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by Dr Lee Sun-keun from his lecture to the Society on May 2, 1962

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A few years ago the Jindan Society asked me to write abont modern Korean history. My book was published last year and came to be known to some of you. Not too long ago the Council of the Royal Asiatic Society asked me to discuss a portion of the book at one of its regular monthly meetings.

It did not seem wise to select an extensive subject. Therefore, I chose to discuss Taewon-gun, the Regent, who, as most of you know, can be rightly called the forerunner of dictatorship in modern Korea. Most probably you know him as an inscrutable, stubborn politician. He was a dictator who massacred Christians and fought a couple of engagements with the French Navy in 1866 and with the American Navy in 1871. Especially the latter is celebrated as the “48-Hour War,” the shortest engagement in the annals of the American navy.

Your impressions of him are not unreasonable. But when we look at the inside facts of history, we see that Taewongun was not as stubborn, anti-Christian and chauvinistic as he is pictured. On the contrary we find him a bold reformist who wanted to do something for his country, a man who was not blindly hostile to Christianity, but had intimate relations with it.

First, in introducing Taewongun, this is his title and not his name. Under the hereditary monarchy this title was given to a king’s father who did not ascend the throne. The name of the person, whom I am now going to introduce to you, was Yi Ha-ung (李夏應). His title before his son became king was Hungson-gun(興宣君). [page24]

Before his son Myongbok became king, while still a child, Yi Ha-ung was desperately poor and had no position in politics. Under the regime, so called Sedo of the Andong Kim (安東金) family, he allied himself with unfortunate politicians and mixed with the nondescripts of the town. It is interesting to note that most of his friends belonged to the Namin, or South Sect. Those belonging to the South Sect contributed much to our culture by importing Christianity to our country. It is clear therefore that Yi Ha-ung was not anti-Christian before he came to power. We should also note that his wife, Madame Min, was a considerable Christian. The nurse of his son, King Kojong, was also a baptized Christian. His wife and his son’s nurse being Christians, we can easily tell that he was not anti-Christian from the beginning. I refer you to Dallet’s “Catholic Church in Korea” for further details concerning this matter.

Furthermore, Prince Hungson was a dilettante in the Oriental sense, who liked music and folk dance, poetry and orchids, an artist in a sense. Togther with Min Yong-ik (聞泳翊) and Kim Ung-won (金應元) of modern Korea, he is called one of the “Three Orchids” in tribute to his wonderful technique in painting. He preceded the two others and exhibited a unique style.

This will naturally make you wonder how he could have suddenly changed his attitude, persecuted Christians, unwisely fought the two Western powers and become a despot. I will try to give the reasons and inside facts behind his attitude.

On the surface Ha-ung pretended to be a dissolute rake but he was a politician of the highest grade with unusual talent and wit. It was at the time when the Andong Kim family, the Queen’s relatives, held power. Members of the royal blood line were banished or killed as traitors if they appeared clever or made political complaints. Ha-ung, therefore, affected to be a fool and [page 25] rake and avoided the suspicion of his enemies by leading a dissolute life. In fact he was neither a fool nor an incapable man. Averting the attention of the Andong Kim family, he was able to become intimately acquainted with Queen Cho, the grandmother of the King, who had the strongest influence in the court. When King Ch’oljong died, Ha-ung arranged for Queen Cho to adopt his son Myongbok (命福) and that through his active and thorough operations make him succeed the king.

At any rate he put his son on the throne in 1864 and made Queen Cho regent for the king in name. From that time on he came to possess all the power of the government and commanded the whole nation. At the same time he enforced great domestic reforms with the applause of the people. His outstanding reforms are as follows:

First, he overthrew the power of the corrupt Andong Kim family and, under a strong central government, stopped the exploitation and violence of the aristocracy.

Second, he severely regulated voracious and corrupt officials who had deceived and extorted the people and punished government officials who embezzled public funds.

Third, he amended the tax system which had become confused in the extreme. The aristocracy had been exempt from taxes but Taewongun imposed duties on them and abolished miscellaneous taxes which were levied by the court or King’s relatives for private purposes.

Fourth, he disbanded about 650 Confucian temples spread throughout the country and allowed only to remain. Like the temples of Western Europe before the French Revolution, the Confucian aristocracy possessed [page 26] various privileges, and harassed the people. He put an end to this.

Fifth, he published law codes such as “Taejon Hoet’ong” (大典會通), and “Yukchon Chore” (六典條例) and also improved and enlarged such books as “Collection of Eastern Diplomatic Papers” (交隣志) and “Diplomacy with Neighboring Countries” (同文彙考) and other similar books, on foreign relations. He made some changes in the vehicles for ordinary citizens and government officials and simplified clothing and other folk customs.1)

Our doubt as to why Taewongun persecuted Christians with whom he had been on good terms becomes intensified now that we learn of his many wonderful domestic reforms and talented administration.

First of all we have to take into consideration the infiltration south of Russian imperialism ana the poor knowledge of Taewongun and his courtesans about things outside the country. I will tell you a more detailed story.

As some of you may know, the year 1860 was an important period which occasioned grave changes in the Far East. The allied forces of England and France attacked the capital of the Ching Dynasty in mainland China and Peking fell, to the great surprise of the peoples of Asia. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Russia took over a vast territory, 700 miles wide, east of the Ussuri River without expending a penny or a drop of blood, by merely scaring the old and weak China. With the end of the Second World War the United Nations forces, after a bloody fight, brought Imperial Japan to her knees. At this moment the imperialism of Red Russia skilfully took Manchuria and North Korea. This is a copy

1) On pp 163-222 of my “History of Korea, Modern Period”, Han’guksa Choegunse p’yon, (韓國史最近世編), I gave a detailed explanation of the domestic reform of the Regent, dividing it into 6 sections. Here only the main points are given.

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of the imperialistic move made by White Russia in 1860.

At any rate, in 1860 Russia came to border our country at the Tumen River for the first time in our history. Borrowing Griffis’ expression, the Korean tiger at that time was threatened by the polar bear.2) As far as I can see, the Korea tiger was young and weak, totally ignorant and inexperienced in modern warfare. In comparison the polar bear was fully equipped with modern weapons and had burning avarice and a warlike spirit.

This greedy bear crossed the border from 1884 onwards, threatened the magistrate of Kyonghung (慶興) and demanded the gates to be opened and trade permitted. Concerning Russian activities at this time, some foreign annals indicate that Russian battleships came to Wonsan and asked for trade.3) There is no such record in Korean documents.

I believe it more probable that the Russian bear simply crossed the Tumen river, instead of invading by sea.

The Far Eastern Russian officials, escorted by Cossack cavalry, visited Kyonghung on the shore of the Tumen river many times during the period between 1864 and 1865. Using bad interpreters and submitting illegible Russian documents, they threatened to march to Hamhung (咸與), the capital of Hamgyong (咸鏡) Province.

When these alarming reports were continually transmitted to the central government, Taewongun, who had been so bold in his domestic reform, became very much

2) Griffis, “Corea the Hermit Nation”, 1907, New York, p. 371 “The Russian bear jostled the Corean tiger.”

3) Foreign authors write thus, prominently Ballet’s “Histoire de Eglise de Coree”, Paris, 1874 and Longford’s “The Story of Korea”, 1911.

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embarrassed. At first he reproached the local magistrate and executed the Korean who had led the Russians; but the latter were not daunted and continued to disturb the peace of mind of Taewongun, then living in Seoul.4) Unable to understand the identity and intentions of the Russian bear, Taewongun actually lost his appetite. His troubles did not long remain hidden from his beloved wife. Madame Min, a Christian, was also deeply troubled for her husband’s sake.

One day Mrs. Pak, the baptised nurse, came on a visit. Madame Min asked her what should be done about the Russians. The two women agreed that the best way would be to use the French missionaries who had infiltrated into the country to propagate the Catholic Church. Thus the staff of the Catholic Church decided to counsel Taewongun on his foreign policy towards Russia and submitted a letter by way of Cho Ki-jin (趙基晋), Taewongun’s daughter’s father-in-law. Although we have no way of knowing the exact contents of the original, it is known that the following points were made:

First, the general international situation at the time was described. In short, Russia was represented as a strong nation but not quite as strong as France and England.

Second, Korea should abandon her closed-door policy. Instead she should join hands with France or conclude a three-nation treaty with France and England. The Russian problem would then solve itself.

Third, in order to promote international alliances, Bishop Berneux, who had come into the country under cover, should be asked to make arrangements with French Minister Bellonet in Peking. If possible Taewon¬gun should first see Bishop Berneux and also invite Minister Bellonet to Seoul and open Korean and French diplomatic talks.

4) For detailed explanation see pp 226-229 of “History of Korea, Modern Period”according to Vol I of “King Kojong’s Annals”(高宗實錄).

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How wonderful these recommendations were! About a hundred years ago our Christians were clever enough to recommend a Korean and French or a Korean, French and British alliance, and that under cover. If their plan had succeeded without interruption, Korea would have been modernized at the same period as the Japanese and avoided the tragic yoke of Japanese imperialism. But the plan failed and only resulted in the persecution of Christians and an armed conflict between Korea and France.

Let us follow the story a little further. First of all the letter of recommendations was drafted by Kim Myon-ho (金勉浩), Hong Pong-ju (洪鳳周) and other Christians who were not skilled in drafting papers. Perhaps displeased with the inferiority of style in the letter, Taewongun ignored it. When his wife and Mrs. Pak learned this, they went for advice and action to Nam Chong-sam (南鍾三), the King’s secretary, who was at the same time their Christian representative and a young devotee. Nam Chong-sam was the son of the former secretary, Nam Sang-gyo (南尙敎). They both belonged to the South Sect and had been intimate friends with Taewongun for a long time.

Nam Chong-sam drafted a good alternative letter, met Taewongun in person ana handed it to him. Taewongun now paid attention to the letter and treated Nam kindly. He took him to one side and asked him about Christian doctrines. Taewongun expressed his readiness to follow the recommendations and told him to arrange a meeting with Bishop Berneux “in secret.”

This story is generally based on the records of Dallet. How wonderful would it have been if Nam Chong-sam and other leaders of the Catholic Church at that time had been more enthusiastic and active in arranging the Taewongun-Berneux meeting! But they [page 30] were not so. When they received a satisfactory reply, Nam Chong-sam and the staff of the Catholic Church were immeasurably happy, spent all their time congratulating themselves, and neglected more important duties.

They exultingly believed that now that their first step had proven so successful, they would soon be able to obtain freedom of religion and the right to propagate their faith. Therefore they collected together their believers, celebrated special services and spread the word around. They divulged the secret instead of keeping it as Taewongun had told them.

Thus, they spent several months fruitlessly. Towards the end of 1865 they were able to get in touch with Bishop Berneux who was engaged in secret missionary activity in a small village in Hwanghae (黃海) Province and asked him to go to Seoul for a meeting with Taewongun. They were not able to pay the travelling expenses to cover a pony and a servant and borrowed the money from Cho Ki-jin, Taewongun’s daughter’s father-in-law. This was an extremely slipshod and loose operation.

I suggest that this casualness was the most direct cause of the tragedy that followed.

They had not kept the secret as Taewongun had most earnestly asked them. Consequently, a rumor became widespread through Seoul that the Unhyon (雲峴) Palace, Taewongun’s residence, was frequented day in and day out by Catholics. Queen Cho and other intimate ministers of state, who formed Taewon-gun’s political backbone, reproached him, making the politician’s position extremely embarrassing.

Word was brought from the Chinese empire, the greatest land on earth, that Christianity and foreigners were being rejected in that country. At this point [page 31] politician Taewongun changed his mind rapidly. He would be condemned for his involvement with the Catholics, the outlaws, when his rash negotiations with the Christians, in the hopes of defending the country against Russia, became public knowledge.

At the end of 1865 Nam Chong-sam called on him and said that Bishop Berneux was in Seoul to meet him. Taewongun at once rejected the interview and said to Nam Chong-sam, “Stop worrying your head with such matters. Go to the country to celebrate New Year’s Day and give my regards to your father.” This was the end of all Korea-France alliance theories and indeed the signal for Christian persecution.

Nam Chong-sam told his father, Nam Sang-gyo, what had happened. Nam Sang-gyo knew Taewongun’s character well and pointed out the off-hand manner in which the Christian leaders had conducted the affair. “Soon a disaster will befall us,” he said to his son in sad prediction, “but let us die like Christians.”5)

In eariy January, 1866 Taewongun began his persecution and murder of Christians. In less than three years 800 Korean Christians and 9 French missionaries were murdered6). In 1866 a naval war had to be fought around Kanghwa Island when French battleships invaded. Regrettably enough Napoleon III’s France, with which Taewongun once contemplated alliance, became an ememy. Until the signing of a formal treaty of amity in 1889 by Ambassador F.G. Cogordan and Ambassador Kim Man-sik, the relations between France and Korea were severed.

The invasion of Imperialist Russia was the principal

5) See pp 229-240 of “History of Korea, Modern Period” concerning the progress of negotiations between the Regent and Christian leaders.

6) Opinions vary as to the exact number of people killed under the Regent’s Christian persecution. My estimate is based on the “Catholic Year Book”, 1956, p. 24.

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reason for this tragedy. Secondly, Taewongun and other political leaders at that time were almost blind to the international situation.

Thirdly the leading members of the Catholic Church were responsible for incurring Taewongun’s reaction, despite his original pro-Christian inclinations, by failing to arrange negotiotions with him with alertness and sincerity.

Finally, French Minister to China, Bellonet, and Roze, Commander of the French fleet in the Far East, despised Korea and had the effrontery to bring armed battleships twice within Korean territory without obtaining the agreement of the Korean government. They withdrew with nothing accomplished but had stimulated Taewongun’s foolish pride to no purpose and made him intensify his persecution of Christians in Korea. This was by no means wise.

Next let us turn our attention to the 48-hour war between Korea and the United States, the shortest engagement ever fought in the history of the U.S. Navy. Why did it take place? Among the many possible reasons I should especially like to tell you one interesting story. You know that this war was due to the bizarre General Sherman incident. Registered with the United States, the General Sherman was unusually well armed for a merchant marine. She came sailing up the Taedong (大同) River in 1869. Her sailors committed violence, their language was incomprehensible to the natives, and not knowing the tide, the ship became stranded. In desperation the sailors fired guns. Consequently the whole ship and her crew were burned to death. The U.S. was not proud of the unfortunate General Sherman incident and wanted to settle the matter quietly and peaceably.

For four or five years the U.S. sent Commodore Shufeldt’s “Wachusett” and Commander Febiger’s “Shenandoah” to [page33] search the shores of the Korean peninsula; to no purpose7). In 1871 Admiral Rodgers led a small fleet and came to Korea. President Grant instructed his Minister in Peking, Frederick Low, to do three things:

1. Arrange a treaty of commerce with the Korean Kingdom if possible.

2. Obtain an agreement from the Korean government guaranteeing the safety of shipwrecked sailors.

3. Unless the flag were insulted, to abstain from force, Minister Low to be responsible for either peace or war.8)

From this we can tell that President Grant and the American government did not want to use force in order to define responsibility for the General Sherman incident and hoped to take the opportunity of signing a commerce treaty. Minister Low accordingly sent a note, through the Peking government, to Taewongun in March 1871 to the following effect.

“In 1866 two U.S. merchant marines reached your shore. One of them met a storm but was saved. The other also met a storm but her crew and cargo were all lost. We are afraid that you have not heard of the U.S. flag. Furthermore, we can not understand why you saved one and hurt the other. I and Admiral Rodgers will bring battleships to your country and make negotiations on a commerce treaty but want to know as promptly as possible your attitude as to how to lend mutual assistance and cooperation when an American ship runs into trouble within your territory in the future.9)

When he received this note, Taewongun’s government

7) See pp 277-286 of “History of Korea, Modern Period” for the General Sherman incident.

8) From B.W. von Block’s “America’s 48-Hour War” in Stag, Oct, 1956

9) From the continued edition of Vol.11 of the Yearbook of Tongmun- gwan-ji (通文館誌), Diplomatic Papers, 1871 and from Ilsong-nok (日省錄) Court Diary, February, 1871.

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acknowledged the rescue of one ship but denied harming the other. Indeed in 1866 an American merchant marine, the Surprise, was wrecked near the shore at Sonch’onp’o (宣川浦), Pyongan(平安) Province. The local officials rescued Captain McCaslin and his crew, treated them kindly and sent them on their way. They also knew that this ship was an American vessel.

As for the Sherman incident which took place near Pyongang(平壤) the interpreter at that time was a British missionary, Reverend Thomas, and the Korean government thought the Sherman was a British ship. When Peking made inquiries about the lost American ship, the Korean government consistently replied that although they had known about a British ship which had caught on fire of its own accord, they had not harmed an American merchant marine. A letter was drafted in reply to Minister Low’s note and sent to Peking.

“We have rescued and given safe conduct to American ships in the past and we will continue to rescue and give safe conduct to American ships when they meet with trouble in the future. As for trade, we do not have any materials available for trade and we don’t feel the need for a commerce treaty. We hope to dissolve doubts between us and live together without conflict”10)

This reply expresses the readiness of the Korean government to rescue those shipwrecked but at the same time refuses commerce from the stubborn closed-door policy that prevailed at that time. Nor did the government want American ships to visit the country.

After the illegal exhumation of Taewongun’s father’s grave at Toksan(德山), Chungchong(忠淸), Province, by Oppert of Prussia, who came on the Rona, the Korean people, who did not distinguish between different

10) Source same as note (9).

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Westerners at that time, concluded that iron-clad foreign vessels always brought the same kind of people. As Minister Low had pointed out, Korea did not know the meaning of a national flag and had no way of telling American, French and English flags apart. Also there had been no formal relations with the West and nobody had told Korea what a national flag meant. If the advanced countries of Europe had been broadminded enough, they would not have blamed Korea too harshly.

At any rate Minister Low notified through Peking that he would “come”; the Korean government replied, also through Peking, that “he better not”. In May 1871 Minister Low and Admiral Rodgers appeared on the shore of Korea with a fleet composed of 5 battleships. They sailed slowly, taking soundings, and delivering letters to local officials who came out to inquire, stating that they wanted trade talks. By the last week of May the fleet had passed Yongjong (永宗), Island and appeared near Pupyong (富平). Thus an uninvited guest had intruded and the Taewongun government became as watchful as it had in the case of the French fleet. In the meantime an official delegation was sent from the central government to the fleet to ask their business. In the Korean court nobody spoke English so they had to choose an interpreter who was good at Chinese. The official inquirers, called Munjonggwan (問情官), visited the ship on 31 May. Secretary Drew talked with the Korean officials but learned that they were lower than grade 3 in the Korean official hierarchy. Both Admiral Rodgers and Minister Low were very angry. “Mr. Low would not lower himself,” they said. “Order them off the ship! The United States government does not negotiate with clerks!”11)

Consequently, the Korean officials were put off the ship. Admiral Rodders was very excited and ordered Captain Homer C. Blake to take the Palos and Mon-

11) Griffis’s “Corea the Hermit Nation”, p. 408. Von Block’s “America’s 48-Hour War”

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ocacy, both battleships, and four steam launches and “survey and examine” the Kanghwa straits. An armed engagement followed. What is the direct cause of the engagement?

Before elucidating the cause, I would like first to define the function of inquirers sent by the Government. Foreign vessels entered our territory after the 19th century. Every time a foreign vessel arrived, an inquiry mission was sent from among local officials near the shore off which the ship lay to ascertain her business. If her business was concerned with the central govern¬ment, an inquiry mission was then sent from the central government and confirmed the reports of the first mission. After that, depending on the nature of the matter, high-ranking ministers of state would present themselves for talks. In this case, therefore, the Korean government was following the regular procedure.

The most unfortunate thing is that although there were able interpreters fluently versed in Japanese, Chinese, Mongolian and Manchurian, nobody spoke English, French, German or any other European tongue. The eight inquirers that visted the American fleet had to speak only through Mr. Drew, the American interpreter, who was as far as I can gather completely ignorant of the Korean language. He had been a customs clerk in South China and even though he knew Chinese, he could not have been well acquainted with the official Peking dialect. Hence Mr. Drew’s interpretation was very dubious.

It is, moreover, easy to conjecture that he did not know the nature of the inquirers. Had there been on board the ship any one of my respected Western friends who speak Korean or if any of the inquirers had spoken English, Admiral Rodgers would not have been so excited. Instead of ordering them off the ship, he would have asked Mr. Drew to treat them with kindness. Had the inquirers been properly treated, high-ranking [page 37] government officials would have come for negotiations as the next step and the Americans would have avoided unreasonable “examination and survey,” and would have averted the 48-hour war at Fort Kwangsong(廣城鎭). At the same time Korea-U.S. trade talks could then have opened. As Professor Griffis points out, “A golden opportunity was here lost.”12) In this short engagement the U.S. could have won but Americans at a later period say:

“Victory, yes. It was a victory. But not one of which anyone could be proud or which anyone wanted to remember.13)

I respect Americans for this and I myself don’t want to remember this short war between Korea and America. I had to tell of it because it is a part of Taewongun’s story. Because of the language barrier neither side could understand the other and brought about an unintentional tragedy. Even today linguistic misunderstanding can cause serious problems in international relationships.

Next, let me tell you a few interesting facts about the so-called argument for the conquest of Korea, Seikan-ron (征韓論), propounded by some Japanese, which is a point of great interest in studying Korea-Japan relations in the Taewongun period. According to documents and writings heretofore propagated by Japan concerning this matter, the entire blame is placed on the Korean government under Taewongun. If we study the matter carefully, however, we cannot blame the Taewongun regime wholly for the worsening of the situation. Let us trace the matter using the materials Japan suggests.

In 1868 Japan completed her Meiji Reform, overthrew the Shogun Regime

12) Griffis’s “Corea the Hermit Nation” p. 409

13) Von Blocks “Americas 48-Hour War”.

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and promulgated the Japanese empire. The new Japanese government recognized Korea and at the same time desired to sign a treaty opening diplomatic relations between the two countries. It is alleged that the Taewongun government refused even to receive the letter asking for the exchange of diplomatic delegations.

The matter did not reach a solution and was postponed. In 1873 the Taewongun government took violent measures. It enforced an economic blockade on Waegwan (倭館), at Pusan, the Japanese residential area, by refusing the supply of grain and charcoal.

This proving insufficient, it is alleged that officials at Tongnae (東萊) secretly instructed guards watching the gates of Waegwan to keep a strict eye on the movement of the Japanese there, on pain of death in case of laxity.

When this secret directive was reported to the Meiji government through the Japanese officials stationed at Pusan, the Japanese cabinet held an emergency meeting where, according to Japanese records, Saigo Takamori and others, called the War Party, proposed, and the Cabinet decided on, the conquest of Korea.

From this we indeed receive the impression that the Taewongun government should be held entirely responsible for the deterioration of Korea-Japan relations. But we have to look at this matter from the Korean angle too before we can make a fair appraisal of the situation.

Even until the expedition of the French fleet in 1867 Korea-Japan relations had not been too strained. The Shogun regime gave Korea good advice and Korea imported modern articles from Japan, their relations being friendly. There was a wandering Japanese, called Yatsuto (八戶), who had roamed about Hong Kong and Canton. This man, to the great amazement of the Korean [page39] government, contributed the following article to the “Chungoe Shinmun” (中外新聞), a daily newspaper published in Canton, China.

“The Japanese government is constructing 80 steamships,” he wrote, “in order to take advantage of the worsened Korea-France relations and to pave the way for invading Korea. The Japanese invasion will take place approximately next spring.”

This newspaper article first came to the notice of the Chinese government, which cut the article out and sent it to the Korean government.14) Yatsuto was definitely Japanese and it was the Chinese government who out of friendship drew the attention of the Korean government to the article. When the Korean government learned this, naturally it became very suspicious of Japan.

Before its suspicions were dissolved, Japan enforced her Meiji reform and made preparatory advances through Waegwan, at Pusan, sending imperial documents and desiring the admission of her ambassador. The frontline Korean diplomats stationed at Pusan first received the official papers and found them contrary to accepted protocol.

In the form of the notes Japan used such words as “Emperor,” “Imperial Household”, etc., which were not used in previous papers. If this were to be permitted, thought the Korean side, the Korean government would be guilty of destroying the diplomatic balance prevailing in the international community at that time. In other words there was only one recognized emperor in the Orient, the Emperor of China, and the sudden emergence of a pretender could not be condoned. Furthermore, there was insufficient explanation.

14) See 7 March 1866, Vol.IV, “King Kojong,s Annals” and attached papers of Document No. 21, pp 69-79, Book I,Vol.I of “Japanese Diplomatic Papers” (日本外交文書)

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Again, the stamp used in the notes was in question. For many hundreds of years all diplomatic papers from Japan were sent by way of the governor of Tsushima Island. The governor stamp, placed on these papers, was made in Korea. The print of this stamp was entered in an official Korean register and the stamp was given to the governor of Tsushima Island for his use. The reason for this scruple was that the Japanese side made counterfeit stamps and used them illegally.

Even smugglers and pirates used these stamps. Since King Sejong in the 15 th century, both sides had therefore agreed that the Japanese stamp would be made in Korea to be given to the feudal lords of Japan (Daimyo) including the governor of Tsushima Island.

Without any previous agreement, Japan arbitrarily changed the stamp, a breach of faith quite unpardonable according to the diplomatic practice current at that time.15)

There were, moreover, two important reasons which we cannot overlook behind the Korean decision to enforce an economic blockade on the Japanese residents at Waegwan, Pusan. In the first place, when Korea-Japan negotiations were delayed, the Japanese government recalled in 1872 almost all Japanese officials stationed at Waegwan with affiliations to the governor of Tsushima Island. As a final threat, Hanabusa brought battleships, greatly stimulating the hostility of the Korean government. Next, Japanese smuggling vessels invaded the coasts of Pusan and confounded the economy. It is said that even Mitsui, the financier, was involved in this illegal trade. Taewongun’s economic blockade is nothing in comparison. It is almost certain that the Japanese policy was calculated to excite the animosity of Taewongun.16)

16) See pp 314-315 of “History of Korea, Modern Period” with regard to the manner of language used in the Japanese notes and the stamp.

16) Pp 328-333 of “History of Korea. Modern Period”.

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Lastly, the most contested point was that the Korean government had given to the guards that kept the entrances to Waegwan, secret instructions to insult the Japanese. But there is ample room for doubt as to this allegation. As far as I know there is no record in the Korean annals concerning these secret instructions. There are many documents instructing the prevention of Japanese smugglers but none could be found concerning secret instructions to Waegwan guards as the Japanese alleged Recently I studied Japanese diplomatic documents of that time printed and kindly supplied by the Japanese Foreign Ministry and made a startling discovery.

The papers describe how the Japanese officials stationed at Pusan reported to the Japanese government that an important incident insulting Japan took place. Their government became wroth and its Cabinet decided on the conquest of Korea after receiving this report. But the contents of the document in question and the manner in which it was delivered give rise to much doubt.17)

First, the document contains some secret messages. Guards and interpreters are ordered to watch the entry and exit of the Japanese and to keep in close touch with the police. In dereliction of their duties they are punishable with severe penalties.

Second, the more doubtful point, is the manner in which this secret instruction was allegedly delivered. According to the Japanese official documents, the instruction was transmitted by officials of Tongnae to the guards by posting notices on the wall at the back of the Waegwan guard house. This is the focal point, The magistrate of Tongnae was Chong Hyon-dok (鄭顯德), one of the able men selected by the Taewongun regime. Tongnae was in constant contact with the guards of

17) The full contents of this strange document was published as part of the attached papers of Document No. 119, pp 282-283 of Vol. VI of “Japanese Diplomatic Papers”.

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Waegwan every day and the instruction could have been driven verbally or otherwise in view of its secrecy, instead of posting it publicly on the back wall of the guard house. This is nonsense. We cannot believe this poster theory.

Ladies and gentlemen! We realize that behind cruel international relations and illegal trade competition bizarre conspiracy and plotting are often involved. Taking a recent example, when imperialistic Japan invaded Manchuria she exploded railways with her own hands but placed the responsibility on Chang Hang-nyang (張學良), and made an excuse for deploying the Kwantung (關東) army. When she invaded the China mainland, she used the same technique at the Lookou (盧口), bridge. There are numerous other examples elsewhere.

So I believe that the poster in question that hung on the wall of the guard lodge was not made by the officials of the Tongnae magistracy. It is regrettable that the police did not succeed in arresting the criminal, either a smuggling hooligan or an international spy. I leave it to your imagination to determine who that could have been. I believe for certain that it was not the deed of Tongnae officials.

I will close this lecture by telling a few stories of Taewongun’s later life. He was greatly hated by Japan (He was the principal reason for the proposal to conquer Korea) and became a prey to domestic party strife. In 1873 he was therefore overthrown, ending his ten years of dictatorship. This, interestingly enough, coincides with the downfall of the “conquest party” in Japan. But the more fascinating thing is that he was overthrown not by the Japanese or by his male adversaries in Korea but by Queen Min(閔), only 25 years old, whom he himself had chosen as his daughter-in-law. Until she was assassinated in 1895 the politics of the Yi dynasty [page 43] were a struggle between Taewongun and Queen Min, and the forces that sought to use their disagreement, all hastening the downfall of the nation. I will divide and sketch by important events the struggles between the two personalities and the manipulations of the neighboring powers.

When Queen Min threw Taewongun out of office, she established the rule of the Min family. In order to oppose him completely, they discontinued all his policies. Yielding to a small military threat by Japan her regime signed, at Kanghwa-do (江華島), conference, an unequal treaty—the Korea-Japan Treaty of Amity—and from then on received the modern capitalism of imperialistic Japan without discrimination.

The Min family discontinued Taewongun’s efforts to reform domestic government and became corrupt. In turn the whole bureaucracy became corrupt and the treasury was threatened with bankruptcy. In 1882 therefore a military rebellion took place, primarily because the soldiers’ meagre pay had been delayed 13 months, attesting to the extent of the corruption of the government.

A few of the leaders of the Min regime were killed and their houses and property were burned and destroyed. Taewongun came to the fore again and saved the situation. But Queen Min cleverly avoided the effect of the military rebellion and got in touch with the Ching government. She also arranged for the Ching dynasty to kidnap Taewongun and take him out of the country to China and within two months restored the Min regime; a truly unusual strategist. We should note that even at this time the Japanese clapped their hands with pleasure at Taewongun’s abduction.

After the reinstatement of Queen Min’s power in 1882, however, the royalty began to vacillate and permitted Chinese and Japanese armies to station [page 44] themselves in Seoul and fight against one another for supremacy.

Faced with this situation the young intellectuals of that time became very concerned and planned to reform the country under the Japanese plan. The leaders of this movement were Park Yong-hyo (朴泳孝), Kim Ok-kyun (金玉均), Hong Yong-sik (洪英植), So Kwang-bom (徐光範), and So Chae-pil (徐載弼) (Dr Jason). Fanned and supported by the Japanese forces they hastily executed a coup d’etat in 1884 but failed completely after three days. At this time the Chinese and Japanese armies also clashed at Changdok Palace and the situation expanded to international proportions. In consequence the Min regime held on domestically and a stalemate was reached between Japan and China with the signing of the Tientsin (天津) Treaty (1885). The two powers were intent on achieving a balance of power and from that time onward they began to interfere in Korea’s domestic affairs. Li Hung-chang of China and Ito Hirobumi of Japan were the leading officials engaged in the actual work.

When the situation took this turn, Queen Min and her minions hated both China and Japan and bewail to make amorous glances at the European powers, especially Russia.

Consequently China and Japan hated Queen Min’s regime and decided to use Taewongun as a check. Taewongun, abducted to Baotsungfu (保定府), in North China, three years previously was now released and sent back to Korea. We should not overlook the important fact that Taewongun’s release and repatriation was effected under the mutual agreement of China and Japan.

Ito advised Li Hung-chang to release him and this spelt a new era in Far Eastern diplomacy, for Japan became the controlling power. Both Taewongun and [page 45] Queen Min were the stooges of Japanese imperialism suiting their temporary interests. On the outside Li Hung- chang was criticized for interfering in Korean affairs but Ito was the mastermind.

In 1894 the Tonghak revolt took place and the Sino-Japanese war began. Japan overthrew the Min regime by force, set up Taewongun as a puppet, and enforced the so-called Kabo (甲午), reform. Taewongun, derided heretofore by Japan as stubborn and shortsighted, now headed a hundred domestic reforms. These measures of reform, compelled by force, could not do any good. They only estranged the sympathy of the Korean people and obstructed the modernization of Korea by her own efforts.

In the Sino-Japanese war, a war between Goliath and David, Japan defeated the Goliath. Thus Japan could now handle Korea at will. Quite unexpectedly, however, Russia prodded Germany and France and the three countries interposed, belittling Japan’s sense of victory and pride.

Japan could not fight the joint forces of Russia, Germany and France and had to expend her spite somehow. After branding Queen Min as a pro-Russian element, Japanese Minister Miura Goro (三浦棺樓), using Taewon-gun as the front, mobilized the Japanese army, Japanese hooligans and pro-Japanese Koreans, besieged the Kyongbok (景福) Palace and assassinated Queen Min.

Late in his life, therefore, Taewongun was foolishly used twice by Japanese imperialists and helped in destroying Queen Min. He died a sad, lonely death in 1899, 4 years after Queen Min’s assassination.

After the death of these two personalities, Korea, in 1905, lost her sovereignty to Japan. Estranged completely from the modernization of the world, Korea spent half a century in tribulations as a Japanese colony. Like the [page 46] lives of Taewongun and Queen Min, the path of Korea henceforth was bizarre and tearful.

Profiting by this historical lesson, the history of blood, our young soldiers have awakened and are enforcing new reforms and boldly performing the task of modernization, that has been left unfinished by their ancestors. I think there is great hope for the future of Korea. Also I am glad that those foreigners in Korea now are unlike the agents of the Chinese Empire, Russian Empire and Japanese Empire, who did everything to obstruct our progress. On the contrary you are helping and encouraging us. I am sure that Korea will grow and develop as a shining star in the Orient.