2004, 161-204; Schouenborg 2012, 130-152). Therefore, the starting point of this discussion can be found by examining what *primary institutions* were prevalent in the Sino-centric international society in East Asia and how the challenges and replacements of the East Asian international society emerged through the expansion of the imperialistic international society of Europe. Above all, the discussion reveals the process of the expansion of the European international society as well as the process of East Asia's entry into the modern treaty system and its more systematic transformation through primary institutions.

These primary institutions include the 'traditional', Westphalian institutions such as territoriality, sovereignty, diplomacy, international law, the balance of power, great power management, war, dynasticism (Bull 1977; Wight 1977; Mayall 1990; Holsti 2004; Jackson 1992, 271-281; Buzan 2004, 161-204) as well as imperialism/colonialism, nationalism and others that are being considered as relatively recent additions, such as human rights, democracy, market and environmental stewardship (Buzan 2004, 161-204, 181-183; 2014). It is possible to distinguish these characteristics through primary institutions based on the following: primary institutions with a pluralist nature that emphasise co-existence by maintaining the order of the sovereign system; state-centred solidarism that assesses the possibility of constructing an international society through sharing, based on solidarism that further emphasises common values such as norms, rules and institutions; and cosmopolitan solidarism, based on universal natural law and moral values. Although pluralism and solidarism may appear to be opposed, the most important foundation of primary institutions lies in their difficulty to be free from the influence of primary pluralism institutions such as sovereignty, territoriality, war and the balance of power. However, after the post-Cold War era, the need to pursue co-existence (prevention of war) has weakened, and a tendency to solidarity has strengthened.

II. Theoretical Framework

A look into the Sino-East Asian regional international society through its primary institution shows that world management and diplomacy between countries were being conducted by a large power centred on China, which formed the balance of power among the members of the East Asian international society operated by the dynasticism. In other words, if we explain this in the language of the Chinese world order system, the East Asian order, a management system centred on China (large power), maintained a stable order between China and Korea and other countries and between the constituent countries through the form of tribute diplomacy. Furthermore, each country maintained a stable order with autonomy based on dynasticism in the Chinese worldview.

Several international politics and East Asian studies have been conducted on this historical context and the Chinese system of East Asia. There are studies on Korean history that strive to shed the West-centred view of history and return to the Sinocentric order that had governed East Asia for millennia. These include studies that explore tributary relations between China and other states in East Asia in the “premodern” times (Fairbank and Teng 1941, 135-246; Kang 2010). These studies portray the tributary system as originating from Imperial China’s cultural superiorism, and as having been systematised into a set of rules regulating political, economic, and diplomatic relations between China and other states through the Ming and Qing dynasties (Fairbank and Teng 1941, 135-246). In these studies, the Korea-China relationship is often seen as the ideal form of tributary relations (Fairbank 1968, 16). Even going so far as to insist that the foundation of the Joseon dynasty in 1392 marked a watershed moment in bringing Confucian internationalism from theory into life, these studies depict the Joseon-Ming relationship as the archetype of the tributary system China sought to establish (Walker 1971, 155). Holding that the tributary relationship between Joseon and China lasted throughout both the Ming and Qing dynasties (1368 to 1894), these studies emphasise that such relationship endured not only for economic and cultural gains, but also for political factors (Chun 1966, 10-41, 34-37; 1966, 435-480, 274; 1968, 90-111, 109-111; Wang 2013, 207-232, 209-211).

These studies, however, are uncritical reflections of the supposed cultural superiority of the Sinocentric tributary system. As such, they betray a different West-centred view. The authors of these studies understand the Sinocentric order in the only mould they know of—that is, the Western experience with the modern sovereignty system. Therefore, they understand the Sinocentric order as a hierarchy, portraying China as the undisputed hegemon of the region in the premodern times, with other states merely subjugated to it. These studies overlook the complex interactions of cultural, ideological, political, and military factors that constituted and sustained that order. The Sinocentric tributary system was an ideological and embellished representation of realistic foreign relations. Overlooking this will likely lead to distorted understanding. Furthermore, the West-centred understanding of the Sinocentric order also runs the risk of understanding Joseon as different and fragmented from modern Korea, thereby supporting, in effect, the conclusion that the sufferings of Koreans in the modern times such as the division was a result of Koreans’ clinging onto an outdated order and failure to accept a progressive new one in time.

In the meantime, the Sino-centric international society of East Asia has faced challenges from the European international society since mid-nineteenth century in the form of its dissolution of the Chinese order. The European international society, which was developed by European empires through the primary institutions of territoriality, sovereignty/non-interventionism, uses diplomacy to communicate among territorial sovereign states and forms the Westphalia order of war, balance of power, international law and large power management.

In the process of the inclusion of the East Asian international society into the modern sovereign state system of Europe, regional dynasties with a declining hierarchical nature appeared according to the principle of equal sovereignty. For example, the basis of sovereignty is from the dynasty to the people, and the basis of diplomacy is the transfer from the dynasty to each country (Wight 1977, 136; James 1992, 377-391; Reus-Smit 1999, 87ff). In the process, international law began as a natural law, but positive law eventually became its main role.

Europe, emboldened by its revolutionary progress into modernity, embraced the Westphalian peace system in the 17th century, which would define international relations according to the principles of non-intervention, territoriality, balance of power, war, international law and diplomacy, in other words. The Westphalian system gave rise to the European international society, an anarchy consisting of multiple sovereign states (Bull 1977, 27-40; Wight 1977, 110-152; Jackson 2000, 156-167). The revival of Europe with this modernisation gave rise to a growing disparity between Europe and non-Europe in cultural, economic, and military strength, fuelling the rise of imperialism in Europe and the violent expansion of European international society (Chen 2013, 165-185, 172; Howard 1984, 33-42; Buzan and Little 2002, 200-222).

This was also the case for East Asia. The European international society, with a sovereign state system based on territoriality, attempted to engage in conversation with the East Asian, Sinocentric international society through diplomacy. However, in the process, they learned the non-sovereignty of the East Asian international society and used it to incorporate East Asia into the Westphalian order through the coercive force of war, which went through a process of justification under international law.

The Sinocentric order started crumbling down in the mid-19th century as China became the target of the modern sovereignty system, the European international society. Joseon (Korea), which had been a player of that order, could not stay immune to resulting changes. The encounter between the European international society and East Asia resulted in escalating violence as well as the spread of the West-centred view that rationalised such violent clashes.

The spread of the Western-centred consciousness becomes an important criterion for forming a hierarchical international society with the superiority of sovereignty and the standard of civilisation.

From the middle ages to contemporary times, international societies in Europe emerged because of political legitimacy-based changes, including the transition from the divine right of kings to popular sovereignty (Wight 1977, 110-173; Bull 1977, 27-40; Jackson 2000, 156-167). International societies are formed through a shared cultural basis, which is also true for global international society (Bull and Watson

1984, 1-9, 1; Watson 1992, 265-276). The expansion of the European international society during the 19th Century led to commercial and colonial domination of East Asia and other regions by European empires (Watson 1984, 13-32, 24-32; Gong 1984, 24-53). This period reflected the confusion between the Europeans and other cultures, armed with modernity and the need for international interactions with unequal terms. Thus, the expansion of international society preceded the standardisation of civilisations, which divided the world into primitives, barbarians, and civilised people, signifying that colonial rule and colonised states are drawn into unequal relationships with Europe through the gradual process of approval (Gong 1984, 4-6; Bowden 2009; Keene 2001, 147-148).

It creates a two-tiered international society based on a sort of sovereignty, which shows the emergence of the institutions of classical European international society of imperialism or colonialism (Keene 2001). In addition, as it becomes the background to the emergence of the standard of civilisation, it emphasises the concept of civilisation not only as a standard regulating the entry of a new state into the international society but also as one that approves completely different legal norms and political systems.

Convinced of the normative superiority of sovereign state relations based on anarchic balance of power, and eager to colonise the rest of the world through direct military control and economic exploitation, Europe had little reason to pay attention to the pre-existing structures and histories of the non-European international system, which were simply “premodern” and “savage.” The economic and military strength of Europe—the advantages from having modernised early—further drove European’s belief in the inequality between Europe and East Asia as inevitable and natural. The formation of the world international society, to Europeans, seemed to proceed by nothing except by the expansion of European international society, unilaterally forcing the rest of the world to accept it and the unequal relations that came with West-centeredness. The expansion of the European international society, in other words, inevitably culminated into peripheralisation of the non-West and modification of the East Asian model of rationality (Buzan and Lawson 2015).

The expansion of this European international society and the colonisation of the East Asian international society by European imperialism have resulted in human inequality. At this point, the two paths have reappeared depending on the perspective of understanding the modern international society, which is about the gap between *positive law* understanding and *natural law* understanding against international law.

Amid the expansion of the European international society, Japan weighed its imperialistic expansion along with its inclusion into the European international society for survival. In this regard, Japan recognised that international law is used as a positive law in the international society rather than as a natural law in the interpretation of its own international law and utilised it (Suzuki, 2005, 2009). In the case of early China, the modern treaty with the West was understood through the Chinese ideology (the tributary order). Later, China understood the international law and sought to survive in a sovereign state system, which is revealed through the interpretation of international law by playing somebody off against somebody as the use of the status quo. This can be seen in Li Hongzhang’s foreign policy toward the Joseon dynasty and the book, “Stratagem of Joseon” written by Huang Zunxian, Chinese ambassador to Japan in 19th century.

Nevertheless, Joseon was aware of the external situation of the Nanjing Treaty and the Opium War, but

the second Opium War raised the internal sense of crisis. However, rather than leading the political elite of Joseon to be interested in the European international society, it made them focus on the internal policies such as the moral efforts of the monarch and the resolution of difficulties in people's livelihoods and corruption in the administration based on the ideology of minor Sinocentrism to maintain the Chinese order.

The Joseon dynasty at the time referred to itself as *Xiǎozhōnghuá* (*small China*) (Jeong 2014 [1394]), and sought to re-establish itself as the new centre of the Sinocentric order amid the collapse of the Qing dynasty, taking lessons from the Opium War and strengthening its anti-foreigner stance (Sillokcheong 2006 [1866]-a). The main objective was to ensure the survival and autonomy of Joseon. However, attempts to realise that goal were repeatedly frustrated, first by the compromise between the Qing dynasty, the old and dying hegemon, and Japan, the new and rising hegemon, for balance of power in East Asia, and second, by Japan's annexation of Korea under the pretext of protecting the latter (Nho 2019). Amid the dissolution of the Sinocentric order, the emergence of the Qing-Japan compact for a new balance of power, the region's entry into the European international society, and the growing ambition of the Japanese empire to reshape the region to its liking, Koreans' demand for justice—namely, independent nationhood—was utterly ignored and silenced. The natural expression is that the sovereignty of Joseon was not considered but that the balance of power between China and Japan mediated that of the Joseon dynasty.

The period when Joseon began to actively understand and accept international law seems to have been triggered by the conclusion of the Ganghwado Treaty, as evidenced from the fact that Joseon officials brought it to the negotiating table (NIKH 1876 [2014]). However, the Ganghwado Treaty did not mean that Joseon had accepted the order of the European international society; instead, it was based on the traditional understanding of restoring good-neighbour diplomacy through a meeting of minor Sinocentrism, Korea and Japan under the Chinese order. This is proven by the remarks of King Gojong, who distinguished Japan and Western foreigners. The international law was widely accepted and applied was after the Joseon–United States Treaty of 1882: a 'double system' appears to have been established, in which the tribute system and the international law system coexist (Yu 1971 [1889], 29th August; Sillokcheong 2006 [1879]).

After King Gojong issued the Fourteen Point Great Plan by the reform of Gabo, liquidated the tribute system with China and declared independence, Joseon left the traditional Sinocentric order and officially entered the international order under public law (NIKH 1894 [2014]). This statement of independence can be understood as the operation of imperialism from the outside in that it came from Japan's recommendation, although it is necessary to consider some factors that led to Joseon's acceptance of the national-public legal order – the part that focuses on the appropriateness and timeliness contained in the provisions of the international law. At that time, the Joseon elites paid the most attention to the provision of balance of power in international law.

By doing so, they expected that if they advocated public law equal diplomacy for all countries, it would be possible to escape from the crisis of unequal treaty that Joseon faced after the opening of ports and to secure the right to sovereignty. In short, it was intended to establish national sovereignty by using the balance of power of public law.

In other words, Joseon wanted to have autonomy in the sovereignty system by relying on the balance of power provisions through understanding it as natural law.

The focus of this study is on exploring the voice of Koreans that was silenced amid Korea's entry from the Sinocentric order to the European international society, and specifically what demand was voiced. By trying to understand what Koreans demanded, we will reach an understanding of how justice demanded by a powerless country was sacrificed for the interest of powerful nations in reconfiguring the balance of power in East Asia.

This study will take us through 1) how the escalating tension between Qing China and Japan silenced Joseon's voice around the time of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1876; 2) how the respective self-interests of these two neighbouring East Asian nations sacrificed Joseon's demand for justice. 3) Our interest is in the period of time from the collapse of the Sinocentric order to the dawn of Japanese imperialism, particularly in how the clash of interests between China and Japan, as manifested in the Sino-Japanese Wars and the Treaty of Shimonoseki (1895), marginalised and overlooked Koreans' demand for justice.

III. The Collapse of the Sinocentric Order and The Rise of Japan

The dissolution of the Sinocentric order was a result of a series of events starting with the Opium Wars of the 1840s, which pitted China against Britain and European imperialism, which culminated into quasi-colonisation of China under the Nanjing and Tianjin Treaties, and the Sino-Japanese Wars of the 1890s, at the end of which the Treaty of Shimonoseki was signed, effectively declaring the tributary system dead. The collapse of the Sino-centric order by the Republic Revolution in 1911, in other words, was a realistic expression of the volatile imbalance of power in East Asia caused by the open conflict between the West and the East, and by the imperfection of the sovereignty system under the rivalry for dominance between China and Japan in the region.

The first crack to the Sinocentric order was made by the first modern treaty entered by the Qing dynasty with Japan. The draft treaty Japan served up China was fundamentally unequal, with Japan demanding the right to put Chinese foreign officials (consuls) to trial and the most-favoured nation treatment from the Qing. It was not a treaty that assumed the equality of the two sovereign states about to enter an agreement, but rather an imposition of the *realpolitik* public law of nations that the Western powers had earlier sought and succeeded to impose on China. Qing China found it impossible to accept Japan's terms, particularly in the absence of evidence of asymmetry in military power (Suzuki 2009, 81-85). The Qing dynasty produced its own draft, demanding that both parties reserve the right to put each other's consuls to trials and accord each other most-favoured nation treatment based on the principle of reciprocity. Japan agreed, and the two parties thus signed the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty (1871) (Suzuki 2009, 150).

Having now entered a modern treaty with China, the undisputed hegemon in East Asia, on an equal footing, Japan began to pursue its ambition of participating as a full-status member in the European

international society, with recognition from the Western powers. The first effort it made was to create a protectorate of the Ryukyu Islands, which had belonged to both Japan and the Sinocentric order until then (Suzuki 2009, 155).

Japan's ambition did not stop with the annexation of the Ryukyu. Its realpolitik perception of foreign relations was geared toward the ultimate dissolution of the Sinocentric order and the entry of East Asia into the European international society so that it could establish a new regional order for itself. Joseon, caught in the middle, became the key battleground of the Sino-Japanese Wars.

1. Japan-Korea Treaty of 1876: Changing Balance of Power in East Asia and Sacrifice of Joseon

In this situation, Joseon held onto Sinocentric perspectives and *Xiǎozhōnghuá*'s ideals from a reactionary standpoint and sought to guarantee its survival in the chaos by isolation. The end of in-law politics and the ascendancy of King Gojong restored the political legitimacy of the state and allowed it to respond to these external changes.

The first step was repairing Joseon's relations with Japan, its biggest international relations issue. Before Gojong rejected the isolationist policies, Japan's renewal through the Meiji Restoration declared itself an empire during the rule of Heungseon Daewongun. As Joseon rejected this declaration, citing the incongruent relationship between Joseon and Japan under the Sinocentric order, conflict arose between the neo-Confucianists, who argued for the rejection of the declaration, and Gojong, who did not see fit to reject the declaration's reception (Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 12 5th Feb, 9th Feb). During this time, Japan discussed its conquest of Korea (MFAJ 1870, 144-145), and Joseon, aiming to maintain its autonomy and agency, decided to negotiate with Japan before joining any armed conflicts (Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 12 10th May).

Contrary to Joseon, Japan willingly opted from Western-style reform and realism (Suzuki 2009). In order to fend off Western invasion and the suffering to be inflicted by such an attack, Japan thought it should become as powerful as the Western states by capturing Joseon and Manchuria (Yoshida 1894). The first step toward this expansion involved establishing equal legal relations between Japan and Western states in East Asia (Fukuzawa 1934, 38-39). To this end, Japan sought most fervently to make the Qing relinquish its suzerainty over Joseon. By signing a treaty with the Qing on an equal footing, the Japanese government hoped to place Joseon below itself and thereby facilitate relations with Joseon. The autonomy of dependent states, guaranteed until then by the Confucian philosophy of respect-the-great-care-for-the-small, was quite different from the kind of absolute hierarchy that Japan sought to establish over Joseon. When asked by the Japanese vice foreign minister, Yanagihara, about the tributary relationship between the Qing and Joseon, the Qing official Mao Chang Xi again affirmed the autonomy of Joseon, explaining that the two countries maintained only the ceremonial function of tributes and investiture, and that the Qing had refrained from interfering with Joseon's internal matters long ago (MFAJ 1928).

As arguments overwhelmed Joseon over its relations with Japan, its indecisiveness ended because of the Ganghwa Island incident. Despite facing only a single Japanese warship, the event ended with the signing

of the Treaty of Ganghwa as Joseon failed to avoid armed conflict and open its ports on its terms (Park 1978a, 749-768; Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 13 20th Jan).

Just after Joseon declined to reply the official document from Japan, Seikanron, the advocacy of a punitive expedition to Korea was raised by Japanese political elites, and it led to debates on using force to change the situation, wherein Japan employed the Western powers' strategy of gunboat diplomacy (MFAJ 1875, 71-72). Debates led Japan to dispatch its warship, *Unyo*, to Ganghwado Island. When a part of *Unyo*'s crew sailed upward into the Hangang Estuary without prior notification, the artillery at Chojijin Fortress began to fire upon the sailors. Although it was located outside the fortress's range, the warship responded with gunfire and destroyed the fortress, while its landing party reached Yeongjongdo Island and massacred multiple civilians before returning (Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 13 4th Jan). This incident was an enactment of the recommendations put forward by Japanese diplomats upon the rejection of their message (MFAJ 1875, 71-72), which represented the Japanese using their historical experience with gunboat diplomacy in their dealings with Joseon. With the justifications provided by the Ganghwa Island incident, the Japanese government earnestly implemented its policies toward the resolution of its relations with Joseon.

Even though Joseon discussed opening its ports to Japan, it invoked its tributary relationship with China to deter Japan's incursion. Joseon requested China to emphasise the illegality of Japan's invasion of Korea as the tributary of Qing under the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty(1871) (Park 1978a, 739), as mentioned by Shin Heon, the plenipotentiary of Joseon in the Treaty of Ganghwa (Gang 1885). The choice to ask China to prevent Japan's invasion in the trade crisis closely matches strategic *Sadae*.

The outbreak of an open conflict between Joseon and Japan near Ganghwa Island following the Korean attack on the Japanese vessel, *Unyo*, deliberately provoked by the Japanese, was the last thing the Qing wanted, amid the escalating tension with Japan over the Sino-Japanese Treaty, the Japanese invasion of Taiwan, and the subjugation of Ryukyu. The Zongli Yamen officially complained about Japan's provocative behaviour, citing Article 1 of the Sino-Japanese Treaty and emphasising Joseon's status as a tributary of the Qing. The Japanese government, however, argued that Joseon was an independent country and therefore had no standing under the treaty (Tsiang 1933, 1-106, 57-60). The Japanese government was willing to risk a war with Joseon in order to make the latter enter a modern treaty with it (Ōkuma 1960 [1873], A4424). The Qing most deeply feared the irreparable damage that an open conflict between two neighbouring states would do to its moral authority as the suzerain state, as such damage would make the collapse of the Sinocentric order irreversible. That means, in order to those risks, Qing had to manage the conflict between Joseon and Japan, and it shows at the Li Hong Zhang's letter to Lee Yu-won. In his correspondence with Lee Yu-won, the then Prime Minister of Joseon who was visiting Beijing at the time with respect to the investiture of the Crown Prince in Joseon and diplomatic frictions with the West and Japan, Li Hong Zhang expressed worries for the security of Joseon now that the transformation of international relations had made isolationism no longer an option(Lee 2013 [1875]; Sillokcheong 2006 [1874]).

Joseon, which had realised the tide of the changing state of affairs in East Asia only too late, continued to seek the Qing's counsel and help as it faced mounting pressure from Japan. Having heard about the famed

victories of Li Hongzhang in battles to protect the Qing dynasty in the Hubei region that he oversaw, Lee Yu-won sought to reach out to him and seek his advice on how Joseon should handle the challenge it faced. Yet Lee did not directly mention the problem with Japan in his very politely worded letter to Li. In his reply, however, Li directly mentions the changing Joseon-Japan relationship, stressing that “Joseon, as China’s fence, should make greater effort to quell the threats and signs of instability it was showing recently (Li 2008 [1874]).”²

In other words, Li is saying that China, too, was struggling with its own problems, and that, should Joseon and Japan clash in an armed conflict, China would be too constrained by the need to protect its own territory to come to Joseon’s aid. In sum, the Qing dynasty was strongly hoping that Joseon would settle its conflict with Japan in a peaceful manner.

Japan and China already settled on an agreement based on their tributary relationship and even obtained the Western powers’ approval through their respective embassies (Kim 2020).

The Qing also had Li engage Ambassador Arinori Mori of Japan to China in a serious debate about Joseon. Quoting the first article of the Sino-Japanese Treaty, Li rebutted Mori’s claim that Joseon was not, in fact, a protectorate of the Qing, pressuring that Japan could invade Joseon only by risking the deployment of troops by both Russia and China. Mori eventually relented, and asked the Qing to do its part in encouraging Joseon into signing a treaty with Japan so as to ensure the peaceful end of the Joseon-Japan conflict. The compromise reached by Li and Mori became the basis of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1875 (PMOSA 1963 [1876], 294-303).

The Qing, in other words, believed that all alternatives other than Joseon accepting Japan’s pressure into signing a treaty would activate risks of war between the Qing and Japan. Should Joseon ask the Qing for military aid in an open conflict with Japan, it would undermine the weakened Sinocentric order and threaten the Qing’s position in East Asia as the regional hegemon, and leave Manchuria vulnerable to Japan’s invasion when the Qing was too busy fighting Russians off its borders. Li thus gave advices to the foreign minister to help Joseon find a peaceful solution to its conflict with Japan.³

Li was quite well aware of the implications of the Joseon-Japan conflict, and gave the Qing foreign ministry detailed instructions on how China should conduct itself in the situation. Li’s proposal for peaceful resolution, delivered by the Qing foreign ministry to Joseon, appears to have played a key role in neutering the strong objection within the Joseon government to resuming relations with Japan (Gojong 1876).

The resulting Japan-Korea Treaty of 1876 thus reflected the Qing’s perception of the state of affairs in East Asia and active intervention. The treaty thus gave the Qing some freedom from military threats to

² Japan and Joseon share their borders, and I do not know what is happening in the relations between the two countries. China has too broad rivers and is surrounded on all three sides by the sea. As its geography makes complete isolation impossible, China cannot help but reinforce its defense. (Li 2008 [1874])

³ “Your ministry should promptly start searching for viable countermeasures, and send a letter of advice, in secret, to the Joseon government, urging it to let go of small grudges and treat Japan with courtesy. You should also encourage Joseon to send envoys to Japan and apologise for firing at the Japanese vessel, so that the two parties would stop distrusting and resenting each other and get ready for a peaceful resolution.” (Li 1962 [1875])

Manchuria that could have resulted from the pre-empted war between Joseon and Japan, while also enabling the dynasty to exercise its role over Joseon as its protectorate.

The Qing's desire to maintain the Sinocentric order by protecting its own security interests in matters involving Joseon was already manifest in the first article of the Sino-Japanese Friendship and Trade Treaty.⁴

With the first article of the Sino-Japanese Treaty intended precisely to deter Japan's invasion of Joseon, out of fear that it would lead to the invasion of Manchuria, the Qing dynasty did not want its self-interest to be known so readily and clearly to outsiders, and therefore stopped short of mentioning Joseon by its name, referring to it instead as its protectorate (Li 1962 [1872], 49). Even when the Japanese invaded Taiwan (1874), the Qing mentioned that what it feared even more was the invasion of Joseon, calling the latter "our Eastern fence (Li 2008 [1874], 542)."

Japan did not agree to this treaty without envisioning some gains for itself. The Japan-Korea Treaty was crucial to Japan's realpolitik modernisation strategy, and marked the first step in Japan's journey toward attaining to formal equality with the European powers on the international stage.

It was too late for Joseon to enter into the treaty with autonomy and agency. As the Japanese gunboat entered Ganghwa Island, the treaty was inevitable (Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 13 24th Jan). Even though Japan claimed its diplomatic intentions, Joseon had already experienced two invasions by colonial powers, and it had no choice but to accept the treaty as the reality of the situation can result in war or a severe threat to the state (Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 13 20th Jan, 30th Jan).

Even though the central government signed the Treaty of Ganghwa, oppositional sentiments were still present. An example came in the form of dissident Confucianists, who argued that "Japan and the West are one and the same." (Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 13 23th Jan) In response, Gojong issued a firm rejection, distinguishing sharply between the West and Japan (Sillokcheong 2010 [1623-1910], Gojong year 13 27th Jan). The rejection attempted to mitigate the opposition's outrage through expressions such as "reaffirming and developing the relationship of friendship since the past," which emphasised that the treaty was not a new definition of the relationship between the two states, but rather an extension of the existing one. Said rejection also reflects the traditional Sinocentric worldview that saw Japan and Joseon as equals in separate worlds. These points speak to the strategic and normative complexities that Joseon had to face as it seeks to balance its sovereignty with the end of the Sinocentric order.

2. Korea in Transition: The Sovereign State System and the Sinocentric Order

Although the Japan-Korea Treaty formally brought Korea into the European international society, Joseon still found itself caught in a *double system* between the Sinocentric order and the European international society (Yu 1883). Between the Treaty of Ganghwa and the First Sino-Japanese War, Joseon sought to maintain a tributary relationship with China under the normative structure of the Sinocentric order and a system of

⁴ "Should Japan remain unbridled in its growing ambition and proceed to annex Joseon, we (Qing) would lose a key fence for our three Northeast provinces, so we must plan our action now. Signing this treaty with Japan may not give us permanent security, but will help us keep Japan in checks. Instead of singling Joseon out, we should refer to it only indirectly as one of our protectorates." (Jiang 1999, P. 475).

international relations as a sovereign state. This contradictory situation represented the competition and conflict between international law and a Sinocentric order, showing how Joseon had all rights assigned to the state under international law, but its tributary status did not affect its status as a sovereign and independent state. While China attempted to maintain its power over Joseon through *Sadae*, Japan attempted to conceptualise Joseon–Japan relations with a modern international order system. Faced with the need for moderation between the two conflicting systems, Joseon pursued a natural law–based balance of power.

The reform-oriented elite in Joseon was thus divided between those who insisted on maintaining loyalty to Qing China and others who advocated switching alliance to Japan, the United States, or even Russia (Kim 1979 [1882]; Yi 1978 [1866]).

However, Joseon was almost forced to maintain unequal alliance with the Qing against its pleasure due to the failure of the Gapsin Coup, which attempted to break unequal ties to the Qing. Kim Yun-sik, who led Korea’s diplomatic establishment at the time, advocated maintaining ties with the Qing in order for a small and powerless country like Joseon to avoid externally imposed isolation and ensure its survival, while also seeking to enter treaties with the Western powers on the side. Kim argued that the tributary relationship with the Qing and equal treaties with the West were not contradictory, but were rather beneficial to Joseon’s security and autonomy (Kim 1971[1883], 57-58).

There were other opinions. Lee Yu-won questioned whether Kim’s strategy could work for a small country like Joseon that did not have the same historical context as other similar-sized countries in Europe (Kim et al. 1996). Lee thought that the international law could function only on a stalemate in which strong and weak countries were locked together, i.e., in alliances and aid for maintaining the existing balance of power between powerful nations and in locations like Turkey where the powerful nations butted their heads. He intuited that international law had little use for an isolated country like Joseon (Lee 2008 [1884]). As the struggles between the European powers over balance of power threatened the survival of remote and powerless countries in East Asia, the normative and realistic aspects of balance of power were inevitably separated, and that the normative and naturalistic façade of the balance of power was something that could be ensured only by power and self-sufficiency (Pak 2018 [1882]; Kim, Jaipil, and Pak 2006). Lee feared that countries incapable of protecting their own autonomy and strength, thereby managing the balance of power in an active and independent manner, were bound to become mere pieces in the game known as balance of power.

Joseon thus belatedly entered treaty relations with the West in the 1880s. Kim Hong-jib, an official dispatched by Joseon to the table for negotiations with Japan over tariffs, met with the Japanese foreign minister Kaoru Inoue and the Qing Ambassador to Japan Huang Zun Xian to share views on the threat posed by Russia and the balance of power and alliance as the new *modus operandi* of international relations. Huang handed “A Strategy for Korea” over to Kim, explaining that the combination of maintaining alliance with the Qing, severing ties with Japan, and forming friendship with the United States as the only path to the balance of power and survival of Joseon (Huang 2007 [1880], 19-34). The suggested path paved a breakthrough in Joseon’s foreign policy.

As the 1880s rolled around, Joseon began to pursue a balance-of-power strategy of its own, making active efforts to sign treaties with the West. Prompting this shift was *Joseon Strategy*. However, this treatise, written by a Qing official, embodied a strategic compromise reached by the Qing dynasty and Japan over how Joseon should be used in international relations (Mitani 2005, 189-238, 228-229). Like the Qing and Japan, Joseon, too, shared the border with Russia, but there was no conflict between Joseon and Russia. Yet the treatise, which stressed the potential threat from Russia and countermeasures, profoundly shaped Joseon's new foreign policy because the reformists saw the need to protect Joseon against tension among Russia, China, and Japan, while drawing on support from China and Japan to quell opposition from Confucian scholars and aristocrats in Korea (Min 1897[1971]; Yoo 1971 [1895]).

In other words, the *Joseon Strategy* was embraced and used, like the ancient saying that barbarians should be used to fight off other barbarians. Joseon's new pursuit of balance of power was the strategy the country chose to ensure its survival between rivalling powers. The small country now sought to fend off overwhelming interference by a certain foreign power by appealing to the interests of another.

How did Joseon seek to counter the encroachment of both the Qing and Japan, and protect the royalty and the state? First, it attempted to sign a secret treaty with Russia (1884-5). It also sent its first envoys to the United States (1887) in an attempt to leverage on America to keep the Qing at bay. While taking refuge at the Russian legation in Korea (1896-97), King Gojong actively attempted to form ties with Russia to fight the Japanese off, but Russia responded only reluctantly, prioritising the relations it had with Great Britain, the Qing, and Japan in East Asia over new tie with Joseon. As Japan published the Waeber-Komura Memorandum and the Lobanov-Yamagata Agreement, the secret pacts that Russia and Japan had already entered, after King Gojong returned to his office, the monarch finally concluded that he could no longer turn to Russia for help. Instead, he began to conceive of an arrangement in which all the powerful nations would be drawn to ensure the protection and independence of Joseon. In addition to consulting the U.S. and British ambassadors for possible mediation, King Gojong also sent Min Yeong-hwan as a special envoy to France and Germany on a mission to sign a secret pact with the two countries on guaranteeing Joseon's independence (Donggwang 1997, 342-343). Taking the advice of Collin de Plancy, the French Minister to Korea at the time, that, concessions of mining and railroad building rights by the Joseon government would attract foreign capital and thereby raise attention around the world in Joseon's independence, King Gojong also began to distribute various economic prerogatives to Western powers. This reflects the shift in the monarch's foreign policy from its bilateralism to multilateral balance of power strategy (Mutel 2008 [1932]).

IV. Joseon, The Sino-Japanese War and the Treaty of Shimoniseki

1. Sacrifice of Joseon by the Balance of Power

The Treaty of Shimonoseki, marking the end of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), was the official instrument

with which Japan broke Joseon away formally from its tributary relationship with China and completed the demolition of the Sinocentric order. Even without this treaty, however, the hierarchical relationship between Joseon and the Qing remained in name only, as China had been semi-colonised by the West and the only matter of significance left was for the Western powers to coordinate their conflicting interests in the region. Joseon was a mere pawn in this game of chess played by powerful nations. Joseon was afforded neither the de-facto autonomy associated with the Sinocentric order nor the formal sovereignty ostensibly guaranteed by international law. After losing an opportunity for reformation by willingly opening its ports, coupled with its losses during the war and its incapability of resisting Japan's gunboat diplomacy, Joseon lacked options following its lack of domestic political legitimacy. Compared to the Western *beasts*, as seen under the Sinocentric order, Japan had a relationship defined by mutual respect despite being a barbarian to Joseon's foreign policy, *Gyorin* (交隣), *good neighbour policy* based on Joseon's minor-Sinocentrism. The recently crowned King Gojong saw this as sufficient justification to appease the opposition in the Confucian groups, including the leader of in-law politics at the time, Daewongun. Joseon's decision to sign an unequal treaty with Japan allowed it to hold onto its normative legitimacy while avoiding armed conflict.

After entering the treaty with Japan, Joseon went on to enter a series of treaties with Western powers as well, including the Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce and Navigation (a.k.a. the U.S.-Korea Treaty of 1882) and the treaties with Great Britain (1883), Germany (1883), Italy (1884), Russia (1884), France (1886), and Austria (1892). After the Treaty of Ganghwa, Gojong began to sign similar treaties with the Western Powers, a decision motivated by several factors. First, China previously invited Joseon to sign treaties with the Western Powers to use their influence to counter the growing influence of outsiders. Specifically, China suggested using the Korean Strategy, which focused on Russia, the only Western Power on the empire's border, while maintaining a strategic agreement between Japan and China (Huang 2007 [1880], 19-34; Mitani 2005, 189-238, 228-229). However, tensions between Russia, China, and Japan served Joseon's goal of self-protection, allowing the state to pursue reforms while placating dissenting groups. The Korean Strategy and the Russian threat became the cornerstones of Joseon's policies and diplomatic outlook (Min 1897[1971]).

Second, the weakening of normative Sinocentrism within Joseon motivated Gojong to sign the treaties because Joseon's conventional diplomatic practices followed *Sadae*. The Confucian idea of respect determined the character of external power relations because, aside from the Ministry of Rites, no other independent government agencies managed foreign relations (Sillokcheong 2006 [1876]). However, the Treaty of Ganghwa elevated commerce to the main focus of diplomatic relations, subsequently weakening the idea of respect, leading China to abolish the tributary envoy model while reforming relations into permanent missions (Kim 2018 [1876], 44-45; Kim 2000, 323-339). This adjustment in the tributary trade system resulted in changes to Joseon's attitude toward the Western Powers. After signing the Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce, and Navigation with the United States, Gojong declared, "signing the treaty is now the norm of all states... there should be no discussions of Western or Japanese barbarians." This action introduced Joseon's participation in the treaty system based on shared laws and sovereignty (Sillokcheong 2006 [1882];

Park 1978b, 80-82).

However, this declaration neither instantaneously eliminated the Sinocentric worldview nor led Korea into a modern order of sovereignty. During the signing of the China–Korea Treaty of 1882 and the Military Mutiny of 1882, China’s imperialistic behaviour resulted in the two states severing their normative relationships.

Third and last was the change in China–Korea relations as a result of the severance. The Treaty of Ganghwa continued to define Joseon’s relationship with China under the normative Sinocentric order up until the China–Korea Treaty of 1882, where it took on the characteristics of modern colonial rule.

The Qing requested that Joseon state the Qing’s suzerainty over it in most of these treaties. Joseon’s negotiators made their efforts to have the Qing’s suzerainty recognised, either expressly or implicitly, in talks with their Western counterparts (Kim 1980, 90-111, 311). The Qing, by this point, had all but lost its claim to superiority over Joseon, though. Now that Joseon had entered treaties with the Western powers, the tension between the Qing and Russia was escalating over the border regions, and the rivalry between the Qing and Japan was ongoing over the Korean Peninsula, the Qing had begun to intervene more actively in Joseon’s internal affairs rather than respecting its autonomy (Sillokcheong 2006 [1886]). The Qing, that was careful to confine its role to the advisory function through the Imo Mutiny and the Convention of Tianjin, began desperately to exert what little control it had on Joseon, trying to affirm to the outside world that its influence on Joseon was not just ceremonial, but still substantial.

In particular, the signing of the treaty revealed China’s colonialist attitude toward Joseon. This was most evident in the China-Korea Treaty of 1882, which explicitly stated that Joseon was a vassal state of the Qing and denigrated the status of the King of Joseon to that of Beiyang Trade Minister (Sillokcheong 2006 [1886]). Moreover, by forcing Joseon to permit the Qing merchants to engage in inland trade on the Korean Peninsula, the China-Korea Treaty became another exploitative and unfair treaty that the Qing itself so loathed. A closer examination of the treaty reveals provisions that point to economic subordination, including Article 2’s provisions on extraterritoriality and China’s interference in Joseon’s market. Among other provisions include Article 4, which establishes an open market in Seoul; commercial travel, which allows merchants with permits to set up commerce throughout Korea; and Article 7, which approves coastal trade rights.

Although the treaty proclaims that the terms agreed to by the suzerain state and the subordinate may not be enjoyed equally by other countries, it significantly influenced subsequent treaties. In particular, the amendments to Japanese and British treaties facilitated the establishment of an unequal treaty system in Joseon. If Joseon was forced by the powers at play in reality to enter unfair treaties with the West and Japan, it caved into the Qing’s claim to traditional suzerainty in entering the China-Korea Treaty.

Furthermore, China sent Yuan Shikai as a negotiation trader, a proxy official that oversaw Chinese policies in Korea, to accelerate its modern colonisation of Joseon. Yuan presented the *Views on Korea’s Public Interests* to Joseon’s court, which discussed Joseon’s interests in relying on or betraying China. He argued that because China is capable of rapid military intervention in a crisis, Joseon should continue to serve Chinese interests (Sillokcheong 2006 [1886]). This practice forced an exclusive rule similar to modern

colonialism upon Joseon. Yuan met Gojong in person and attempted to limit Joseon's modernisation policies by claiming that the only way for Joseon to survive the encroachment and exploitation of other countries was to submit to China (Kim 2018, 112).

When the military opposed the opening of Joseon's ports in 1882, China used the mutiny to justify dispatching its military to Joseon, both to contain Japanese influence in Korea and to intervene directly in Joseon's affairs, citing Japan's subjugation of the Ryukyu Kingdom as inspiration (Kwon 1986, 190-191; Eoh 1971 [1930], 137). Amid mounting tensions between China and Japan in Korea, China's desire for power balance in Joseon had failed, fully discarding its traditional model of suzerainty between the two states and opting to rule Joseon through force instead. By imitating the Western Powers, China turned itself into a secondary imperialist power. Chinese forces proceeded to kidnap Heungseon Daewongun, the mutiny's patron, arrest officials that supported the mutiny, drive the mutinous soldiers out of Seoul, and take control of the city, including the royal palace (Jeong 1964 [1910]; Song 1980 [1905]). Even if Daewongun rebelled against the will of Gojong, his kidnapping resulted in anti-Chinese sentiments growing among the Korean people and the royal court (Kim 1971[1883]; Kim, Jaipil, and Pak 2006).

The traditional Confucian norms that used to govern the relations between Joseon and China thus crumble down through the Imo Mutiny in Joseon, with the tribute-investiture relations remaining in name only. This later led to the Gapsin Coup in Korea. The Joseon government could not help but acknowledge the modern treaty system as the sole norm of international relations and remove the anti-foreign steles, recognising international public law as operative on the Korean Peninsula (Sillokcheong 2006 [1884]).

2. Failure of Joseon's Balance of Power Strategy and the Collapse of the Sinocentric Order

The transition of the base of the relationship between Joseon and Qing from moral authority to actual exercises of power was manifest in the Imo Mutiny (Kwon 1986, 190-191; Tabohashi 1940a, 788-789). The mutiny occasioned a blow to the balance of power between Japan and the Qing over the Korean Peninsula and exposed to the world that the Qing had begun to take a more realistic approach to safeguarding its self-interest in East Asia, abandoning traditional norms and values.

The great turmoil in Joseon in the form of the Tonghak Revolution (1894-1895), however, ultimately led to annexation of Korea by Japan. Faced with the rising revolution, Joseon requested military backup from the Qing to suppress rebels. Under the Tianjin Treaty (1858), however, Japan also volunteered to send troops. The problem worsened as both the Qing and Japan refused to withdraw their troops from Korea. The British and the Russians, who joined the anti-revolution effort upon China's request, had to step in as mediators. In other words, Joseon was left out of negotiations on the withdrawal of foreign troops from what was rightfully its territory because the interests of powerful nations took precedence over Joseon's.

The Chinese military in Joseon became a contentious topic for some time. After the treaty of 1882, Joseon recognised the changes in the Joseon–China relationship, including the attempt to impose a modern colonial rule in Korea (Koo 1999, 220). The intervention of Chinese forces in putting down peasant rebellions resulted in a massive loss of life, which would further raise rebellious sentiments in the populace and served

as a pretext for other foreign powers like Japan to send their troops into Joseon (MFAJ 1894a, 153-154, 156). Joseon's government sought to end the peasant uprisings through internal reform, rather than suppressing them by force. However, Gojong's position of power was under threat not only from the uprisings but also from Daewongun and the forces that engaged in in-law politics, which also aligned with China's interests and the concern of losing control of Joseon to Japan. By promising the peaceful suppression of uprisings and the Chinese forces' entry into the capital to quell disturbances, China persuaded Gojong to approve the dispatch of their forces (Sillokcheong 2006 [1894]). However, Japan responded by sending its troops into Hanyang with the pretext of protecting Joseon and safeguarding its legations and Japanese nationals established under the Treaty of Tientsin and the Treaty of Chemulpo (1882) (MFAJ 1894a, 169). Joseon's requests to withdraw the two countries' forces went unheeded (Kim 2013, 556-557).

In the end, dispatching Chinese soldiers to Joseon resulted from the balance of interests between the Joseon government, who had no recourse following the peasant uprisings; Daewongun and the pro-Chinese groups, who sought to protect their established powers; and China, who sought to reform Joseon as a modern colony. After looking for opportunities to send its forces into Korea, Japan's rapid response led to the First Sino-Japanese War.

The Joseon government requested that Japan withdraw its troops, as it had originally asked for military support from the Qing and not Japan (Itō 1935, 372-373). Japan refused to oblige, citing the need for the reform of the Joseon government as its reason (Park 1991, 22). Joseon replied that it would launch the reform after Japan withdrew its troops. Based upon the plan of meddling in Joseon's internal affairs that it had planned for a long time, the Japanese government maintained its military presence under the pretext of neutralising the peasants' threat (JMK 1894, 123), and pressured the Joseon government to adopt Japan's reform proposal and thereby ending its relations with the Qing in effect (Munemitsu 1980 [1895], 37-38; Sugimura 1904, 12-13; FO 1894, 33).

Taken aback by the deployment of Japanese troops, the Qing made a request to Great Britain and Russia for arbitration over the withdrawal of troops (FO 1894b, 3; 1894a, 3). Great Britain had been tacitly condoning the Qing's enduring suzerainty over Joseon as part of its efforts to maintain commercial relations with the Qing and also to prevent Russia's southward expansion. Russia also feared that war on the Korean Peninsula might have repercussions on the construction of railways in Siberia, then in progress, and also relinquish the control over the Korean Peninsula to Great Britain (Fujimura 1973, 100; Kang 2006, 223, 228). As both Western powers had a common interest in maintaining the status quo on the Korean Question, they intervened readily as arbitrators and tried to safeguard peace.

Russia was concerned by the rising Japanese influence in Korea, which would put the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in a better position to threaten the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Russian Pacific Fleet (FO 1984 [1894], 129-130). For the British, an independent Joseon meant that Russia would have free reign to exercise its interests in Korea (FO 1984 [1894], 13). Thus, the two powers pressured Japan to accept China's suzerainty over Korea. In reality, both powers opposed Japan's attempts to change the situation.

Japan ignored Joseon's request to withdraw its forces and rejected the British proposal of simultaneous

withdrawal, claiming that its military action was intended to establish Joseon's independence and guarantee peace (Weber and Dimant 1933, 509-510). Emphasising its internal reform method in Joseon and already cementing its military superiority before the First Sino-Japanese War, Japan further established its dominance in Korea by purging pro-China supporters, culminating in Queen Min's assassination in 1895 (Sugimura 1904).

As its attempt at mediating the return of troops to their respective countries failed, Great Britain proposed that the Qing and Japan co-occupy the Korean Peninsula, with the south of Seoul to be assigned to Japan and the north of Seoul to the Qing, and with both parties to refrain from occupying Seoul and Jemulpo (FO 1894, 42). As the military conflict escalated, the likelihood of both the Qing and Japan withdrawing their troops simultaneously drew to zero, and Great Britain thus wanted to keep the two countries' troops physically separate to ward off possible clashes while it bought more time for negotiation (FO 1894, 34). Great Britain consulted Russia on its proposal for the co-occupancy of the Korean Peninsula (FO 1894, 43). The Russian government passively expressed approval, reserving an official answer in the absence of the Russian emperor. France and Germany officially accepted the proposal, while the United States opposed it, citing the principle of non-intervention (FO 1894, 43-44).

Li Hong Zhang accepted the Western powers' offer of keeping the status quo intact in Joseon and quelling the peasants' rebellion, and was willing to provide them with equal commercial relations in return, but refused to grant them political privilege to Joseon. While the Qing could tolerate the proposal for establishing a joint committee in Joseon, Li insisted that the Western powers refrain from forcing the king of Joseon to accept their reform plan and also that they exclude the Qing's suzerainty from the agenda of issues to be discussed (FO 1894, 49-50). The Qing had hoped Great Britain to pressure Japan into withdrawing its troops from Korea, but Great Britain refused to oblige, arguing that it was the intent of neither Britain nor Russia to exert such pressure (FO 1894, 162). The British proposal for co-occupancy was thus rejected for good (FO 1894, 50).

China argued for the simultaneous withdrawal of Chinese and Japanese forces in Joseon after realising that it could not accept the occupation plan, which put Chinese forces in the northern part of the peninsula, far away from Hanyang and Incheon (FO 1984 [1894], 49). Li Hongzhang demanded that suzerainty be left out of the discussions while accepting the joint occupation committee (FO 1894, 169). Next, he notified Russia that China would accept the occupation of Korea as long as Japan withdrew from Seoul and the Japanese garrison in Busan, and the Chinese forces used Pyeongyang as a temporary garrison (FO 1984 [1894], 81-82, 1984 [1894], 83).

Russia joined China in demanding Japan's withdrawal from Seoul (FO 1984 [1894], 126-127). Nikolay Girs, Russia's foreign minister, reported the British occupation proposal to the Tsar (FO 1984 [1894], 65; Weber and Dimant 1933, 640-641) and proposed a new temporary garrison in Yeongheungman Bay (Port Lazareff) (Weber and Dimant 1933, 643-644). Moreover, Russia agreed to the joint occupation of Korea by China and Japan should the latter withdraw from Seoul. The Russian ambassador to Beijing mentioned that Russia would pressure Japan with France, Germany, and Italy (FO 1984 [1894], 109-110, 1984 [1894], 113-

114). To the three countries, Russia suggested that China accept this proposal, and it has made an agreement with the British Empire regarding the joint occupation plan. The British and Russian Empires agreed on the joint occupation in advance and sent France and Germany the same proposal (Weber and Dimant 1933, 641). Through the agreement, Germany and Russia emphasised the importance of the latter's understanding of the situation in Korea, and the former would support Russia's actions (Weber and Dimant 1933, 632-633; USDoS 1982 [1894], 103-105).

However, the ambassador to Germany and Great Britain, Aoki Shuzo, argued for the acceptance of joint occupation and reached an agreement on Japan and China's joint participation in Joseon's internal reform as the most optimal and immediate solution to the conflict (FO 1984 [1894], 41). Aoki's plan was a combination of Britain's joint occupation plan with Japan's demand for joint participation in Joseon's internal reform. Japan then sought to confirm China's approval through various channels (MFAJ 1894a, 315-317).

Japan also signed the Aoki-Kimberley Treaty of 1894 with the British Empire, which prohibited attacks toward Shanghai, an area with a significant British interest, and guaranteed its independence while gaining the British Empire's tacit acquiescence and nonintervention when Japan started the war (FO 1984 [1894], 62-63, 1984 [1894], 63). Even if the treaty was interpreted as a position of simple nonintervention, rather than tacit agreement, it was clear that the British Empire's pro-Japanese and anti-Russian position provided an environment favorable to Japan's war. In the end, the mutual strategic and political understanding of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance, which was reaffirmed through the treaty, served an important role in Japan's decision for war.

The United States and its position of neutrality was the decisive catalyst of the First Sino-Japanese War. Joseon's independence, which served as the pretext for Japan's refusal to withdraw its forces from Korea, was the basis for Secretary of State Walter Q. Gresham's announcement of America's neutrality. Through the Joseon-United States Treaty, the United States proclaimed its respect for Joseon's independence and sovereignty. The United States' declaration stated that China and Japan must retain their impartial neutrality, any actions taken toward Japan should be friendly, and that the United States would refuse joint interventions with the European Powers under any circumstances (USDoS 1982 [1894], 99-100, 1027-1029). Despite its position of neutrality, the United States had a pro-Japan attitude that was motivated by their desire to weaken British and Russian influence in China while serving their interests as latecomers to the colonial contest.

The agreement of the powers on Joseon's independence was a sacrifice in the game of mutual checks between British, Russian, and American interests, and Japan capitalised on this relationship to declare war.

With the joint occupation plan deemed a failure (FO 1894, 50, 1984 [1894]-a, 100), Japan declared war on China under the justification of securing Joseon's internal reform, security, and independence (FO 1984 [1894], 96-97). China responded immediately by claiming to repel Japan's military invasion and safeguard their suzerainty of Joseon, an act motivated by maintaining the status quo (FO 1984 [1894]-b, 100). While both countries aimed to control Joseon, they had drastically differing views on Joseon's independence.

During the Sino-Japanese War, Joseon's peasant uprisings, such as the Tonghak Revolution, intervened before the war in organised and disorganised forms, which involved anti-Japanese arguments through public

proclamations or written memorials to the throne. Kim Hong-jip, who was appointed as the prime minister of Joseon during Japan's reform, covertly resisted as well (Kang 1997, 277-284, 277-284). The poor discipline of the Chinese forces, who pillaged the places they relocated to, did not endear them to Joseon's people. Through these perspectives, the First Sino-Japanese War can be seen as an event where Joseon expressed its anti-Japanese sentiments and its disappointment in China.

While China insisted on having its own way in relation to Joseon, as it had always done under the Sinocentric order, Japan seized the opportunity presented by the situation to break Joseon apart from China and co-opt it into the modern treaty system, thereby completing its strategy for hegemony in East Asia. The rising tension between the two countries evolved into an armed conflict. The true nature of the situation developing on the Korean Peninsula became clear as the Russians opposed the occupation of Geomundo Island by the British in 1895, citing the need to respond in a timely manner to potential risks in the situation, while the British continued to keep track of the developments in Korea via their liaison with Japan (FO 1875, 169; 1876, 169), and the Russians finally actively intervened in the Sino-Japanese conflict out of fear of continued threats from the British and Japan to the status quo. Although the withdrawal of foreign troops held direct impact on lives in Joseon, it was the four powerful countries that sought actively to find a solution, while completely leaving out of Joseon's fate. The new Joseon as a sovereign state that these foreign powers had promised, in an attempt to make Joseon open up its ports, thus turned out to be a mere empty rhetoric.

The British proposal was meant to maintain the status quo on the Korean Peninsula by dividing it up among powerful nations irrespective of what the state and people of Joseon wanted. Other countries proposed another way of dividing up the peninsula for shared management or turning the peninsula into a neutral zone. The Western powers blatantly abandoned even the window dressings of modernisation and civilisation by helping Joseon become re-established as an independent sovereign state. They were clear from the very beginning that their only interest was in maintaining the status quo on the Korean Peninsula in order to protect their own interests. It was the conflict of interests among these powerful nations that led to the eventual colonisation of Joseon.

King Gojong sought to channel the competition between the rival powers into a durable arrangement of peace and survival for Joseon by neutralising the country. This neutralisation strategy arose after Joseon turned into a battleground of rivalry among foreign powers after Joseon entered diplomatic relations with the Western nations in the 1880s. The strategy seemed to promise a solution to the question of the Korean Peninsula and East Asia. Joseon sought to employ this neutralisation strategy to prevent the further denigration of the Korean Peninsula into a mere battleground for foreign powers, and also to ensure the survival of the royal court (Koo 1985, 493-531, 504).

Yu Gil-jun helped articulate the neutralisation strategy, arguing that Korea could not preserve its security by allying with only one of the foreign competing powers surrounding it, and that no single country is capable of guaranteeing the security of Joseon on its own (Yoo 1971 [1895]). Although the Britain's occupation of Geomundo to prevent Russia's southward, Qing did not oppose their occupation and Japan also acknowledged to Qing's supremacy of the Joseon to prevent Russia's southward (Yu 1895, 321-328). In this

context, Joseon's Qing-led-neutralisation strategy was considered as the best to for Joseon, but also Qing as they believe it is possible to prevent the war with Russia on the Korean Peninsula (Yoo 1971 [1895], 321-328). Yu's pro-China neutralisation strategy reflected dissatisfaction with the passive stance of Japan and other foreign powers surrounding Korea, the limits to Joseon's ability to maintain true neutrality on its own, and the realistic gains the Qing had over other foreign powers in the situation. Yu's vision and rhetoric were on display in a letter penned by Kim Ok-gyun to Li Hongzhang in 1886. In his letter, Kim compares the relationship between China and Joseon to that between the teeth and the lips, and proposes that Joseon be established as a neutral, and therefore risk-free, territory, which he explained as beneficial to both Joseon and the Qing as well as the peace and security of East Asia (Kim 1979 [1882], 143-146).

Despite Joseon's desire for neutralisation, the Qing requested interference from the British and the Russians in the conflict over the withdrawal of troops from Joseon, harnessing Joseon's exclusion from matters that directly affected its own interests. The tendency to silence and neglect justice for Joseon would be repeated, in both the Sino-Japanese Wars that took place largely on the Korean Peninsula and in the Ganghwa treaty talks (Feb. 1895).

The Japanese thus came to lay siege on Gyeongbokgung Palace, and declared war on Qing China, alleging that the latter kept frustrating Joseon's attempts for reform and mounted a military provocation against Japan. The First Sino-Japanese War thus broke out (FO 1894, 86). The treaty talks were held at Ganghwa to finalise Japan's victory and the end of the war, leading to the Treaty of Shimonoseki that sealed the coffin on the collapsing Sinocentric order.

Japan's victory, however, was not enough by itself to determine the fate of Joseon. The possible interference from other powers at play was also an important variable to consider. The attitude of Great Britain and Russia, which had been involved in the war from its beginning, was especially important. These two Western countries took grave interest in whether the state of affairs would change on the Korean Peninsula and in the Qing. Russia needed more time to complete the Siberian railway and establish its position in Asia-Pacific securely, and thus needed things to stay the same in Joseon (Popov 1935, 236-244, 256). To Great Britain, by contrast, the disintegration of the Qing empire meant the loss of a significant buffer against Russia's southward expansion and also a serious blow to its economic outlook (Kang 2006, 337-338). Both Russia and Great Britain, however, expected the negotiations on Ganghwa Island to proceed quickly and bring the war to an early end. Russia explicitly stated that it would not interfere with the design of the terms of peace insofar as the independence of Joseon was guaranteed (Lensen 1966, 211). As the defeat of the Qing became a near *fait accompli*, Great Britain pressured the Qing to accept the terms to be reached at Ganghwa, minimising Japan's worries over the likelihood of future interference from the British (Nish 2012; Kang 2006, 337-338). Japan, which wanted nothing more than freedom from the possible involvement of these two Western powers, reassured them that it would respect the independence of Joseon as promised and that no terms would be proposed at Ganghwa that would bring the Qing dynasty to collapse (Munemitsu 1980 [1895]; Lensen 1966, 221; FO 1895, 169). Japan sought to disincentivise the British from getting involved in the negotiations at Ganghwa by sharing its trade privileges with Great Britain, while also trying

to make the Qing relinquish its control over the Liaodong Peninsula under the new peace treaty to be signed (FO 1895, 28). Taking this effort by Japan as aimed at depriving Joseon of sovereignty in effect, Russia tried its hand at triple intervention in partnership with France and Germany (Lensen 1966, 278; FO 1895, 29). Skeptical that it would survive war against this alliance of Western powers, Japan officially renounced its interest in occupying the Liaodong Peninsula. The Qing and Japan then entered the Treaty of Shimonoseki.

The treaty signified the official end of the Sinocentric order in two major ways. First, it handed Taiwan and the Penghu Islands over to Japan. Second, it officially removed Joseon, the last tributary of the Qing and the symbol of the still functioning Sinocentric order, from that order altogether. Most importantly, unlike the similar treaties preceding it, the Treaty of Shimonoseki was accepted and recognised officially by all the major powers in the world, making the end of the Sinocentric order final. The fact that Japan refused Li Hong Zhang's proposal that it, too, like the Qing, recognise the independence of Joseon implied the growing ambition Japan had already been cultivating with respect to colonising Joseon.

V. The Road to Japan's Annexation of Korea

East Asia's connection to the European international society started through the imperialist expansion of the European powers. The end of the First Sino-Japanese War and the Treaty of Shimonoseki signaled the complete dismantling of the Sinocentric order.

The international society, formed by shared European values, began to expand and become the world's standard for international society (Bull and Watson 1984, 1-9, 1; Watson 1992, 265-276). This expansion led to the European powers' colonisation of East Asia and the establishment of an exploitative colonial system (Watson 1984, 13-32, 24-32; Gong 1984, 24-53). According to modern European civilisation standards, the process involved unequal relationships created as approval methods to include East Asian countries gradually (Gong 1984, 4-6; Bowden 2009; Keene 2001, 147-148). East Asia's traditional Sinocentric order was dismantled by the expansion of Western empires and European international society, pressure from Imperial Japan, and Joseon and China's forced inclusion into the Western sovereignty system that ended their drive toward internal reform (Suzuki, Zhang, and Quirk 2013; Suzuki 2005, 136-167).

The dismantling of the Sinocentric order was completed with the expansion of the European international society and the imperialist expansion of Japan, a non-Western country that submitted rapidly to the standard of civilised states, joining the international society and becoming an empire soon after (Suganami 1984, 185-99; Gong 1984, 164-200). Japanese politicians and the intelligentsia were divided under two trends. The first sought to preserve Japan's autonomy and independence by excluding external military threats. Meanwhile, a second, more aggressive stance aimed to develop the state through outward expansion. Japan's stance gradually shifted from the first to the second. For these groups, the image of perpetual conflict in the modern state system overlapped with the struggle for survival during the Warring States period, which naturally led to an aggressive position for independence and survival (Suzuki 2005, 136-167). Japan's dismantling of the Sinocentric order and its engagement in the First Sino-Japanese War was its

way of surviving the perils of the international society.

The First Sino-Japanese War and the Treaty of Shimonoseki also spelled the end of Joseon's Sinocentric worldview. At that time, Japan, Russia, the United States, and the conservative and enlightenment factions in Korea faced growing distrust, dissatisfaction, and doubt in China. The war demonstrated Japan's dominance over China in the last 50 years, and the people of Joseon found new opportunities and choices before them (Tabohashi 1940b, 746-748), such as restructuring Joseon's international policy to one based on justification and practical gain. At this time, right before colonial submission, Joseon had to re-establish its relationships with the surrounding states, as all of them had the potential to become allies or enemies.

The mounting pressure from the Western powers and its own failure to deal with them led Japan to develop strategic foreign policies for maximising its self-interests based on a Hobbesian view of the world (Suzuki 2005, 136-167; Pyle 2009). Defining Joseon as its "interest line," Japan had set out to penetrate the Chinese continent through Joseon under the pretext of protecting its own "sovereignty line" since the first Sino-Japanese War (Yamagata 1966, 196-200, 197). In particular, Japan insisted on justifying its invasion of Manchuria-Mongolia, defining it as "the life line" that ought not to be disrupted for the survival of Japan. Joseon as Japan's "interest line" was the key ground upon which Japan justified annexing Joseon (Yabe 1940, 36). The interest line was then extended to the life line so that Japan's imperial endeavours would be justified in the name of its autonomy. Japan claimed that the interests it held in Manchuria differed from the interests that other powerful empires held in occupying others' territories. Japan's interest in Manchuria-Mongolia was beyond a matter of rights; it was a matter of life and survival. As such, Japan claimed that it held a "special relationship" to Manchuria-Mongolia (Nakamura 1932 July).

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Now that Joseon's relationship with Qing China had degenerated from an tributary relationship to an exploitative hierarchy, Japan's victory in the war with the Qing meant Joseon was now to be subjugated by another exploitative power. Joseon once again sought to neutralise itself to ward off the ambition of Russia and Japan to annex the Korean Peninsula.

The First Sino-Japanese War and the Treaty of Shimonoseki demonstrated to Joseon the effects of the Triple Intervention. The war ended in China's defeat and saw Japan withdrawing its forces due to the diplomatic pressure facilitated by Russia through King Gojong (MFAJ 1894b, 17-18). Numerous pro-Japanese members of the government who rose to prominent positions at the time were also either exiled or replaced with pro-Russian groups (Lee 1981, 365-357).

Barely out of the First Sino-Japanese War, Japan now found itself in a growing impasse with Russia, while its plan to occupy Korea single-handedly was thwarted, the anti-Japanese sentiment in Korea reached

new heights in the aftermath of Queen Myeongseong's death, and King Gojong took refuge in the Russian legation (Sillokcheong 2006 [1896]). The news of Russia and Japan reaching a compromise by agreeing to exchange Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula (1901) reached and greatly shocked King Gojong, who ordered the Korean ambassador to Russia to launch an investigation into the matter. He also sent Park Je-sun as a special envoy to Japan to propose the neutralisation plan once again. Japan, however, countered Park's proposal with its plan for a military alliance between Korea and Japan. The two sides could not reach an agreement (Sillokcheong 2006 [1900]).

However, Japan purged the pro-Russian factions in Joseon, resulting in the Komura-Weber Memorandum, signed between Prime Minister Yamagata and Russian foreign minister Lobanov-Rostovsky, and the Nishi-Rosen Treaty of 1898, resulting in the balance of Russian and Japanese power in Joseon until the Russo-Japanese War. In contrast to Joseon's wishes, its efforts to assert its sovereignty through their secret emissary to the Hague went unheeded due to Japan's and Russia's conflict of interest and their tacit agreement on the balance of power.

The British-Japanese alliance (Jan. 1902) and the Russo-French Declaration (Mar. 1902) kept King Gojong's hope for the viability of the neutralisation strategy alive. With the Russo-Japanese War impending, King Gojong again sent special envoys to both Russia and Japan, demanding that the two countries regard Korea as a neutral territory in their war, only to have his request directly ignored by both sides.

Arguing that, under the international law, a country could declare itself neutral in wartime only when it was sufficiently resolved and capable, Japan openly questioned Korea's ability to maintain its neutrality, and again proposed a military alliance between Korea and Japan, using King Gojong's incompetency over managing Korean fugitives in Japan against him (MFAJ 1903, 22-23, 723-726). In negotiations with Japan, Russia proposed creating a neutral territory on the Korean Peninsula north of the 39th Parallel. This irked Japan into proposing, instead, creating a neutral territory stretching 50 kilometres on either side of the Korea-Manchuria border (MFAJ 1903, 22-23). Korea's neutralisation diplomacy thus utterly failed as the powerful nations struggled to protect their own interests in the Korean Question.

the Russo-Japanese War broke out and ended with Japan's victory over the West. After the war, the Treaty of Portsmouth (1905) established Russia's exclusion from the Korean Empire, and the Russo-Japanese Agreement (1907) established Korea's status as a Japanese protectorate, thereby allowing Japan to exclude China and Russia from Korea completely.

The end of the war also led to the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905, which forfeited Korea's diplomatic sovereignty and turned the country into a Japanese protectorate. During the Russo-Japanese War, Japan intervened in Korean politics through agreements on the use of advisors established in the Japan-Korea Agreement of August 1904, which appointed a Japanese financial advisor and a foreign advisor to take over all financial and diplomatic matters in Korea. The signing of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905 was a complete takeover of Korean diplomatic sovereignty and finalised its status as a Japanese protectorate.

The speed and confidence with which Japan had completed its subjugation of Korea stemmed from its victories in the First Sino-Japanese War and the Russo-Japanese War and the *de facto* approval of the Second

Anglo-Japanese Alliance(1905) through the deletion of Japan's guarantee of Joseon's independence (Nish 2013, 298-344; Gooch and Temperley 1927, 148-151).

The appropriation of Korean diplomatic power turned the country into a Japanese protectorate similar to Egypt under the British Empire (Moriyama 1994, 30-41; Ariga 1906; Takahashi 1907). Although Japan did not yet annex Korea, its status as a protectorate guaranteed the agreements and treaties signed between itself and Japan while bringing significant changes to Korea's status and relationships with the rest of the world (Nakamura 1905). Korea was still a nominally independent state despite facing Japanese intervention in its internal politics, which was within the rights defined in their agreement, specifically through Article 1 of the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 (Nakamura 1930, 43; Shuzan 1908, 127, 137; NIKH 1905).⁵

The transfer of diplomatic sovereignty meant that Korea shifted from a fully sovereign state to a semi-sovereign state under international law (Tachi 1930, 135). Korea's state resulted from its external sovereignty being limited as a protectorate of Japan, while Japan was reconfigured as a protector of Korea through the delegation of Korea's external sovereignty (Takahashi 1907, 200-201).

While Japan claimed that this change was necessary to preserve Korea's survival and independence under a world power, it was, in reality, an annexation (Takahashi 1907, 203-207). Their claim's veracity was called into question by the withdrawal of all diplomatic missions to and from Korea. Thus, the Korean Empire had lost its independence and its place on the world stage (Takahashi 1904, 6-10).

This process led to the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1907, which disbanded the Korean military, and the Korea–Japan Memorandum in the Delegation of the Administration of Courts and Prisons (1909), which delegated Korea's legislative power to Japan. These agreements culminated in the Japan–Korea Annexation Treaty (1910), which forcibly annexed Korea to the Japanese Empire, proving that becoming a Japanese protectorate was intended to lead to eventual annexation. Although a protectorate is limited to its diplomatic relationship with a protector and intervention in internal affairs is considered an exception, recent examples have shown that the relationship erodes through the protector's executive and legislative intervention, culminating in the loss of international dignity and the protectorate's subjugation.

At that time, Joseon experienced foreign exploitation through the Military Mutiny of 1882, Queen Min's assassination in 1895, and King Gojong's refuge in Russia's legation. Faced with threats to its autonomy and survival, Joseon reformed itself into the Empire of Korea, a state based on constitutional monarchy but leaned toward absolute monarchy (Sillokcheong 2006 [1897]). When the country declared its independence and autonomy, the Korean people's recognition in the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 centered around emotionally charged pessimism and righteous anger. The response was chaotic and complex, with protest-suicides, uprisings, invitations to other powers for intervention, and legal objections.

As a witness of the Triple Intervention's result, King Gojong expressed that diplomatic means should facilitate the international society's intervention. He envisioned Korea's participation in the Second Peace

⁵ Article 1. The Imperial Government of Korea shall transfer and assign the control and administration of the post, telegraph and telephone services in Korea (except the telephone service exclusively pertaining to the Department of the Imperial Household) to the Imperial Japanese Government. (NIKH 1905)

Convention of 1907 at The Hague in the Netherlands. Gojong aimed to secure the invitations to the Hague Peace Convention through Russia before the signing of the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 and use their participation in the convention to declare Korea’s right of non-aggression to the international society and recognise Korea’s independence (Park 2002, 753). After the signing of the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 and the Treaty of Portsmouth following the Russo-Japanese War, participating in the convention was unlikely for Korea; without diplomatic sovereignty, Korea was no longer eligible for participation, and it could no longer depend on Russia’s cooperation (Park 2002, 104). In the end, the attempts to declare the unlawfulness of the Japan-Korea Treaty of 1905, criticise Japan’s violation of international laws, and request for foreign powers to intervene in the Korean peninsula have failed (Gojong 1906). Having recognised the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 before the Treaty of Portsmouth and the Russo-Japanese Agreement of 1907, Russia could not be expected to provide support to Korea because Japan already guaranteed Russia’s special interests in North Manchuria (Park 2002, 341; MFAJ 1965, 280-281).

Gojong then sent Syngman Rhee as a secret emissary to the Portsmouth Peace Conference to seek an audience with President Roosevelt. Immediately after the signing of the treaty, Rhee asked Homer B. Hulbert, the U.S. advisor to the Empire of Korea, to send an emergency message to the United States asking for their intervention based on the “amicable arrangement” clause in Article 1 of the Joseon–United States Treaty of 1882 (MFAJ 2012 [1905], 517-519). However, Roosevelt and the Department of State understood that Korea’s subjugation as a Japanese protectorate resulted from the Russo–Japanese Agreement, well before the Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905 (MFAJ 2012 [1905], 337). Japan’s friendship toward Korea and the latter’s inability to supervise its diplomatic affairs meant that becoming a Japanese protectorate would be for the best (MFAJ 2012 [1905], 348-349). Furthermore, Secretary of State John M. Hay instructed Hulbert to refrain from sending any results from any treaties or agreements signed between Korea and Japan in the future, thereby allowing the United States to intervene in Korea (Wilz 1985, 243-270), a rejection of the duty of amicable arrangement under Article 1 of the Joseon–United States Treaty. However, Korea was unaware that the United States and Japan had already agreed on the American subjugation of the Philippines and the Japanese subjugation of Korea under the Taft–Katsura Agreement (1905).

The signing of the Second Anglo–Japanese Alliance, the Taft–Katsura Agreement, and the recognition of the Treaty of Portsmouth completed the preparations needed for the subjugation of Korea as a Japanese protectorate. This process was built on an agreement between foreign powers and Joseon’s exclusion.

In the end, Korea’s declaration of sovereignty was rejected and excluded by the relationships of interest between foreign powers. Even though Korea was forced to accept its sovereignty through unequal treaties with the Western powers, the country’s sovereignty was reduced to a semi-sovereignty, culminating in its annexation in 1910, depriving the country of its sovereignty and justice.

VI. Conclusion

In summary, an examination of the Sino-centric international society in East Asia took place through a primary institution, great power management with China at the centre, and diplomacy among countries, which stabilised the balance of power between the constituent countries of the East Asian international society operated by dynasticism. However, while this meant that European Westphalian international society could still communicate through diplomacy, it nevertheless penetrated through the non-sovereignty of the East Asian international society, and eventually incorporated them into the Westphalian system of sovereign states through the coercion of war. Through two Western disturbances, French (1866) and the U.S' (1871) expedition to Korea at the end of the 19th century, Joseon encountered the European international society in line with its expansion into the international order. However, as Joseon had identified itself as a member of the Sino-centric order and oriented the legitimacy of its authority toward the Confucianism-based notion, as a result, Joseon recognised the West as mere barbarians.

Ironically, such a Sino-centric viewpoint of Joseon influenced its conclusion of treaties with Japan, as the role of the Qing and the position of Japan were deemed equal under the Sino-centric order. This was due to the Qing's intention to avoid direct conflict with Japan during the time when Japan was accelerating its imperialistic expansion under the realistic recognition of the world order. As such, the Qing attempted to reconceptualise the Joseon–Japan relationship via a noble moral norm of sovereignty on top of the conventional norm of the Sino-centric order of which the Qing took advantage to maintain its existing superiority over Joseon. Eventually, Joseon was simultaneously placed under both the Sino-centric order and a double system deprived of its sovereignty. It would be more accurate to say that Joseon was used as a medium for balance of power between China and Japan, rather than Joseon's sovereign state being respected and considered at the forefront. Japan–Korea Treaty of 1876 was understood as Joseon's diplomatic approach to liaison with Japan, and was employed to distinguish Japan from the West.

What led the Joseon/Korean Empire to seek entry to a sovereign state system were the following: King Gojong promulgated the Fourteen Point Great Plan, rejected the tributary system with the Qing Dynasty, and declared Joseon as the sovereign state. At the same time, Korean political elites paid attention to the balance of power clause in the international public law, and advocated the national sovereign autonomy of Korea. Amidst the era of turmoil, Joseon sought survival through a balanced foreign policy, which pursued interlocking of the interests of superpowers and the rest, by signing treaties with the Western empires, while maintaining tributary relations with the Qing. Yet despite such efforts, the treaties which Joseon had signed with the Western nations no longer came into effect following Japan's victory over Russia in the 1904 Russo-Japanese war, which further enlarged the Western superpowers' interest in Japan following Japan's victory over the Qing in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894. Throughout the signing process of the Shimonoseki treaty, and the Portsmouth treaty, the rights of Joseon, which had previously been guaranteed under the treaties, were gradually limited following the signing of the Japan–Korea Agreement of 1904, Japan–Korea Treaty of 1905, and Japan–Korea Treaty of 1910. Consequently, Joseon's efforts to join the treaty-based system upon signing of the Ganghwa treaty in 1876 and to resist Japan's interference on the back of the rights guaranteed by the treaties it signed with the neighbouring superpowers were discouraged. The Western superpowers no

longer paid attention to the voice of Joseon and rather allied with Japan, which had emerged as the rising empire of East Asia following its victories in the two major wars.

As such, during this period, Joseon underwent three incidents of exclusion and sacrifice as the result of the neighbouring superpowers' pursuit to reorganise the order considering interests of the superpowers, including those of Japan. Although Joseon sought to remain a member of the existing Sino-centric order, it was unwillingly incorporated into a system of treaties based on the interests of the Qing and Japan. Placed under the *double system*, Joseon claimed its position as a sovereign state and pursued balance of power by signing treaties with the Western superpowers in an effort to resist the expropriation from the Qing and Japan, but such efforts were cut short following alliances established between Japan and the Western superpowers. Consequently, Joseon was legitimately annexed by Japan through treaties on the back of tacit consent by the superpowers.

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