

claim to territories in China. Despite popular outcry at the “Triple Intervention,” the government had no choice but to obey. Russia then grabbed control of Port Arthur and the Liaodong peninsula.

SUMMARY

Building a state capable of confronting domestic and foreign challenges proved difficult for the oligarchs—the men who had appointed themselves to be its leaders. They had to buy off the former ruling class of daimyo and samurai, centralize administration, develop a tax base, create a national education system, and reform the military, all the while facing criticism from within their own ranks and opposition from outside. The Constitution of 1889 and the Diet (national assembly) tried to balance the oligarch’s desire for stability and control with the promise of parliamentary democracy.

Industrialization too got off to a rocky start. Although a few entrepreneurs used connections to government to their profit, others found that state-operated enterprises were squeezing them out before but control over transportation, communications, and industries related to the military. Businessmen grew wealthy; the ranks of male and female workers swelled. To protest inhumane working conditions and demand better wages, they went on strike.

To counter the destabilizing effects of increased social mobility, new ideas, and changing industrial relations, the oligarchs and other conservatives promoted unity and harmony. They had the emperor model the man of character; they used education to promote civic virtues; they reinforced the authority exercised by the male head of household through legal codes. Even foreign adventures

made a contribution: a sense of national identity that could unite factory owners with factory workers demanded imperialist enterprises to divert attention from their differences.

Japan did to its Asian neighbors what the Western powers had done to it by imposing unequal treaties. In the process of demarcating its boundaries, it turned the Ryukyu Islands and Hokkaido into internal colonies. Having negotiated an end to the unequal treaties, it fought a war with China that would have given it significant territory on the Asian mainland had Western powers not pressured it to back down.

How should we assess the changes that Japan experienced in the latter part of the nineteenth century? Historians who note that ordinary people’s lives changed only gradually if at all prefer to speak of a Meiji “transition.” Others who point to the official abolition of status distinctions and restrictions on mobility as well as new opportunities for political action talk about revolution. Comparing 1868 with the end of the nineteenth century makes it hard to deny that Japan had been transformed from a decentralized, largely agrarian regime into a centralized industrializing nation. Molded by schools and the military, informed by newspapers and journals, the peoples of Japan had become citizens. They had learned to ride on trains, wear Western-style clothes, and be self-reliant in striving for success. In dealing with the outside world, they had discovered that economic development and national defense required expansion abroad. Adaptation of Western models to local circumstances meant that Japan did not simply undergo a process of westernization. After all, the effects of modernity on community life, family relations, and definitions of individual identity required wrenching changes in Western nations as well.

Korea in the Turbulent Nineteenth Century (1800–1895)

Politics and Society Under
Child Rulers (1800–1864)

Material Culture: Gimchi

Documents: Donghak Beliefs

Attempts at Reform and
External Pressure (1864–1894)

Biography: Queen Min

The Donghak Rebellion

and the Sino-Japanese War
(1894–1895)

Making Comparisons:

Slavery

Nineteenth-century Korea faced many challenges: three rebellions caused largely by the state’s failure to solve long-standing institutional and economic problems, intermittent persecution of Catholics, a series of young kings whose wives’ relatives dominated the government, and the threat to national survival by foreign imperialism. The last half of the century saw the birth of Korea’s first new religion, failed attempts at reform followed by conservative Confucian anti-foreignism, and unprecedented Chinese interference in Korean affairs. Domestic rebellion and a strengthened Japan brought Chinese influence to an end in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895 and seemingly opened a path for serious reform.

What were the reasons behind the rebellions and the state’s lack of response to them and foreign aggression? What changed in the lives of people outside of government? What was Korea’s role in the Sino-Japanese War and how does that war speak to Korea’s relations with its neighbors?

POLITICS AND SOCIETY UNDER CHILD RULERS (1800–1864)

King Jeongjo’s (JUNG-jo) death in 1800, leaving an heir of only eleven years old, marked the beginning of politics dominated by relatives of the king’s wife, a situation that lasted to the end of the century. One reason was that all four nineteenth-century kings came to the throne as children under regencies established by the eldest living dowager (widowed) queen or were selected by such dowager regents when there was no crown prince. The dowager regent retained power until she resigned voluntarily or the king decided that it was time for him to rule on his own. Male relatives of dowager regents and queens benefited from this system in that they received appointment to high office.

Conflict between clans for control of the king turned on which had ties to the eldest living dowager and which supplied the king’s wife. When King Cheoljong (CHEOL-jong) died without an heir in 1863, Queen Sinjeong (SHIN-jung) of the Pungyang Jo (POONG-yang JOE) clan, whose

husband had died in 1830 before he could ascend the throne, was the eldest living queen. She selected the twelve-year-old second son of King Cheoljong's second cousin to be the new king, King Gojong (GO-jong). His father received the title of Daewongun (DAY-won-goon), or grand prince, a title reserved for the father of a king who had never been king himself. The dowager became regent and held the position for only two years, to 1866, but the young King Gojong was kept unaware of his right to rule. Instead, the Daewongun continued as de facto regent from 1863 to 1874 even though he had no formal title or position. He and his supporters clashed repeatedly with his son's wife, Queen Min (MIN), and her clan, causing his political fortunes to rise and fall with startling frequency until his death in 1898.

Social Change and New Social Policies

The early nineteenth century found the government grappling with the consequences of social change. New diseases such as cholera, deforestation that led to flooding, and drought brought an end to the eighteenth-century rise in population. Instead the population dropped to 12.4 million by 1816 and then fluctuated between 12.2 and 12.7 million until 1876, in contrast to the population increases seen during the same period in China and Japan.

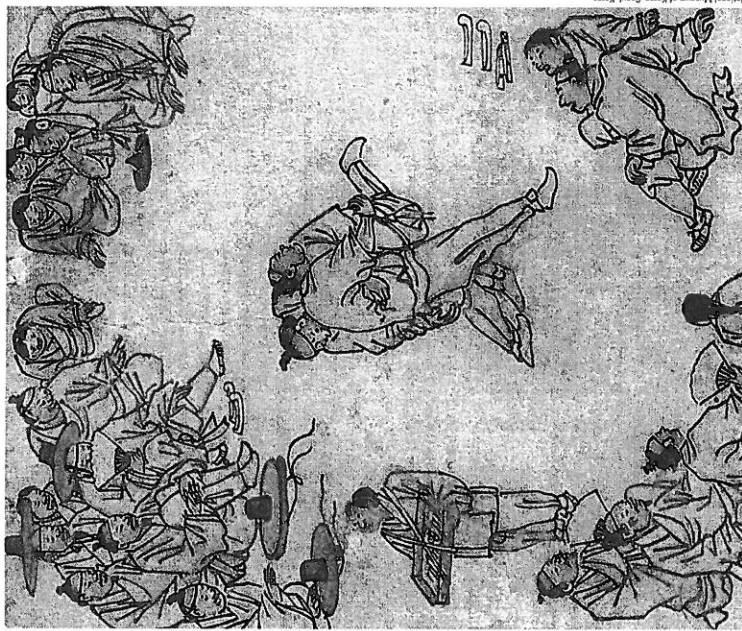
As the *yangban* (YANG-bahn) became more entrenched in central government, intermediate groups between them and the commoners also came to be defined by hereditary status. Like the *yangban*, they married within their own groups, and they often monopolized specialized occupations. Historians today call them secondary status groups, although they disagree over whether the last two listed below belong there or whether they should be seen instead as a marginalized regional elite and a military aristocracy.

- *Jungin* (JOONG-in)—technical specialists in foreign languages, law, medicine, and finance
- *Hyangni* (HYANG-ni)—clerks in local administration
- *Seodol* (SUH-ul)—children and descendants of concubines
- Elites from the northern provinces formally classified as *yangban* but kept out of central administration because of where they were from
- *Muban* (MOO-han)—military officials also classified as *yangban* but discriminated against because they were eligible to take only the military, not the civil service, examinations

Members of these groups appear with increasing frequency in nineteenth-century records of art, literature, and reform and in twentieth-century politics. In 1801, the dowager regent freed most of the sixty-seven thousand official slaves, except for slaves working in local offices. This measure recognized what had already happened; many government slaves had gained their freedom either through military service or purchase, and the remainder no longer worked for the government. Some slaves owned slaves; some slaves owned land. The 1801 decree liberalized the slave system, but hereditary slavery for several million private slaves continued to 1886. Although slavery itself was abolished in 1894, the mostly *yangban* slave masters retained their power until the dynasty was near its end. (See **Making Comparisons: Slavery.**)

The factional strife that had dominated Korean politics in the eighteenth century had consequences for religious policy. While freeing official slaves, the dowager regent authorized renewed persecution of Catholics and other minority factions. Supported by the Patriarch faction and the Party of Principle, she ordered the institution of a five-family mutual surveillance system to ferret out Christians in the Southerner faction. Sent into exile for his beliefs, Jeong Dasan wrote several treatises proposing reforms in local administration and the penal system. Also banished were a Chinese missionary and the previous king's half-brother, wife, and daughter-in-law. The situation for Christians worsened when officials intercepted a letter from the Christian Hwang Sayeong (HWANG SA-young) to the papal court in Rome requesting a military expedition from France to protect Korean Christians from persecution. Outraged by this act of treason, the dowager regent executed more than three hundred Christians that year alone and persecuted members of the Southerner faction and Party of Expediency. These factions were kept out of office for another half-century.

The Christian issue emerged once again in 1839 when the government executed three French missionaries and scores of converts. Six years later it martyred Korea's first priest, Kim Daegoon (KIM DAY-goon), trained in Macao, who had preached in secret. Between waves of persecution, the number of converts continued to grow. Instead of being primarily *yangban*, they now tended to be people in intermediate status groups and commoners, including a remarkable number of women.



"Wrestling" by Kim Hongdo (KIM HONG-doe). The first painter to depict daily life in Korea, Kim Hongdo here illustrates an informal match before an audience of men and women. Note the peddler waiting for a sale.

Social Ferment and Popular Culture

The nineteenth century saw important developments in intellectual life and popular culture. Men of *yangban* origin played less of a role than men from secondary social statuses who spread new ideas in an effort to make sense of society and promote reform. Many elements associated with Korea's traditional culture today either arose during this period or took on the form by which they are now known.

The practical learning school blossomed in the early nineteenth century. Based on empirical observation and the careful comparison of texts, it produced scholars who challenged the Confucian orthodoxy promoted at court. Seo Yugu's (SUH YU-goo) *Sixteen Treatises Written in Retirement* contained his thoughts on agricultural practices, economic developments, and *yangban* leisure pursuits. *Observations on Examining Two Stone Inscriptions* by Kim Jeonghui (KIM JUNG-hwi), also a famous poet and

calligrapher, recorded his detailed comparisons of sixth-century stone monuments.

Men whose social backgrounds blocked them from bureaucratic office compiled biographies of superior men who had likewise suffered from discrimination. Written by a man from a fallen *yangban* family, Choe Hangi's (CHAE HAN-gi) *Persomnel Administration* (1860) proposed that the government select its officials from men of talent and ability regardless of their status background while urging openness to foreigners. The specialist Seong Haeung (SUNG HAE-ung) took a similar stance in advocating reform of the tax and forced labor systems, arguing that taxes should be collected in cash and that the government should pay workers rather than expect them to work for free. The wife of a practical learning scholar, Bingeogak Yi (BING HUH-gak Yi), compiled an encyclopedia of women's work, some of it commercial enterprises, as a guide for her daughters and to make the point that women should be respected for their achievements, literary and economic.

Men from the secondary status groups composed works across a range of genres. They wrote poetry, compiled in 1857 into *Third Selection of Poems of the People*; they wrote historical novels that celebrated the glories of Korea's martial past. Sin Jaehyo (SHIN JAE-hyo) composed lyrics for *pansori* (PAWN-so-ri, stories sung to drum accompaniment). Music, painting, and dance crossed the social divide, with anonymous artists imitating subjects admired by *yangban* and producing paintings to brighten the walls of temples. Combining dance, song, and narrative, masked drama flourished. One famous passage from *Festival at Naval Headquarters* mocked the *yangban* by using a food image that must have been highly satisfying for a commoner audience:

I'll eat them raw at low tide, cram my maw at high tide,
Devour my *yangban* masters nine and ninety.
Then I'll eat one more and lo!
A dragon now become, mount the throne of Heaven.*

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Men practiced a range of martial arts, some derived from Chinese traditions. Kim Hongdo sketched wrestlers performing as they had since the Goguryeo (GO-goo-ryeo) era in a style akin to Japanese sumo.

Economic Developments and Rebellion

Historians disagree over the extent of economic development in the decades before foreigners made their presence felt. Many of the positive indications seen in the eighteenth century—the spread of markets and signs of commercialization—did not lead to greater output.

Farmers adopted a number of strategies for survival, one of the most prevalent being the *gye* (GYEH), a voluntary organization that promoted mutual assistance. Like similar credit associations that arose in Japan, the *gye* provided a mechanism for people to pool funds and then take turns using the capital. Early *gye* had specific functions: to give members access to support groups and the large sums needed to pay for funerals and weddings. Even *yangban* and wealthy households joined them. Later *gye* pooled resources to overcome hardship. Some had specific community-wide goals, such as repairing an irrigation system, whereas others allowed individual members to use the money for diverse purposes. The *gye* still function in modern Korea, where they provide a means for women to gain access to credit, and in overseas communities where immigrants lack access to banks.

Other survival strategies included planting New World crops and opening marginal fields. The sweet potato arrived via Japan in 1763; the white potato arrived via China around 1840. Both were cultivated as insurance against famine. Another nineteenth-century addition to the diet was cabbage (see Material Culture: Gimchi). Despite these dietary supplements, tenant farmers and farmers of small plots led a precarious existence. After a year or two of poor harvests, they abandoned their fields, wandered the country, and died of starvation by the thousands. In desperation they practiced slash-and-burn agriculture on hillside that stripped the uplands of trees and increased the frequency of floods. Some peasants joined bands of brigands that coalesced into small armies and ravaged the countryside. When all else failed, they migrated into Manchuria and the Russian Maritime Province.

Rebellions constitute the chief indicators of social unrest in the nineteenth century. A major rebellion

MATERIAL CULTURE

Gimchi

The food most associated with Korean cuisine is gimchi (GIM-chi), but it developed into its current form only in the nineteenth century.

Koreans began pickling vegetables, especially long radishes, in salt to preserve them through long winter months around the seventh century. In the twelfth century, spices and seasonings such as soy sauce came to be added, and people started eating gimchi year-round. Although hot red peppers originating in the Americas arrived in Korea from Japan following Hideyoshi's invasion of 1592, it took two hundred years for them to be used to flavor gimchi. The peppers give gimchi its distinctive red color. The final, essential ingredient is Chinese cabbage (*baechu* [BEH-chu]), introduced in the nineteenth century. Although other vegetables continue to be pickled, cabbage became the

favorite. A Joseon cookbook explains how to make gimchi for the royal court:

First, cut well-washed cabbages and radishes into small chunks and salt them. Second, mix them with chopped hot red pepper, garlic, dropwort (minari [MI-na-ri]), leaf mustards (gat [GAT]), and seaweed. Third, boil fermented fish in water and cool it. Fourth, add the fish sauce to the blended vegetables. Fifth, store the mixture in a pot and wait till it is fermented.*

Today pickled cabbage is eaten across northern Eurasia, but the spiciest is gimchi, prepared not only in Korea but also in eastern Siberia.

*http://www.koreanrestaurantguide.com/kimchi/kimchi_0.htm



Gimchi. Making gimchi requires cabbage, spices, salt, and other seasonings that can stain and damage the skin—hence the gloves.

DOCUMENTS

Donghak Beliefs

(CHAE JEH-ohb), founder of the Donghak (DONG-hak) religion, describes how external pressure and domestic turmoil so afflicted his mind that he became ill. In that state, he had conversations with the Supreme Being, who offered him solutions to the issues facing him and Korea as a whole. This conversion narrative, a testimony to faith, illustrates the path to belief.

CHOE JEU ON PROPAGATING VIRTUE

From the distant past up to the present day, every year without fail spring has eventually turned into autumn, and all four seasons have come and gone in the proper sequence. This is a display for the entire world to see of how the Lord of Heaven regulates the changes and transformations in the universe. Yet ignorant folk know only that rain and dew are natural phenomena and do not know how it is that they are able to benefit from them. Recently people have tended to do whatever they feel like doing instead of acting in accordance with heavenly principles. They no longer pay any attention to the decrees of heaven. I have worried about this night and day, but did not know what to do about it.

It got worse in 1860. That is when I learned that Westerners, claiming that they were only doing what the Lord of Heaven wanted them to do and were not trying to be rich or to lord it over others, began using military force to seize territory all over the world. Everywhere they went they set up churches and promoted their way of doing things. I asked myself if this really could be happening, and if so, how could such things happen?

Then a totally unexpected event occurred one day in the fourth month of that year. All of a sudden a chill came over my heart and my whole body shivered. It was as if I had abruptly fallen ill, but I couldn't tell what sort of illness had attacked me. Then my ears seemed to pick up a strange voice. It is difficult to describe. The closest I can come to describing it is to say that it sounded like the voice of one of those immortals who lives deep in the mountains. I was frightened and asked, "Who are you?" An answer came back, "You don't have to be afraid. I am the one whom human beings call the Lord Above. Don't you know who the Lord Above is?" Startled, I asked why he was talking to me. He replied, "So far I haven't been able to accomplish all

that I have wanted to accomplish. Therefore I have sent you into this world so that you can teach human beings the right way to do things. So cast all fear and doubt aside and listen to me."

I then asked, "Do you want me to teach people the Western way of doing things?" He replied, "No, not at all. I have a talisman that is called the 'medicine of the mountain immortals.' It resembles the Great Ultimate [the name neo-Confucians give to the wellspring of all existence]. Take this talisman and use it to heal people of the various diseases that afflict them. Also, I am giving you an incantation that I want you to use to teach human beings on my behalf. If you do this, you will live a long life and will propagate virtue all over the world."

This all happened at a time when terrible diseases were sweeping across our country. Everyone was worried day and night that they or someone dear to them might be the next victim. It was our bad luck that this was happening at the same time that Westerners were on a rampage. I wondered if there wasn't some way to help our country and put the minds of the people at ease.

Unfortunately people these days don't understand what a precarious situation we are in. If they happen to hear what I have to say, it goes in one ear and out the other. Even worse, some of them criticize me publicly. They are ignorant of the way and don't follow it. This is really a pitiful situation.

Questions for Analysis

1. What are the circumstances that led Choe Jeu to his beliefs?
2. What does Choe Jeu see as the answers to his problems and those of Korea?
3. Where do these answers come from?

Robert E. Buswell, Jr., ed., *Religions of Korea in Practice*, Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

led by fallen *yangban* and professional geomancer Hong Gyeongrae (HONG GYONG-nae) broke out in the northwest Pyeongan province in 1811. One cause was perceived injustice in the taxation and service systems, but general discontent with the discrimination against northerners practiced by central administration officials and resentment at being blocked from promotion to high office led men of secondary status groups to organize an army of rebels. Although it was quickly suppressed, small-scale outbreaks continued.

In 1862 the government's failure to solve the problems of injustices in the collection of the land tax and military cloth tax and in the distribution of grain relief and loans provided the main cause for a series of rebellions throughout the country, primarily in the three southern provinces. Although taxes had earlier been combined into a single land tax, corruption by clerks and magistrates more than offset the reductions gained from distributing taxes equally among all residents. More massive and widespread than earlier outbreaks of social unrest, the rebellion of 1862 lacked central organization. Despite a few attacks against *yangban* landlords, it was aimed mainly at government officials. Although *yangban* participated in the planning of some protests, they usually withdrew when the uprising became violent. Armed with bamboo spears, commoners provided the leadership in dozens of spontaneous uprisings that killed government functionaries and burned official buildings. Rather than trying to suppress the protests by force, the government sent officials to punish corrupt magistrates, investigate abuses of the tax system, and pacify the people.

Choe Jeu and the Donghak Religion

A more lasting response to social dislocation came in the form of a new religion. Discontented with his life as a *déclassé yangban* (his mother had remarried, thus barring him from the civil service examination) and appalled at the sorry situation of his country, Choe Jeu experienced a vision in which he believed Hanulnim (HA-neul-lim, the Lord of Heaven) entrusted him with the task of spreading a new faith to the Korean people and saving mankind on earth. Choe also created a potion for curing illness and attaining immortality by burning special amulets and mixing the ash with water. He called the faith Donghak (Eastern Learning, or "Korean National Teaching"). It combined Confucian ethics with Buddhist faith, the Daoist search for

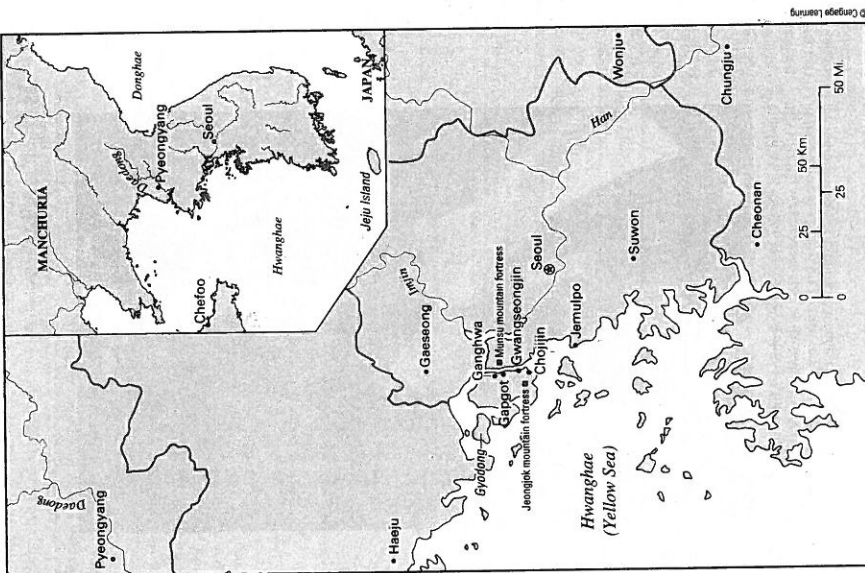
longevity, geomancy, and the use of talismans, curses, and shamanistic appeals to spirits in a mixture that was supposed to counteract Western learning and Christianity (see Documents: Donghak Beliefs).

Jeu's followers were mostly commoners and slaves because the *yangban* regarded his departure from Confucian orthodoxy as unacceptable. They also rejected his teaching that all men were equal in their duty to serve the Lord of Heaven with whom they were united by their very nature. His ideas thus constituted a threat to both the stability of the dynasty and the purity of Confucian belief. Although he was not involved in the many local rebellions that began in the south in 1862, the government arrested him the next year for fomenting dissent with his heterodox teaching. In 1864, the government had his head cut off. The movement went underground and did not reemerge (except for one minor rising in 1879) until 1893. Even in 1864 it signaled that popular discontent was calling into question the ability of Confucian orthodoxy to solve the problems Korea faced.

ATTEMPTS AT REFORM AND EXTERNAL PRESSURE (1864–1894)

The year 1864 marks a divide in Korea's nineteenth century. Although Korean diplomats at the Qing court received news of China's defeat in the Opium War, its magnitude remained concealed from them. (See Connections: The Age of Western Imperialism.) Wei Yuan's *An Illustrated Essay of the Maritime Nations* had reached Korea in 1845, but its recommendations for improving defenses against Westerners had been ignored. Later foreign encroachments on China and Japan also had little effect on policy until China gave Russia a lease on the Liaodong peninsula next to Korea in 1860. Official responses to the foreign threat had to wait until King Gojong took the throne at the age of twelve with his father, the Daewongun, behind him.

The Daewongun tried to revive dynastic power and the Korean state by pursuing a course of domestic reform and foreign isolationism. To elevate the prestige and power of the king, he rebuilt the Gyeongbok (GYONG-bok) Palace left in ruins after Hideyoshi's invasion of 1592. He addressed the causes of the 1862 rebellions; abolished the majority of private academies in the provinces (they had



Map 21.1 Military Pressure from the West, 1866 and 1871

persecution of Korean Catholics that lasted to 1871 and reduced their ranks from twenty thousand to eight thousand. In 1866, the French landed troops on Ganghwa Island to punish the Koreans for their refusal to tolerate Christianity, but Korean troops were able to force the small French force to withdraw.

Military Pressure from the West

Western powers tried repeatedly to change the Daewongun's isolationist stance. In 1866, a ship under the U.S. flag, the *General Sherman*, with an English captain and a crew of Malays and Chinese, rampaged up the Daedong River near Pyeongyang and demanded trade. Irrate local residents attacked the ship, burned it to ashes, and killed its crew. The governor of Pyeongan (PYONG-ahn) Province quickly received approval from the Daewongun for his plan to strengthen coastal defenses by building new forts along the coast, particularly one at the mouth of the Daedong River; recruit more soldiers skilled in the use of firearms; and institute a special examination for them.

Another memorial aimed at self-strengthening was based on Wei Yuan's *Illustrated Essay of the Maritime Nations*. Wei had written that the secret of Western strength was the domination of the seas by a small number of skilled troops with superior cannon, not superior numbers, thus, the memorial recommended that Korea concentrate on building advanced cannon and sea mines and distribute them to coastal garrisons. The Daewongun ordered the construction of three new warships and a cannon for laying mines. He even ordered construction of Korea's first steamboat in 1867, although it failed its trial on water and had to be broken up for scrap metal.

In the bizarre foreign incident of 1868, the German adventurer Ernst Oppert tried to dig up the bones of the Daewongun's father to hold them as ransom before Korean troops forced his withdrawal. In 1871, the United States landed marines on Ganghwa Island to teach the Koreans a lesson for the *General Sherman* incident and to demand a treaty of trade and amity by killing dozens of Korean defenders. There is no evidence that new warships, cannon, and mine-laying cannon played any role in either of these two incidents. The Daewongun declared victories for Korean arms when the foreigners withdrew. He issued a

become centers of *yangban* factional interest); persecuted Korean Catholics for suspected treasonous collaboration with foreigners; minted the first multiple-denomination coin in Korean history, the 100-cash, to pay for expenses; and resisted Western and foreign demands for treaties and trade. The reform program resulted in a land survey to register land hidden from tax collectors, forcing *yangban* households to pay the military cloth tax for the first time (but in the names of their slaves to save them embarrassment) and cancelling past-due loans in the official grain loan program administered by district magistrates. Farmers escaped from permanent indebtedness, and the Daewongun shifted the administration of grain loans from corrupt district magistrates and their clerks to local elders.

These reforms were less radical than they seemed because the land survey did not cover the whole country, and *yangban* living in villages had already been included with their neighbors in paying the combined tax. Nonetheless, *yangban* found the obligation to pay the military cloth tax particularly galling because it was a direct affront to their status. The abolition of all but forty-seven private academies dedicated to Confucian worthies from the dominant factions was an insult to both hereditary factions and past titans of Confucian scholarship. Government spending and the inflation that resulted from the 100-cash were a violation of conservative Confucian attitudes toward extravagance.

Reaction to Reforms

The Daewongun received more criticism for his domestic reforms than for his fear of foreigners. Conservative Confucians opposed institutional tinkering and believed that good government required only frugality, the reduction of taxes, and the cultivation of Confucian virtue. Almost all Confucian scholars supported his foreign policy, their favorite slogan being "Defend Confucian correctness against foreign perversity." With their support, the Daewongun rejected all requests from foreigners for treaties because he was determined to avoid the unequal treaty system imposed on China and Japan.

In 1866, when Korean Catholics offered to mediate with the Russians in their demands for trade, the Daewongun suspected a plot to undermine Korean security. He ordered a nationwide

manifesto that anyone who advocated peace with the foreigner was a traitor to the state.

Frustration caused by ambiguity over who was responsible for the conduct of Korean foreign relations under the Chinese tributary system provides

one explanation for the foreigners' use of violence. They wanted to know whether Korea was a sovereign nation with a king who had the authority to sign treaties. If not, they would negotiate with China as Korea's overlord. Not only did the Daewongun

BIOGRAPHY

Queen Min

Like other women from *yangban* families who married royalty, Queen Min used her connection to the king to gain positions for her relatives and influence for herself.

Born in 1851, Queen Min maneuvered to preserve Korea's independence at a desperate time in its history. Selected for King Gojong by

his father, the Daewongun, because her branch of the Yeohung Min (YUH-heung MIN) had little power, Min entered the palace when Gojong was thirteen and she was fourteen. The marriage took place a year later. On seeing this teenage bride, the Daewongun is said to have commented, "She is a woman of great determination and much poise of manner." After their differences became apparent, he remarked sarcastically, "She evidently aspires to be a doctor of letters; look out for her."

Animosity between the wife and the father of King Gojong had political consequences. Queen Min had only one son; born five years after her marriage, who died within three days. She found it all too easy to believe rumors that the Daewongun had poisoned the boy. After the king's father was forced into retirement in 1874, she moved her relatives into positions of power. Her first brush with death came in 1882 when members of the old capital guard units, angry about arrears in salary, invaded the palace to murder her and her relatives.

For the next thirteen years, her faction maneuvered between China and Japan, favoring whichever side promised the least interference in Korea's affairs but always opposed to the Daewongun. In 1895, she chose Russia. The Japanese minister in Seoul decided that to eliminate the Min family from politics, it was essential to assassinate her. In October he sent Japanese police disguised as Korean guards into the palace, where they killed Queen Min and burned her body on the spot. Once again the Daewongun took charge of government.

When King Gojong was declared emperor of the great Han Dynasty in 1897, Queen Min received the posthumous title of Empress Myeongsong (MYUNG-sung).

Questions for Analysis

1. What kind of woman was Queen Min?
2. What were Queen Min's politics?
3. What roles did Queen Min play in Korean history?



Queen Min, Queen Min of the Yeohung Min family, 1851–1895, was assassinated by Japanese thugs and soldiers in the palace in 1895. This picture commemorates her posthumous title of Empress Myeongsong.

Dr. Yuhun Yoo/Vietnam Correction Archives

refuse to negotiate with them, but the Qing government also evaded responsibility because it knew that if Koreans violated any provision in a treaty with a foreign power, that power would demand compensation from China.

In 1868, Japan added to the pressure on Korea from abroad. When the new government sent a note in the Meiji emperor's name to the king of Korea asking for a treaty of trade and amity, the Daewongun refused even to accept the note on the grounds that there was only one legitimate emperor, the emperor of the Qing Dynasty in China. Japanese resentment over what radical samurai perceived as an insult to the Meiji emperor almost resulted in Japan's invasion of Korea in 1873 before cooler heads prevailed. (See Chapter 20.)

The Ganghwa Treaty of 1876

Korea's isolationist stance began to change once Queen Min and her faction convinced King Gojong that he, not his father, should rule (see Biography: Queen Min). She had considerable influence over her husband, and her male relatives remained in power to 1894. Their faction advocated accepting communications from the Meiji emperor on the grounds that his title was a domestic issue irrelevant to Korea and that eliminating animosity and restoring amity with Japan would result in a continuation of the trade relations and friendship that had prevailed from 1609 to 1868. Learning of this new attitude, Japan created an excuse for hostile action by sending a survey ship up the Korean coast in 1875 in the expectation that Korean shore batteries would fire on it. When the Koreans obliged by doing so, Japan landed a battalion of troops on Ganghwa Island and threatened military action unless King Gojong signed the Ganghwa Treaty with Japan in 1876.

As Korea's first modern treaty, the Ganghwa Treaty had most of the provisions of the unequal treaty system. King Gojong agreed to open three ports to trade with Japan—Busan and two more to be selected in the future—and limited Japanese merchants under the treaty to a small radius around them. Imposing extraterritoriality on Korea gave Japanese in the treaty ports the right to run their own affairs. King Gojong assumed that Japan would be content to trade without invading Korean space elsewhere or making further demands. In fact, he had opened the door not only to trade but also to foreign interference.

First Attempts at Modern Diplomacy

King Gojong accepted the Ganghwa Treaty's provisions on China's recommendation. At first he had opposed the opening of two new ports and the demands for a Japanese delegation to be resident in Seoul until a recommendation titled "Strategy for Korea" sent to him in 1880 by Huang Zunxian, a Chinese official resident in Tokyo, persuaded him to reconsider his position. Huang argued that Korea should negotiate treaties with all the Western powers as a means of self-protection.

Huang Zunxian's recommendation was in line with Li Hongzhang's policy for Korea. Advocate of self-strengthening and chief of Qing Dynasty relations with Joseon (JOE-sun), Li sought to capitalize on the rivalries among the imperialist powers to check any attempt by Russia and Japan to strip China of its dominance over Korea. He realized that China was militarily too weak to maintain its tributary control over Korea by force, and his policy depended on the willingness of foreign powers with little interest in trade with Korea to check their imperialist rivals. It allowed China to maintain control until the Sino-Japanese War of 1894, but only by changing the nature of the tributary system itself.

During the next five years, King Gojong took a number of steps to promote reform and self-strengthening, always shadowed by conservative opposition. He dispatched a secret investigative mission to Japan to report on developments there, followed by a second study mission in 1881.

Another training mission went to China to study military science. King Gojong agreed to open two additional ports to Japan at Incheon (IN-choon) and Wonsan (WON-san) and to allow the first Japanese minister to Korea to establish a legation in Seoul. In 1881, he set up the Office for Management of State Affairs to handle diplomacy, trade with foreign states, and reform, and he welcomed the first Japanese ambassador. He also hired a Japanese officer to train a small unit of troops in the capital in Western military tactics and weapons. These initiatives aroused a conservative protest movement. In the fall of 1881, when a plot by the Daewongun to overthrow the king and abolish the new Office was uncovered, the Daewongun's subordinates were arrested and executed.

In charting the treacherous territory of modern diplomacy, Korea relied heavily on China. King Gojong consulted with China on how to make

modern weapons and conduct negotiations with the United States and other Western powers. In 1881, Li Hongzhang negotiated with Commodore Robert W. Shufeldt of the U.S. Navy to conclude a treaty of amity and trade between the United States and Korea. It contained several elements of the unequal treaty system such as extraterritoriality and the most favored nation clause, which guaranteed the United States any advantages obtained by other foreign powers in future treaties with Korea. During negotiations, Li Hongzhang tried to insert a clause indicating that Korea was a tributary of China. Shufeldt refused to accept it because the United States would never agree to sign a treaty with a dependency. He compromised by allowing King Gojong to send a letter to President Chester A. Arthur declaring that Korea was both "self-governing" and a Chinese tributary, a description that fit the reality because the Qing regime had never interfered with either Korea's domestic problems or its relations with Japan. The United States ignored the contradiction and acted as if Korea was a sovereign state. Signed by King Gojong and Shufeldt in May 1882 and soon followed by similar arrangements with other nations, the treaty did not change the fact that both Korea and China regarded the tributary relationship as undamaged.

China's policy of noninterference in Korea's domestic affairs soon changed. Incensed at favorable treatment afforded the new Japanese-trained unit in the capital and delay in the payment of their salaries, members of the old capital guard units killed a Japanese training official, burned the Japanese legation, and drove the ambassador and his party from Korea. They even invaded the palace seeking the queen and her relatives, but the Queen was able to escape. The rebels forced King Gojong to recall his father, the Daewongun, to the capital and appoint him chief of administration. Fearing that the Daewongun's hostility to Japan might provoke a Japanese invasion of Korea, China dispatched forty-five hundred troops to Seoul. Invited to what was supposed to be a friendly meeting, the Daewongun found himself hustled onto a Chinese ship, transported to China, and kept under close watch for three years. After his departure, Chinese troops wiped out the rebels.

Kidnapping the *de facto* head of state and the king's father was unprecedented. It marked a departure from the tradition of noninterference in Korean affairs and transformed China's relations

with Korea to that enjoyed by Western imperialists. For the first time, China negotiated a commercial treaty with Korea that provided privileges for Chinese merchants trading in Korea that were denied other states. China also instructed King Gojong to pay compensation to Japan to prevent any hostilities. The Chinese restored the king, queen, and her relatives to power and allowed them to punish the Daewongun's supporters.

Late in 1882, King Gojong called on Koreans to submit memorials recommending policy to fit the times. He received one hundred private memorials, of which one-fifth advocated reform. Many cited *Iyan* (*Simple Talk*) by Zheng Guanying, a Chinese merchant associated with a Western company. Zheng had written the book in 1862 to alert China to the need to manufacture Western-style weapons by hiring Western experts. Many Korean reformers traveled to China to meet Zheng, and his book exerted greater influence in Korea than in China. His main theme was the need to adopt Western technology while maintaining fundamental Confucian values. Gojong republished the book in *hangeul* in 1883 and urged everyone to read it. This formula was to prove as inadequate for meaningful reform in Korea as it had in China because Western culture included more than machines and tools.

Abortive Reform and the 1884 Gapsin Coup

In contrast to anti-foreign conservatives associated with the Daewongun and gradualists around Queen Min who took a pro-China stance, a more radical faction, several of whom belonged to the secondary status groups, believed that Korea had to follow Japan's lead. Calling for social equality, the appointment of men with talent and ability, centralized administration, and enlightenment, it convinced King Gojong to institute a number of reforms in 1883: a modern post office, the Ministry of Culture and Information, and publication of the first newspaper, the *Seoul Weekly*. The government also sponsored some forty students to study military and technical subjects in Japan. Fearing that if they did not act first they would be killed and hoping that conflict with France over Vietnam would keep China too busy to interfere, members of the radical faction under the leadership of Kim

Okgyun organized a coup to seize power. Because the conspirators had no support inside Korea, Kim Okgyun (KIM OHK-gyun) convinced the head of the Japanese legation to let him use legation guards. The coup leaders seized the palace, held King Gojong captive as their symbol of legitimacy, summoned high officials to court, and decapitated them on the spot.

Before the coup leaders had time to issue any orders, China acted. Led by Yuan Shikai, Chinese legation guards and regular Korean troops attacked the palace, killed a half-dozen leaders, and drove the rest of the plotters, along with the Japanese ambassador and his entourage, out of the country. Once again, China's intervention turned the political situation in its favor and blocked the opportunity for significant reform. Following negotiations with Japan, China forced Korea to pay Japan reparations for the murder of Japanese victims and property damage. Because the Japanese ambassador had authorized the use of Japanese troops to aid the plotters without prior authorization from Tokyo, he was tried in Japanese courts but let off for lack of evidence.

Qing Control

For the years between 1884 and 1894, Japan accepted China's domination of Korea's affairs. To avert conflict between the two nations, it negotiated the Convention of Tianjin with Li Hongzhang in 1885 by which both sides withdrew their troops and agreed that neither would supply officers to train Korean soldiers. If either Japan or China should feel it necessary to send an army, it would inform the other in advance. Later that year, Li Hongzhang appointed Yuan Shikai resident commissioner for Korea, the first instance of a Chinese overseer on Korean territory since the departure of the Mongols in the mid-fourteenth century. For the next decade, Yuan sat at King Gojong's side, preventing him from doing anything that might interfere with China's control over Korea and lead to national independence. King Gojong was not even allowed to dispatch ambassadors to foreign countries. When the British navy temporarily seized Geomun (GUH-moon) Island off the southern coast of Korea in 1885 as a feint to block the Russians from obtaining a leasehold at Wonsan and expanding their influence into Korea, China took no action

to force the British to retreat. Russia, which both China and Japan perceived as a threat to their interests, also accepted the continuation of China's traditional relationship with Korea.

Yuan Shikai also interfered in Korea's domestic affairs. When a provincial Korean official blocked the export of rice and beans to Japan in 1888 to preserve food stocks during a famine after Japanese merchants had purchased them, Yuan insisted that Korea pay the penalty demanded by Japan. He obstructed Japanese efforts to build a telegraph line from Busan (BOO-san) to Seoul and to reform Korean coinage at the Korean court's request while blocking Korean attempts to obtain foreign loans and foreign military advisers. Yuan's actions demonstrated that China's direct intervention in Korea's foreign and domestic affairs had become part of the new relationship.

Introducing Modern Institutions and Modern Technology

By the 1880s some reformers realized that Korea needed to modernize its institutions. In 1883 a government official in the treaty port of Wonsan opened the first modern private school to teach foreign languages, history, geography, and the natural sciences to people who came in daily contact with foreigners. The following year saw a reorganization of the bureaucracy and the establishment of a Western-style post office, followed by a customs agency overseen by the German P. G. von Moellendorff. While under house arrest in 1887, Yu Giljun (YU GIL-joon), who had studied in Japan while living with Fukuzawa Yukichi and then in the United States, wrote his famous account of conditions in Western nations, *Gyeonmun* (GYON-moon, *What I Saw and Heard in the West*), that advocated adopting Western institutions.

In the 1890s, Japanese and other businessmen fostered interest in trade, modern transportation projects, and the exploitation of natural resources. Electricity announced its presence by lighting up the king's palace in 1887 while loans from China and Germany allowed Korea to build telegraph lines linking the treaty ports with the capital. Trains started running between Incheon and Seoul, and a railroad bridge connected Seoul and Noryangjin (NO-ryang-jin) over the Han River in 1900. The first streetcar arrived in 1898, demonstrating to

the populace its advantage over palanquins for female *yangban*, donkeys and horses for male *yangban*, and ox-drawn carts for commoners. The laying of tracks for streetcars and trains was followed by streets paved in cobblestones or crushed stone, overcoming one of the most important obstacles to rapid transportation of goods and people: dirt roads that turned to impassable mud in the rainy season.

Protestant Christianity

Just as Korean Catholics had found their faith in the late eighteenth century before the arrival of missionaries, so too did Koreans start practicing Protestant Christianity before guidance came from the West. During the 1880s, Protestant missionaries from the United States brought education and medicine to China, Japan, and Korea. The first sweetened their message with the demonstration of good works, such as the construction of hospitals and schools. Having gained acceptance by King Gojong and Queen Min for saving the life of her relative during the *Gapsin* (GAHP-shin) coup of December 4, 1884, the Presbyterian and doctor Horace Allen became physician to the royal court and established the first Western hospital the next year. With this as a starting point, the government launched a small-pox eradication program across the country. Allen later gave up his status as missionary, became a secretary to the Korean legation in Washington, D.C., and then served as the U.S. ambassador to Korea. As a businessman, he arranged opportunities for Americans to exploit Korea's best gold mine and to build rail and trolley lines, Seoul's waterworks, and a telephone service.

In 1885 the Methodists Henry G. Appenzeller, Dr. William B. Scranton, and Scranton's wife, Mary Fitch Scranton, arrived in Korea. William Scranton founded the first Methodist hospital and taught Western medical techniques. Appenzeller started the *Baejae hakdang* (BEH-jae HAK-dang, School for Training Men of Talent), and Mary Scranton opened the first school for women, which Queen Min dubbed *Ewha hakdang* (E-hwa HAK-dang, Pear Blossom School). Ewha University is still Korea's premier institution of higher learning for women. Little attached to Confucian norms that discriminated against them, men from secondary status groups and businessmen supported the missionaries

even though preaching heterodox beliefs was still punishable by death.

Over the next fifteen years, Protestant missionaries and Japanese businessmen introduced hospitals, schools, banks, currency, telegraph lines, electric power lines, and brick buildings for public offices. Most of these developments occurred in Seoul, Pyeongyang, and a few border towns. Only a small segment of the urban population had the opportunity to gain a modern education or to read newspapers published by men trying to promote new ideas.

THE DONGHAK REBELLION AND THE SINO-JAPANESE WAR (1894–1895)

Both economic hardship and religious persecution played roles in the Donghak Rebellion, the largest uprising in Korean history. The treaties signed with foreign powers worsened conditions for ordinary people. Japan bought Korean rice, but the profits from the increase in prices went to middlemen, not producers. Japanese fishery companies invaded Korean coastal waters, and Japanese ships took over Korea's carrying trade. Droughts in 1876–1877 and 1880–1889 reduced tax revenues, but state expenditures had risen with the payment of indemnities to foreigners and the need to finance modern institutions such as the army. Desperate for income, the government allowed tax collectors ever more leeway in oppressing the farmers. Under its second patriarch, Choe Sihyeong (CHAE SHI-hyung), the Donghak had petitioned the government repeatedly for an end to persecution and for religious toleration. Furious at corrupt officials, determined to drive the Min faction from court, opposed to the presence of Japanese and other foreigners on Korean soil, and antagonistic to Christianity, the Donghak launched an insurrection in 1894.

Having lost confidence in his army's ability to repress the Donghak rebels, King Gojong asked China for help. Before it arrived, he reached an agreement with the Donghak military leader, Jeon Bongjun (JEON BOHNG-joon), to call off the rebellion in return for religious toleration and a promise to allow the Donghak to administer their captured territory. Nonetheless, Japan took this opportunity to force a war on China by sending more troops to



Jeon Bongjun (1854–1895). The leader of the Donghak rebel army after his capture in 1895.

Korea than had China and by making unacceptable demands. Japan attacked China without bothering to declare war, surrounded the Korean palace, and kept the king and queen under detention while the war continued. (For information on the course of this war, see Chapter 18.)

Gabo Cabinet Reforms

Shortly before attacking China, Japan put a pro-Japanese cabinet in the royal palace to foster reforms under its guidance that eventually came to be led by Pak Yeonghyo (PAK YOUNG-hyo) and Seo Gwangbeom (SUH GWANG-bum), former participants in the 1884 coup exiled to Japan. Alarmed by Japan's takeover of the Korean government and

the return of men they regarded as the traitors of 1884, the Donghak under Jeon Bongjun rose again to drive Japan out of the country. This time, they had to fight against superior Japanese forces with advanced weapons and units of the Korean army. While this struggle was underway, King Gojong also proved obstructive. He finally agreed to exclude the queen and her relatives from decisions and to consult with ministers before making them. He then declared the end of Korea's tributary relationship with the Qing Dynasty.

Launched by men who had studied abroad and hoped to emulate Meiji Japan, the reform program aimed at remaking government and society. It called for rationalizing the bureaucracy, abolishing sinecures (offices with salaries attached that require little to no work), establishing a regular budget and a

uniform currency, ending the king's control over the treasury, creating a new judicial structure with professional judges and a modern police and military, initiating a modern educational system through high school for both sexes (compulsory through primary school), and expanding railroads and telegraph lines. It allowed widows to remarry and abolished slavery. It promised universal health care. It put an end to civil service examinations based on Confucian classics, status distinctions between *yangban* and commoners, economic controls, and the mistreatment of wives. It promoted national identity through the use of *hangeul* on government documents and the teaching of Korean history, not Chinese, in the new schools.

The reform measures had mixed results. Not all slaves were freed immediately, and members of the educated *yangban* elite continued to monopolize admission to government office under the new system of examinations run by individual ministries. On the other hand, opening the door to upward mobility to non-*yangban* allowed the educated members of the secondary status groups to begin their trek up the bureaucratic ladder, a trend that continued into the colonial period.

The reform cabinet lasted sixteen months. The Triple Intervention in April 1895 by Russia, France, and Germany to force Japan to give up its territorial gains following the Sino-Japanese War meant that Japan had to retreat from Korea as well. Pak Yeongho's ambition to become prime minister was foiled when a Japanese legation official leaked his proposal to assassinate the queen. He barely escaped to Japan. One faction at court centered on Queen Min favored turning to Russia as a counterbalance to Japan. When the Japanese minister to Seoul orchestrated her assassination, it roused the ire of the Korean people and caused deep embarrassment to the Japanese government. A few hundred armed Koreans loyal to the queen attacked the palace to murder members of the cabinet but were driven off by Japanese guards. The cabinet then had King Gojong issue a decree for all adult men to cut off their topknots, a traditional Korean marker of adulthood. Short hair had been adopted in Meiji Japan to signal a rejection of old customs and a commitment to modernity, but Korean men stood by the old ways, attacking authorities all over the country. After King Gojong escaped to the Russian legation, he fired the Gabo (GA-bo) cabinet.

SUMMARY

By 1800, the Yi Dynasty, which had ruled Korea for more than 400 years, had made so many compromises with powerful factions of *yangban* officials that the rulers had little leeway in which to confront social change and international pressure. The government took positive measures to improve the lot of slaves; it persecuted Christian converts. At the same time, it had to deal with a series of rebellions caused in part by maladministration.

Korea experienced considerable cultural and social ferment during this period, from advances in scholarship to art celebrating commoner life to criticisms of the ruling class. The spread of revolving credit associations gave commoners access to capital. Businessmen from the secondary status groups discovered ways to become wealthy outside of the traditional government official path to riches. A notable response to social dislocation came in the Donghak new religion that claimed a decidedly Korean worldview.

In 1864, the Korean government launched a series of reforms to deal with social dislocation while becoming increasingly isolationist. The reforms ran into opposition by the *yangban* who resisted the assault on their hereditary privileges. The isolationist policy founded in the face of military pressure from the West and Japan. Disputes over how to deal with foreigners that pitted the king's father against his wife provided openings for China and then Japan to become increasingly influential in Korea's affairs. Conflict between these two nations, which led to the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, resulted in Japan's ascendancy.

While foreigners fought over who was to control Korea, Koreans tried to deal with the confluence of domestic problems and foreign threats. Should Korea try to hang on to the old ways or should it follow Japan in pursuing Western technology? Building modern schools, often started by Protestant missionaries, and modern infrastructure mainly benefited people in cities. In the countryside, economic hardship and religious persecution led to the Donghak rebellion, intervention by China and Japan, and the short-lived Gabo cabinet reforms under Japanese auspices.

How did Korea change during the nineteenth century? Population decline, rebellions, and reports of

relations, wrangling by *yangban* factions and the king's relatives slowed Korea's response to foreign pressure, but by 1895 it had ended its tributary relationship with China, its diplomacy rested on treaties, and it had started to build a modern state. As we will see in Chapter 23, these attempts at reform came too late to prevent Korea from becoming a Japanese colony.

famines indicate that life got harder for commoners. In contrast, popular entertainments and tales of martial valor suggest that society was opening up to groups that fit poorly within the old social hierarchy. Korea's most successful reforms were those that meshed with the desires of men from secondary status groups long suppressed by *yangban* to achieve upward mobility through education and government service. In terms of international