

A REEXAMINATION OF KIM OK-KYUN: A STUDY OF A KOREAN INTELLECTUAL
AND THE POSSIBILITIES FOR A REGIONAL HISTORY OF MODERNITY

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A Reexamination of Kim Ok-kyun: A Study of a Korean Intellectual and the Possibilities for a
Regional History of Modernity

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Kim Ok-kyun stands at the center of two major events in East Asian history, the first being the 1884 coup against the Korean government, and the second being the First Sino-Japanese War, as his assassination was one contributing factor to the outbreak of hostilities. Despite the importance of Kim in late-nineteenth-century East Asian history, he has been underrepresented in scholarship. In this study, I challenge the characterization of Kim's reform program as one that was simply pro-Japanese and argue for a close reading of his extant articles to illuminate the syncretic nature of his intellectual and political programs and how they changed over time. I examine this program by focusing on four aspects: the constitutive elements of Kim's intellectual program, his reform program for Korea, the methods he pursued to achieve these programs, and finally the change in his thought over time as he went from government official to revolutionary to refugee. I conclude with suggestions for future research based on my argument that his life and death reflect a regional history of modernity in East Asia.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
II.	KOREA BETWEEN COMPETING IMPERIALISMS: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND.....	15
III.	KIM OK-KYUN'S EARLY LIFE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REVOLUTIONARY.....	31
IV.	A KOJONG RESTORATION? THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REFORM AGENDA.....	49
V.	THE COUP OF 1884.....	67
VI.	EXILED IN JAPAN: REVOLUTION FROM ABROAD.....	91
VII.	CONCLUSION: THE ASSASSINATION OF KIM OK-KYUN AND THE POSSIBILITIES FOR A REGIONAL HISTORY OF MODERNITY IN EAST ASIA.....	122
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	130

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

On March 27, 1894, Kim Ok-kyun and his traveling companion, Hong Jong-u, checked into a Japanese hotel room in the international settlement in Shanghai upon their arrival from Japan.¹ This was Kim's first trip away from the islands since the failure of the coup that he led against the Korean government a decade earlier had forced him into exile. He had undertaken the journey to China to meet with Viceroy Li Hongzhang and discuss the possibilities for Korea's future and China's role in that future. The meeting, whether it was actually arranged or was simply a fabrication meant to lure Kim away from Japan's protection, would never take place. The following day, Hong Jong-u shot Kim in the head, ending the life of one of Korea's most notorious outlaws and the former leader of its Enlightenment Party. This was the penultimate step in a plan concocted by the Korean government to destroy the man who, a decade earlier, led his Enlightenment Party in a violent coup against the Korean government. Kim's story was not yet over, however. After the assassination, his body was transported on a Chinese ship to Korea, where it was dismembered, paraded throughout the capital, and then sent around the country to serve as a warning to any would-be revolutionaries. Meanwhile, in Japan, news of Kim's death sparked a public outcry and demands that Japan go to war to avenge his death. The war came six months later in the wake of the Tonghak Uprisings that summer and concluded with Japan's victory over China and its rise to preeminence in East Asia.

¹ For a more complete account of the assassination and its aftermath, see Hilary Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910: A Study of Realism and Idealism in International Relations* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960), 223-5. Though Conroy goes into significant detail concerning the reaction in Japan to Kim's death, he does not give as much attention to the details of the events in Shanghai directly leading to Kim's assassination. For this, see Min T'ae-wŏn 閔泰瑗, *Kapsin chŏngbyŏn kwa Kim Ok-kyun* 甲申政變과 金玉均 (Seoul: Kukche Munhwa Hyŏphoe, 1947), 10-12.

My study of Kim Ok-kyun begins with his death not because I see it as the high point of his career but rather because that is where my own interest in Kim Ok-kyun began. While working on a research project on the American media coverage of the First Sino-Japanese War, I came across a full-page article from 1894 in the *New York Times* that described Kim's death, his infamous reputation, and even the suggestion that, because of the assassination, war was on the horizon between Japan and China.² Intrigued by this obscure figure, I set out to understand better why the assassination of Kim Ok-kyun was so significant that even American observers could tell that war was likely on the horizon between Korea's two neighbors. What I found was a man who was at the center of a story of rebellion, murder, and assassination, one that also had at its heart a story of political and intellectual innovation in the midst of a dramatic period of Korean and East Asian history.

Argument and Historiography

In this study, I examine the extant writings of Kim Ok-kyun in order to better understand his intellectual and political agenda in four areas: the constitutive elements of Kim's intellectual program, his reform program for Korea,³ the methods he pursued to achieve these programs, and finally the change in his thought over time as he went from government official to revolutionary to refugee. In many ways the intellectual history that is accessible through these documents is quite mundane. Although Kim may well have written extensively on abstract philosophy, which is often the focus of intellectual history, in the handful of remaining documents, we get very little of this mode of thought. Instead, we see Kim discussing finances and plans for violent action.

² "Government by Murder: The Fate of a Revolutionist in Eastern Asia," *New York Times*, May 13, 1894.

³ I separate his intellectual program from his reform program not because they are unrelated but because of the differences in the evidence available for both. In all of Kim's extant writings, there are references to what seem to be his central interests, namely Korean independence from China and the promotion of a strong monarchy, but two of these documents also discuss specific plans he has for Korean domestic development. These may have well been just as central to his intellectual and political agenda as the former two items, but given the lack of available evidence, I have decided to distinguish the two categories from each other.

Nevertheless, these documents do give at least a partial picture of what Kim hoped to achieve and how he had planned to do it. Central to Kim's intellectual program were, first, the independence of Korea from what he saw as the debilitating suzerainty of the Qing empire and, second, the promotion of a strong monarchy to lead a reform program for Korea.⁴ Though there is little conclusive evidence available about the range of Kim's reform program for Korea, there is strong evidence that he promoted fiscal reform and at least limited market-style development, as well as a type of hygienic modernity that would be supported by a new type of governmentality. In order to accomplish these ends, he was keenly interested in raising foreign loans and repeatedly demonstrated a willingness to resort to violence if he found it necessary. Finally, though it is difficult to trace the change in his perspectives over time with the few documents that remain, the extant evidence indicates that while his primary goal of reforming Korea seems to have remained consistent throughout his adult life, especially after the failure of the coup, he seems to have become more aware than he was before the coup of the regional and global context in which Korea was situated and the need to develop close foreign relations, particularly with Japan, but also with Europe and the United States.

Through reading Kim's works in such a way, I seek to address what I see as several shortcomings in the existing scholarship on Kim and the coup of 1884. The first is simply the overall lack of historiography on Kim. Although he stands at the juncture of two major events in nineteenth century East Asian history—the first being the coup he led in 1884, and the second the First Sino-Japanese War—he has remained in obscurity in the English-language

⁴ I do not critically engage with the idea of “independence” in this study, as there is simply not enough evidence in the documents to determine what exactly Kim meant when he used the term *tongnip* (獨立). In short, the evidence indicates that Kim was first and foremost interested in ending the vassal-suzerain relationship with the Qing and creating a sustainable position for Korea on the international stage. As time went on, this further developed to advocating for a neutral position for Korea in East Asia that both preserved its independence while also cultivating relationships with China and Japan that were essential because of Korea's strategic position in the region.

historiography on late-nineteenth century Korea and East Asia.⁵ His life has generally been featured in histories only in brief reference to the 1884 coup or, less frequently, his 1894 assassination, histories that offer conflicting interpretations of these events and their meanings. Scholars who are interested in Japanese efforts to reform Korea during this period tend to see the coup as a foolhardy but admirable venture that unfortunately precluded further Japanese development of the peninsula for the following decade.⁶ Kirk Larsen's 2008 study, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade*, argues for a re-examination of this period of Korean history to see how the Chinese empire was actively using modern methods to reform Korea. In his narrative, the coup appears as an attempt to undo many of the reforms that were in progress on the peninsula, driven primarily by China during the early 1880s.⁷ In these studies, however, the focus is not on the role of the coup in Korean history but rather on how the coup shaped competing imperialisms in the region.

Harold F. Cook's 1972 study, *Korea's 1884 Incident: Its Background and Kim Ok-kyun's Elusive Dream*, is actually the only published English-language work to date that focuses on Kim Ok-kyun or on the development of the coup to any extent.⁸ In his work, Cook gives an account of the coup of 1884, giving preference to Kim as the widely acknowledged leader. Cook offers an overview of Kim's early years and then examines Kim's *Kapsin illok*, as well as other Korean sources and numerous Korean and Japanese studies, to analyze how Kim decided on revolution

⁵ Throughout this study, I occasionally reference Korean, and to a lesser extent, Chinese and Japanese sources. Given Kim Ok-kyun's prominence in Korean history, he and his 1884 coup, as well as his assassination, have received significant attention from scholars in East Asia, and particularly in Korea. The depth of this scholarship is such that I do not attempt in this study to engage with the historiographical arguments in Korean-language scholarship. Instead, I cite these sources for the information they give about Kim and the events of his life, as even much of this information is not available in English.

⁶ See Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea: 1868-1910*; Harold F. Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident: Its Background and Kim Ok-kyun's Elusive Dream* (Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, 1972); and In K. Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s: A Study of Transition in Intro-Asian Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1978).

⁷ Kirk W. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade: Qing Imperialism and Chosŏn Korea, 1850-1910* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

⁸ Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*.

and worked with the other members of the Enlightenment Party and Japanese government officials to carry it out.⁹ Despite the many contributions of this work, not least of which is that it took Kim Ok-kyun and the coup from the footnotes of histories on Korea and East Asia and made his story the center of a work of scholarship, Cook's work falls short in several ways. First, his study ends abruptly in 1884. He mentions the failure of the coup and the fact that the leaders were forced to seek refuge in Japan, but he does not extend the scope of his analysis beyond the 1884 incident, leaving the final decade of Kim's life and his assassination largely unexplored in English-language scholarship.¹⁰ Also, Cook's analysis focuses primarily on the political events that led to the coup, leaving aside Kim's intellectual agenda and giving the impression that the coup was largely carried out in response to a personal feud with a favored nephew of Queen Min, Min Yŏng-ik, as well as frustration over his not being able to reach his potential in governmental service due to the Min clan's overwhelming influence in the government. Finally, Cook relies primarily on the *Kapsin illok*, or *The Daily Record of Kapsin*, which Kim wrote while he was in exile to provide a lengthy summary of the events leading up to the coup.¹¹ Although this is certainly a valuable source, the fact that it was written after the suppression of the coup limits the extent to which it can be used to understand the events that led to the coup, as well as Kim's own intellectual development prior to December 1884. As such, the entire scope of Kim's life has not been represented in English-language scholarship, and to the extent that it has been, it has only been a partial analysis.

⁹ In addition to the limitations outlined below, another problem with Cook's study is that, though he does include a bibliography, he does not use any notes throughout his study. It is therefore impossible to verify his arguments or even to contextualize his conclusions in light of the reliability of his source base, or to examine the sources he used to see if there are other ways of understanding the text(s).

¹⁰ One exception is Conroy's discussion of Kim's assassination and how it was used by members of the Japanese population to advocate that Japan go to war. In K. Hwang also discusses the state of the Korean reform movement after the coup, but the focus of Hwang's work is on Fukuzawa Yukichi and his influence in the Korean reform movement, and the information he gives about Kim in particular is limited. Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*, 131-41.

¹¹ *Kapsin* refers to the year 1884.

One final shortcoming in scholarship on Kim Ok-kyun is what I see as the misrepresentation of Kim's thought. Given the strong influence of Japan's modern reform movement and the Meiji Restoration on the development of Kim's agenda, even if the multiple intellectual sources of the coup and its program are acknowledged, in the final analysis, the fact of the coup leaders' reliance on Japanese aid tends to be emphasized, and the coup is generally characterized as being pro-Japanese.¹² Second is the argument that I have found in Korean-language scholarship that Kim, because of his Buddhist background, was a people's rights advocate, even an advocate of equality.¹³ I hesitate to address the historiography of Korean-language scholarship at all, since the historiography is so vast and I cannot do justice to it here. Nevertheless, I bring up this point because it is also reflected in English-language scholarship.¹⁴ Not only do I find little to no evidence for such a claim, but I also argue that it perpetuates the common misconception that there is a direct correlation between a modern reform movement and the promotion of so-called universal values. As I argue in this study, the reality of reform movements and intellectual thought is so much more complicated and rich than such a simple correlation suggests.

By engaging in a study of Kim's works as outlined above, I seek to begin to address these shortcomings in the historiography. Firstly, I seek to expand on the existing scholarship to provide what is possibly the first English-language study of Kim's life from his early years through and beyond his assassination in 1894 in order to argue for an understanding of Kim as a

¹² This is particularly prominent in Cook's work, as well as in Larsen's quick summary of the coup. Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade*, 124-7. It is also visible to a lesser extent in Yöng-ho Ch'oe, "The Kapsin Coup of 1884: A Reassessment," *Korean Studies* 6 (1982): 105-24; Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea: 1868-1910*; Peter Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword: The Japanese Penetration of Korea, 1895-1910* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); and In K. Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s: A Study of Transition in Intra-Asian Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1978).

¹³ Cho Il-mun 趙一文. "Haeje" "解題." *Kapsin illok* 甲申日錄, by Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均 (Seoul: Kōnguk taehakkyo Ch'ulp'anbu, 1977), 17-8.

¹⁴ Martina Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys: The Opening of Korea, 1875-1885* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1977), 199-202.

life-long intellectual whose engagement with Korea and the world did not end with his failed coup. This is not simply a biographical work, though of course especially given the paucity of scholarship on Kim in English, the biographical element is prominent in this study. Instead, I engage in a close reading of his extant writings to give to the reader an understanding not only of what he did but also of how he developed as an intellectual and the personal networks in which this development occurred. The entirety of his remaining works reach to around one hundred and fifty pages, and therefore my analysis is necessarily selective.¹⁵ As I am primarily interested in his intellectual and political agenda before the coup and how both his thought and his methods for changing Korean society changed after the failure of the coup, I focus on those elements of his work that demonstrate a particular intellectual and political stance and his plans for accomplishing his political agenda.

Secondly, although I readily acknowledge the importance of Kim's personal conflict with the Min family and with Qing-centered politics, as well as the very high likelihood that he felt his career had been limited by politics directed by the Min family that prevented him from rising as high in the government as he would have liked, I argue that there is also an intellectual history here that has been largely overlooked. Therefore, while I remark at points on the personal motivations for the coup, I primarily focus on what Kim tried to accomplish and what we can

¹⁵ Kim was apparently a prolific writer, and so these documents are but a handful of what he actually wrote. We do know of at least one other document by name, "K'i hwa ki sa" (箕和近事) Paek Sun-chae, Sin Il-ch'öl, Chin Yong-ha, and Yi Kwang-rin, eds., "Haeje" "解題," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, viii. Also, Martina Deuchler indicates that he and Pak Yŏng-hyo both wrote books on contemporary affairs. Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys*, 151. Finally, Cook quotes a few memorials Kim wrote to the throne while Kim was still an active government official in his collection of court documents that reference Kim, and these have not been included in Kim's collected works. Cook, "Appendix A," *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 227- 37. It is possible that other such documents are available in the archives of the court. In addition to Kim's works, I also use selections from Sŏ Chae-p'il's reflections on the coup written in the late 1930s. Philip Jaisohn, *My Days in Korea and Other Essays* (Seoul: Institute for Modern Korean Studies, Yonsei University, 1999). Besides these, there are numerous documents also available that were written by Pak Yŏng-hyo, including "Memorial on Enlightenment;" Yun Ch'i-ho, most notably his diary; and others who were involved in the coup. Although these are valuable sources for an analysis of the coup as a whole, as my primary interest here is in Kim Ok-kyun as a reformer and intellectual, I have not included these sources in my analysis here.

understand of his vision for Korea's future. To do this, I move beyond the *Kapsin illok* and analyze the full range of Kim's extant works for what they reflect of this intellectual history. Finally, I argue for a more complex understanding of Kim's thought as having been informed by multiple experiences as well as the intellectual tradition in which he came to maturity.

An East Asian History of Modernity

Though, as suggested above, a reexamination of Kim Ok-kyun is worthwhile simply for the reason that he has been underrepresented and, to some extent, misrepresented in scholarship, I also argue that it sheds greater light and opens new questions for future research on Korea and East Asia in the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ In short, I see Kim's story as situated in a nexus of what I call the regional history of modernity in East Asia, which is tied to my larger interests in understanding how regions are formed and how they operate to mediate between the global and the national and individual. This is further tied to my interest in studying modernity as a history of process. Although I do not claim to critically examine these issues in the present study, this study is in many ways the first iteration of a larger research project that take modernity as at least partially a product of regional processes, and so I will conclude my introductory notes with a brief discussion of what this larger project entails and how I see the present study speaking to it.

My first contention is in agreement with an increasingly large body of historiography that contends that the nation state, which has been the primary focus of the historical profession and, in fact, was the initial imperative for the development of the professional study of history, is inadequate to address multiple narratives of history. These scholars argue that one way of overcoming this deficiency is to pay greater attention to alternative histories, including

¹⁶ In this, I agree with Joseph Levenson's contention in his study of Liang Qichao that studying an individual is not meant to only represent that individual nor to take the individual to represent the entirety of his or her society, but rather to understand the individual as he or she illuminates his or her society, shedding light on the many debates and perspectives that shaped the individual, and which he or she in turn helped to develop. Joseph R. Levenson, *Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967).

transnational or even global history.¹⁷ One way of studying history beyond the narratives of national history is to do so through a regional lens.

There are multiple ways to conceptualize the region. One way, and perhaps the most productive, is to follow the geographic regions that have largely come to delineate the contours of area studies—East Asia, Western Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, to name a few. To a certain extent these regions are the product of deliberate design; in other words, they are considered to be regions because they are historically-created categories developed in order to collect knowledge on and thereby assert authority over those geographic regions. Such a view is too narrow, however, as not only do these regions tend to have long histories of interaction, but also the very creation of the categories has given these regions a discursive reality that has in many cases been translated to a regional identity, as in the pan-Asianism of the twentieth century.

Another way I argue we can conceptualize the region is not through a model based on geographic proximity but rather through one based on political, economic, intellectual, and cultural ties. The earlier model can be studied from the perspective of the “region,” the ties within an area demarcated as geographically and culturally distinct from other regions, or “regionalism,” the development of an identity connection with that geographic and cultural space, or the historical relationship between the two. This latter model, on the other hand, is primarily one that deals with regions rather than regionalism. Through this model, I argue that

¹⁷ For deeper discussions of recent trends in transnational history and why the transnational has become such a prominent historiographical trend over the past decade, see Mark Müller, and Cornelius Torp, “Conceptualising Transnational Spaces in History,” *European Review of History* 16, no. 5 (2009): 609-17; Bernard Struck, Kate Ferris, and Jacques Revel, “Introduction: Space and Scale in Transnational History,” *The International History Review* 33, no. 4 (2011): 573-84; and Merry Wiesner-Hanks, “Early Modern Women and the Transnational Turn,” *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 7, no. 191 (2012): 191-202. I am particularly interested in histories that connect the transnational and global to the individual through the use of microhistory. See Tonio Andrade, “A Chinese Farmer, Two African Boys, and a Warlord: Toward a Global Microhistory,” *Journal of World History* 21, no. 4 (2011): 573-91; Filippo De Vivo, “Prospect or Refuge? Microhistory, History on the Large Scale,” *Cultural and Social History* 7, no. 3 (2010): 387-97; and Lara Putnam, “To Study the Fragments/Whole: Microhistory and the Atlantic World,” *Journal of Social History* 39, no. 3 (2006): 615-30.

we can study in detail the global flows of capital and discourses that comprise what we think of as global. This model would suggest that the “global” is never encountered but rather mediated through these extra-national constructs. I do not suggest here that these two models of the region are mutually exclusive; indeed, I argue that both the geographic region and the network-based “region” constitute a country’s (and an individual’s) extra-national world, and they can be productively used as a means by which to study international and transnational histories.

My second contention builds off of these interconnected models of the region. In the historiographies of China, Japan, and Korea, the “transition” to modernity has generally been studied on the level of the history of the nation-state, with one major exception being Prasenjit Duara’s *Rescuing History from the Nation*, in which he deliberately argues against this model by looking at alternative histories to the grand national narratives of China and India that challenge the premise of those narratives from *within* the nation space.¹⁸ I argue that we can similarly challenge the narrative of the nation-state as the primary subject of history by looking at how histories beyond the borders of the nation affected national historical developments. In other words, the histories of modernity in China, Japan, and Korea, I argue, are fundamentally connected to what I call a regional history of modernity in East Asia. The ways that the countries of East Asia experienced Western imperialism and experienced the paradigm shift that gave rise to universalization of the Western modern during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries should be seen as having occurred in a distinctly regional history.¹⁹ This claim echoes Duara’s assertion

¹⁸ Prasenjit Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Duara certainly is not alone in this conclusion. For a historiographical essay on developments in European historiography that challenge the national paradigm with local histories, see Celia Applegate, “A Europe of Regions: Reflections on the Historiography of Sub-National Places in Modern Times,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 4 (1999): 1157-1182.

¹⁹ In the nineteenth century through the first part of the twentieth, the countries and societies in East Asia experienced a shift from what are generally termed “traditional societies” to “modern societies.” This is not to say that there is no longer any tension between what is seen as “traditional” and what is seen as “modern.” My designation of this time frame simply reflects that, by the first part of the twentieth century, the acceptance of

in a later study that what he calls the “East Asian modern” is “a regional mediation of the global circulation of the practices and discourses of the modern.”²⁰

By East Asia, I refer to what has generally been conceived of as the sinosphere,²¹ namely China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and to a lesser extent Vietnam, though I also suggest that in the modern period the region of East Asia should also include far eastern Russia.²² There are several reasons why such a regional construct is a valuable unit of analysis. First of all, these countries have a long history of intense cultural and political interaction stretching long before the

Western “modern” norms as a sign of “civilization” had become hegemonic in the countries of East Asia, though arguably still not universally accepted. This shift, spurred by Western imperialism in the region, was marked by an increasing rejection of prior understandings of the world and a corresponding acceptance of Western “modernity.” Though there was certainly no singular modernity even in the West, and it is becoming increasingly evident that the modern world was not the product of the West but rather the result of global processes and multiple voices from around the world, terms such as “modernity” and “civilization” came to represent those features that were understood to be the source of Western strength, or those that Western countries claimed to exclusively embody that marked their societies as civilized and progressive and the non-West as backward. For a detailed history of how “modernity” and “civilization” developed into universal standards, see Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). Though scholars today on the whole do not agree with such a teleological model, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this model was not only accepted as scientifically verifiable but also came to serve as the foundation for international and domestic politics in the West and, increasingly, the non-West, as well.

²⁰ Prasenjit Duara, *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 2.

²¹ For a study on the “sinosphere,” see Joshua A. Fogel, *Articulating the Sinosphere: Sino-Japanese Relations in Space and Time* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009). I limit my discussion here to China, Japan, and Korea, as those are the three countries whose histories I am most familiar with. Although I use the term “East Asia” as though it is a well-defined entity, the reality is that its composition as a region changes over time, as do the questions that we try to answer through a regional history. For instance, in the pre-modern period, the questions raised about the region have largely been concerned with the spread of and innovations in Confucian and Buddhist thought, and this was a region that is most appropriately identified as the “sinosphere” because of the overwhelming dominance of China in the political and cultural histories of the region. In the nineteenth century, however, as Vietnam increasingly was drawn into France’s orbit, and as Russia took far greater interest in its eastern lands, the geographic boundaries of the region changed. Also, during this period, the questions are less about the spread of Confucianism and Buddhism and more about the impact of Western imperialism, particularly in terms of politics, economics, and religion, though this certainly does not mean that questions of Confucianism and Buddhism go away. The questions change in the twentieth century, as well, as the region is fundamentally reordered with the advent first of Japanese imperialism and later of the Cold War. Therefore, though my comments here are primarily directed at nineteenth century East Asia, I argue that the models of studying transnational history through regions are relevant in other historical contexts, but the questions that we ask of other regional constructs are necessarily unique.

²² Even though Russia was certainly not part of the sinosphere, I include it in this list for several reasons. First, the peoples who eventually were incorporated into the Russian state had historic ties to China, Japan, and Korea. Also, and more significantly, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Russian state became increasingly involved in northeast Asia. A history of “East Asia” during this period, then, cannot ignore Russian interests and actions, on the levels of both the state and the individuals living in the far eastern realms of Russia. Though I barely mention Russia in this study, it is part of my larger research agenda to incorporate Russia into the histories of East Asia in these two centuries.

nineteenth century, and in many ways, though I do not intend to erase differences between them, they shared concepts and texts that were foundational to the worldviews that formed in each country. In no small sense, then, the individuals who directly engaged with Western imperialism were part of a long intellectual tradition that stretched across borders and that shared a similar field of concepts through which they understood the world. Additionally, because of geographic proximity, this period was marked by a sharp increase in border crossing, allowing for personal intercultural exchange that also shaped the ways that individuals participated in this paradigm shift. Thirdly, as demonstrated by Lydia Liu in *Translingual Practice*, the very terms through which new ideas were encountered and engaged with, ultimately giving rise to a language of modernity were developed and disseminated through East Asia.²³ Finally, as I discuss in more detail in this study, the area of East Asia, as it was conceived by individuals at the time as a region, also became the site for the competing imperialisms of China and Japan, as each sought to gain status as a “modern” country according to the dictates of international law and through the development of overseas capital networks. In the midst of these competing imperialisms, ideas about how to imagine oneself and one’s country in the modern world were not only the sites of tension and conflict but were also points of contact and cross-cultural exchange through the region. In short, as a region with a strong interconnected history and a shared cosmological vocabulary that was consciously conceived of as a separate region with a unique identity within the global world in which ideas about that world accompanied people and texts across borders, East Asia in a very real way was a site through which the modern experiences of China, Japan, and Korea took shape.

²³ Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity: China, 1900-1937* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

By making the above argument for taking East Asia seriously as the primary unit of analysis in a study of modernity, I also argue that doing so offers new insights into the modern paradigm shift that simply relying on national or even sub-national history does not. First, it has the potential to offer a more complete understanding of how the countries and societies that comprise East Asia experienced the modernizing world. More importantly, it provides another way through which to contest the supremacy of the West in the creation of the modern world. In his 2012 *American Historical Review* article, “Enlightenment in Global History,” Sebastian Conrad calls for a revision of the argument that the Enlightenment, and with this we can also say modernity itself, was a product of the West.²⁴ Instead, the modern world as we know it, both as a globalized, interconnected space bound together by capital and information networks, as well as a world that identifies itself with a discourse of “modernity” that has long been identified with supposedly universal values that developed in the West, should be seen as the product of global events, discourses, and actors. Even though this modernity is associated with the West, it was in fact the product of global history, as was the development of the discourse of the West as the birthplace of the modern. Not only is modernity, then, a historically-constructed entity, but it is also constantly being revised so that the idea of what it means to be modern is never stable but is rather being rewritten by individuals not only in the West but also around the world. By looking at the history of modernity through the lens of regions, both as defined as geographically contingent regions and as networks stretching across the globe, we can understand better the processes through which this “modern” was constructed globally.

The history I propose above is intimately connected with histories of process—the process of cultural and intellectual exchange; the process of the development of ideas; the

²⁴ Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): 999-1027.

process of the formation of discourses; and the process of how those discourses gain power nationally, regionally, and globally. Accompanying these is the formation of counter discourses that challenge the development of a hegemonic order and deny its claim to full universalization. Although to this point I have largely been articulating my suggestion that we take the region as a unit of analysis, at the heart of this claim is an argument that the history of modernity be studied as a history of process. Of course, the teleological argument of modernity as the end of history has long been refuted, but the study of the modern world is still largely dominated by epistemologies that are identified with the “modern.” Through a study of modernity as process, we can examine at the same time alternate visions for existing in the modern world, the conflicts that arose between these alternate visions, and ultimately, how it came to be that what is generally identified as the Western, liberal modern came to claim global hegemony.

As noted above, the present study is merely a first step in a larger research agenda that seeks to investigate questions that address the topics discussed here. Therefore, through this research, which is primarily a study of Kim Ok-kyun as an intellectual in the context of how his intellectual and political programs developed, I hope to take a first step toward writing such a history of the process of modernity as it occurred on the level of the region. I also argue that the history as I relate it here opens up questions and future avenues of research on the regional history of modernity as a history of process, which I will elaborate on more fully in my concluding remarks.

CHAPTER II

KOREA BETWEEN COMPETING IMPERIALISMS: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

When Kim Ok-kyun was born on February 23, 1851, he entered a world on the precipice of fundamental changes. His own clan, the Andong Kims, would soon be overshadowed by the Yŏhŭng Min clan with the appointment of Kojong as heir to the throne in 1864 and Kojong's subsequent marriage to a Min woman later known simply as "Queen Min," in 1866. This union effectively removed the Andong Kims from the position they had enjoyed for the previous half-century as the male relatives of the kings' consorts.¹ Additionally, there would soon be increased (and unwanted) contact with foreign powers, as, following the successful "opening" of Japan by Commodore Perry's black ships, Korea had become the object of Western and Japanese interest. This eventually forced China to readjust its position vis-à-vis Korea from that of a rather passive titular sovereign to an active promoter of Chinese interests on the peninsula first and then those of Korea.

This was a period of turbulence in Korea, as international pressures increasingly came to bear on politics. China, Korea's suzerain, had recently lost the Opium War in 1842, and the following decade would experience an even more serious threat to its sovereignty with the Taiping Rebellion. Off the other shore, Japan was arguably experiencing even greater changes. After signing unequal treaties in the wake of Perry's "black ship" expedition and the subsequent civil war and Meiji Restoration, the Japanese government undertook an intense Westernization effort in order to make Japan eligible for equal status with the West under Western international

¹ The Andong Kims rose to power in 1802 when Kim Cho-sun's daughter married King Sunjo. After a series of royal marriages and deaths, Sunjo's widowed wife was in the position to choose the next king because there was no longer a living male heir to the throne. She chose a boy named Ch'ŏlchong, and another Andong Kim was chosen as his wife. After Ch'ŏlchong died with no living male heir, this Kim woman was left powerless as a more senior widowed queen, the wife of Sunjo's childless son, Ikchong, selected Yi Ha-ŭng to be the heir, whose mother belonged to the Yŏhŭng Min family. Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 15-6.

law. Although certainly not all changes in China, Japan, or Korea during this period were due to the extension of Western imperialism in East Asia, the history that interests me in this chapter, and in this study as a whole, was how Korea and the region were fundamentally impacted politically and intellectually by the coming of the West.² To some extent, this history may read as a repetition of the outdated Orientalist action-response model of global history, the notion that the West acted first and the rest of the world could only (passively) react to this active incursion. This is because the reality that it was the West that came to East Asia and not the other way around is unavoidable, as is the reality that, at least by the nineteenth century, the power dynamics in the region had tipped in favor of the West, though intra-regional power dynamics continued to fluctuate. Recently, excellent research has been conducted on early developments of capitalism in early modern Asia to challenge the action-response thesis.³ Nevertheless, by the nineteenth century, Western imperialism had developed to the extent that Western states and individuals could to a large extent impose their will on even the non-colonized societies of East Asia. It is the dynamics of this encounter that interests me, and in this encounter we can see

² This is one of the core critiques of the action-response thesis, namely that not all developments in non-Western countries after contact with the West should be understood as being related to the West. I completely agree with this argument, but as one of my interests in this study is to explore the dynamics of change under cross-cultural encounter, the coming of Western imperialism is inseparable from my analysis. Nevertheless, there are developments that I will cover in the subsequent chapters that were not responses to the West, like the development of *sirhak* learning, which I will discuss in Chapter Three. Yet, even in such cases, the terms of the internal social debate were influenced in many ways by the changes and new imperatives brought about by Western imperialism by the second half of the nineteenth century. In this way, I agree with Chang Hao's treatment of what he terms "internal dialogues," as intellectuals engaged in debates occurring both across time in their own societies and occurring at the moment between intellectuals of the same generation, and in this period these debates were in many ways shaped by Western imperialism. Hao Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis: Search for Order and Meaning (1890-1911)* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987).

³ Early examples of scholarship that seeks to find structural equivalents between modern developments in Europe and in Asia are Robert Marks, *The Origins of the Modern World: a Global and Ecological Narrative* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China, and the Making of a Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Kären Wigen, *The Making of a Japanese Periphery, 1750-1920* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995). With the exception of Wigen's work, this earlier scholarship tends to be on global narratives, and as such, does not offer focused narratives on specific developments. Later scholarship has taken up this shortcoming. Examples include Sunil Amrith, *Crossing the Bay of Bengal: the Furies of Nature and the Fortunes of Migrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); and Eric Tagliacozzo, *Chinese Circulations: Capital, Commodities, and Networks in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

significant action and innovation that challenges the premise of the action-reaction thesis.⁴ In other words, the reaction of China, Japan, and Korea to the encounter with and demands of Western imperialism constituted a new chapter in the history of modernity shaped by international forces, regional discourses and tensions, national politics, and individual and group personalities and perspectives.

Although Kim's own childhood, adolescence, and early career do not reflect the national and regional changes of the mid-nineteenth century, all played a significant role in his own experiences and in his evolution as an intellectual and politician. Therefore, in this chapter, I offer a brief summary of the regional and domestic background of Kim's own childhood and early career, against which we must understand his 1884 coup, the following decade during which he was in exile, and his assassination. My intention here is to outline briefly the ways that changes in China, Japan, and Korea through the middle of the nineteenth century produced the situation in which Korea was forced to negotiate the terms of its participation in international affairs while being caught between competing Chinese and Japanese imperialisms, the world into which Kim Ok-kyun entered.⁵

China and Japan at Mid-Century

In the years immediately following the Opium War of 1842, although China was subject to the Treaty of Nanjing, in many ways its official approach to the West remained much the same as before the war. Foreigners were to be kept at a distance, though because of the opening of additional treaty ports and the ability of merchants and missionaries to reside year-round therein,

⁴ This is similar to Jerome Ch'en's argument that underneath "response" there is a history of dynamism. Jerome Ch'en, *China and the West: Society and Culture, 1815-1937* (Taipei: Southern Materials Center, 1979).

⁵ My description of Korea as being between competing imperialisms is in part inspired by Andre Schmid's work on the decade during which Korea experienced relative autonomy after the conclusion of the First Sino-Japanese War severed the tributary relationship between Korea and China and before Korea became a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and then a colony in 1910. What we see in the 1870s through the 1890s is the period of competition between China and Japan that gave rise to that period of relative autonomy beginning in 1895. Andre Schmid, *Korea between Empires, 1895-1919* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

that distance was significantly shorter than it was prior to the war. The West, while it was recognized as a power to be reckoned with, was but one of many such threats on the borders of the empire. Indeed, as Peter Purdue has skillfully demonstrated, from the middle of the seventeenth century, the Qing Empire was primarily concerned with securing the western borderlands in its own efforts at continental imperialism.⁶ After the Treaty of Tianjin of 1858, however, policy towards the West changed significantly, as Western imperialism quite literally moved into the capital itself. Although many officials continued to strongly oppose engagement with the West beyond what was stipulated in treaty agreements, others advocated for a new approach to the West, namely adopting those elements of Western culture that were seen as the source of Western power.

One result was that numerous officials, chief among them Li Hongzhang,⁷ began the “Self-Strengthening Movement” (C. *zìqiáng yùndòng*, 自強運動).⁸ The objective of this

⁶ Peter C. Purdue, *China Marches West: the Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁷ Of course, Li Hongzhang was not the only Chinese reformer during this period, though he was perhaps the most prominent, certainly in terms of international visibility. As this is a brief summary of the trends shaping the emergence of competing imperialisms in Korea, I will not go into further detail. For additional studies on late-nineteenth-century Chinese intellectuals, see Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*; Ch'en, *China and the West*; Samuel C. Chu, *Reformer in Modern China: Chang Chien, 1853-1926* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965); Paul A. Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity: Wang T'ao and Reform in Late Ch'ing China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); Joseph R. Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate: a Trilogy* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968); Levenson, *Liang Ch'i-Ch'ao and the Mind of Modern China*; Benjamin Schwartz, *In Search of Wealth and Power: Yen Fu and the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964); and Y.C. Wang, *Chinese Intellectuals and the West, 1872-1949* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1966). Though of course many of these scholars recognize the intellectual syncretism of these men, that what they advocated was neither a fully Chinese tradition nor a fully Western orientation but rather an active engagement with both intellectual lineages (and the multiple lineages within each of the larger “Chinese” and “Western traditions”), the vast majority of the intellectuals whose lives and thought have been given serious consideration were individuals who engaged with the West in one way or another and are often framed as pioneers for a new future for China. This represents a gap in the historiography, I argue, in that the thought of individuals who fully opposed the West has not been given serious consideration in English-language scholarship.

⁸ The entire movement is often cited as a failure because of the inability of the new Chinese military to effectively defend against the Japanese in the First Sino-Japanese War, though this has recently been challenged by scholars who seek to understand the movement beyond the fact of its failure. See Stephen R. Halsey, “Sovereignty, Self-strengthening, and Steamships in Late Imperial China,” *Journal of Asian History* 48, no. 1 (2014): 81-111. Halsey argues that the movement set in motion many developments in technology and in corporate business structures that lived beyond the movement. Although it did ultimately fail in its objective, in addition to the points raised by

movement was to build up Chinese military strength, particularly the navy, so as to be able to defend China against further Western aggression. At the heart of this movement was the idea of *tiyong* (體用), or substance versus use. In short, the contention was that Western knowledge and technology could be studied and implemented in order to be useful, but that China must maintain its core substance and identity. Underlying this argument, of course, was the belief that such a distinction could be maintained and that Western implements could be fully integrated into China without there being corresponding social and cultural changes. Though this proved to be a false conclusion, it nevertheless represents a new approach to the modern world. It recognized that continued willing ignorance and disdain for the West would only result in further degradation of Chinese sovereignty.⁹ Yet, this recognition did not mean that all things Western should be fully embraced. Though this movement has often been characterized as an example of intellectual conservatism that prevented full engagement with Western ideas,¹⁰ I argue instead that it represents an effort to develop an alternate Chinese modernity, or a unique Chinese approach to the modern world that did not accept all elements of the Western understanding of modernity, and in this way, it should be understood as an example of intellectual innovation.¹¹

Halsey, the significance of the movement should also be recognized for what it attempted to achieve. Whether or not that goal was ever truly realizable, the development of the movement represents a unique moment in Chinese intellectual and technological history.

⁹ Consistent with my larger claims in this study, I do not label this movement as progressive, nor do I label the worldview that continued to oppose the West as conservative. I regard each as expressions of approaches to the new world that, to the individual who held each view, seemed to be the most rational, both in terms of its feasibility and its correlation with the individual's value system. Yet, I do consider those who opposed change to the status quo to have been incorrect in their calculations, as by this time Western avarice could not be held in check.

¹⁰ For an older interpretation of the *tiyong* debate, see Levenson, *Confucian China and its Modern Fate*, 59-78.

¹¹ I agree here with Timothy B. Weston in his more recent argument that the *tiyong* model was an intellectual model that "permitted motion and change." "As an intellectual vehicle, it was full of energy and initiative; it was a means of imagining a new intellectual landscape, not merely a reflection of fear, frustration, and denial." Timothy B. Weston, "The Founding of the Imperial University and the Emergence of Chinese Modernity," in *Rethinking the 1898 Reform Period: Political and Cultural Change in Late Qing China*, eds. Rebecca E. Karl, and Peter Zarrow (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 105. A further question this raises is, how did this debate change over time? Weston was writing about the use of *tiyong* as a founding principle for the imperial university in 1898. The period that I am interested in here is thirty to fifty years prior to the 1898 reform period, and China had again undergone many changes since the beginning of the Self-Strengthening movement, and especially in the immediate

During this same period, an internal debate was also raging in Japan over how to respond to Western imperialism and the imposition of the unequal treaty system, and the ultimate result, though certainly it was not a foregone conclusion, was the large-scale Westernization efforts that have come to define the Meiji period. The focus on Japan's successful entry to the ranks of the world's imperial powers, and simultaneously to the "family of nations," after the First Sino-Japanese War through its success in implementing Western modernity into Japanese political, social, and cultural life has largely eclipsed both Japan's initial ambivalence to the West after being opened through the 1854 Treaty of Kanagawa, and the continued tensions within Japan regarding the correct path of development for the country. In fact, for the majority of the fifteen years between the time that Perry's ships first appeared in the bay of Edo and the Meiji Restoration in 1868, the general mood seems to have been decidedly anti-foreign.

The tenor of this time is vividly portrayed in Fukuzawa Yukichi's autobiography in his descriptions of his experiences working as an English and Dutch translator for the government. Concerning the bakufu, Fukuzawa writes, "It was very like the present situation in China. Our government was simply worrying over the threats and bullying of the European diplomats, and could not decide what to do."¹² Although the central government continued to vacillate over how to deal with the West, other samurai were less divided. Speaking of the year 1863, he writes, "The shogunate was now harassed on both sides:—there was, on the one side, the agitating clans which clamored at the point of arms for the closing of the country, and on the other side was the

aftermath of the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Therefore, it is quite likely that "*tiyong*" meant something significantly different to intellectuals in 1898 than in the 1860s and 1870s. Further inquiry into this is entirely outside of the scope of this study, but I do agree with Weston even for this earlier period that the *tiyong* debate should be recognized and understood as a type of innovation rather than an intellectual incapacity for engaging with the West on its own terms.

¹² Fukuzawa Yukichi, *The Autobiography of Fukuzawa Yukichi*, trans. Eiichi Kiyooka, 3rd ed. (Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1940), 155.

united power of Western nations demanding the ‘open door.’”¹³ As for Fukuzawa, he and others who were studying English and Dutch favored open relations with the West, and because of it, he felt himself always in danger of attack for his involvement in foreign studies, particularly as tensions increased in the early 1860s: “The reason the *ronin* included us in their attack was that they thought we scholars who read foreign books and taught foreign culture were liars trying to mislead the people and make way for the Westerners to exploit Japan. So we also became their prey.”¹⁴

The situation changed dramatically in the period after the Restoration, as the conversation shifted away from whether or not to engage with the West to the extent to which Japan should engage with the West and Western ideas. The chief issue was the continued imposition of the unequal treaty system, which the Japanese government felt was a humiliating mark of inferiority imposed on it by the West.¹⁵ Therefore, the next order of business was to continue to try to revise the treaties, an effort actually begun by the Tokugawa government. The Japanese were informed that, in order to revise the treaties, the country and its laws would need to be reformed along Western lines. Thus began the large-scale Westernization effort of the Meiji period. It was not only laws and regulations that were affected—people were encouraged to adopt new fashion and new hairstyles; education became compulsory for boys and girls; and the military was even eventually opened to male conscription. The changes were not even across Japanese society, however, with one notable case being differences in gender. Although girls were required to attend school, their education was envisioned as being for the benefit of being good housewives. Additionally, soon after men were encouraged to cut off their topknots, many women also

¹³ Ibid., 172-3.

¹⁴ Ibid., 151.

¹⁵ For further information about the early attempts at treaty revision until Mutsu Munemitsu took control of the process, see Louis G. Perez, *Japan Comes of Age: Mutsu Munemitsu and the Revision of the Unequal Treaties* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 47-63.

wanted to adopt shorter hairstyles. This, however, was not permissible, so in 1872, the government outlawed short hairstyles for women to the point that, “even older women who had health reasons to wear short hair had to get a license to do so, at least if they were to go to a barbershop or hairdresser for the procedure.”¹⁶

There was still considerable division among the ranks of the samurai concerning the new direction Japanese society was heading. This came to a head in the 1870s in what is known as the “Korea problem” (J. *seikanron*, 征韓論) and then later in the Satsuma Rebellion. In 1873, the Japanese government sent an envoy to Pusan to inform the Korean government of the imperial restoration and of Japan’s new name, which included such honorific characters as “*kō* [皇] (imperial), *choku* [敕] (imperial order), and *dai* [大] (great),” characters that were reserved for China and the Chinese emperor.¹⁷ As there was only one emperor, and he resided in China, the Korean officials could not countenance engaging with a country so brazen as to claim the characters for and title of the Chinese emperor for their own leader. Rebuffed by what it considered to be the inferior country, Japan was nearly led to war by a group of samurai from Satsuma under the leadership of Saigō Takamori, who sought to take revenge for this humiliation, and also to use the opportunity to employ samurai whom the restoration had left without an occupation. Saigō succeeded in obtaining permission to go to Korea to force the Koreans to recognize the new regime and to open trading relationships directly with the Japanese government, rather than only with the Tsushima domain, which had previously been Korea’s only contact with Japan. Thanks to the timely return to Japan of Iwakura Tomomi from a diplomatic mission around the world and his opposition to the mission, the attack on Korea did

¹⁶ Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: from Tokugawa Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 89.

¹⁷ Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys*, 20. For a more in-depth discussion of the 1873 mission, see pp. 17-23.

not occur. Instead, the samurai forces were sent to Taiwan to punish the mountain aborigines there for the murder of several Ryūkyūans in 1871. The samurai problem was not resolved, however, and in 1877 Saigō again led a group of discontented samurai, but this time against the imperial government itself. The issue at stake this time was disagreement over the direction the new state was heading. Not only did the samurai oppose many of the social changes that had taken place, but they also resented the recent rise in corruption in Japanese politics and society. The rebellion was crushed, and with it came the end of armed opposition to the new state.

Competing Imperialisms in Korea

Connected with these domestic changes in China and Japan were changes in their foreign policies, and Korea lay at the center. The Chosŏn state, founded in 1392, based its governance largely on Neo-Confucian principles, and it proudly occupied a position of vassalage to Ming China as part of the sinocentric tributary system that at least ostensibly governed affairs in East Asia until the nineteenth century. In this relationship, both suzerain and vassal would regularly send vassals to conduct trade and discuss matters of politics. Also, while the vassal state was free to conduct its own domestic affairs, foreign affairs were the purview of the suzerain. With the fall of the Ming and the rise to power of the Qing in 1644, this relationship, though on the surface appearing to function in much the same way as it had before, in reality it was significantly changed.¹⁸ The Qing dynasty was a (barbaric) Manchu dynasty, and it had replaced a (civilized) Han dynasty as the rulers of “all under heaven” (C. *tianxia*, 天下), or more simply, the world. After much deliberation, the Korean government decided to continue participating in the tributary relationship but in a far more restricted sense and with no small amount of suspicion

¹⁸ For an extended discussion of the impact of the fall of the Ming on Korean literati and their position vis-à-vis China, see Jahyun Kim Haboush, “Constructing the Center: The Ritual Controversy and the Search for a New Identity in Seventeenth-Century Korea,” in *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, eds. Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Martina Deuchler (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 46-90.

toward the new state headed by barbarians. What resulted, however, was the development of Korea into what has often been referred to as the “Hermit Kingdom,” as even relations with China were kept at a distance, and at least officially, there was little to no contact with any other foreigners. The only exception to this was the agreement made between Korea and Japan to allow for trade to go on between Pusan and Tsushima, as well as the occasional Korean envoy missions to Japan, mirroring the Chinese missions to Korea, signaling clearly the Korean claim to dominance in its relationship with Japan. Perhaps more significantly, as the Korean literati increasingly considered themselves to be the guardians of Confucian orthodoxy, which was likely to be spoiled in the hands of the Manchus, they accrued to themselves a strong identity that was in many ways based on their adherence to and protection of Confucian values.

As for the extension of Western imperialism in Korea, with the exception of a few missionaries, Westerners did not travel to Korea until the mid-nineteenth century. It was only after their relations with China and Japan had been formalized through the signing of unequal treaties that Western powers developed an interest in similarly opening the Korean market to global trade. Korean officials were apt observers of the changes that had occurred in the region. During this period, Korea was ruled not by the king but by young Kojong’s father, the Taewongun (大院君), who took power in 1864 and ruled until 1874, when Kojong came of age. The Taewongun prompted a fiercely anti-foreign policy and would permit relations with only China. In what is taken to be emblematic of his rule, in the early 1870s he ordered the installment of stone markers across the country with the inscription, “Western barbarians invade our land. If we do not fight, we must appease them. To urge appeasement is to betray the nation.”¹⁹ From the perspective of the Taewongun and the majority of Korean officials and literati, Japan, already a

¹⁹ Qtd. in Larsen, *Tradition, Treaties, and Trade*, 55.

suspect nation because of the Hideyoshi invasions and Japan's refusal to pay proper obeisance to China, had become entirely barbarized. Under the firm belief that Japan, and to a lesser extent, China, both nominally Confucian countries, had sold out the faith, the Korean government under the Taewongun was determined to not capitulate to the barbarians.

Western attempts to exert imperial influence in Korea were therefore largely unsuccessful. Not only were the dominant forces in the Korean government entirely uninterested in engaging with the West at this time, but there was also the reality that no Western government considered Korea to be either a threat or a prize—quite frankly, the small peninsula between China and Japan did not matter to them. Not so for Chinese and Japanese officials. For both countries, Korea was seen as the “lips” that protected the teeth, a buffer state protecting the heartland from foreign invasion.²⁰ Not only had the Korean peninsula served as a launching pad from which forces from the continent attempted to attack Japan (the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century) and from which Japanese forces attempted to invade the continent (the Hideyoshi invasions of the late sixteenth century), but especially for Japan, it was also a potential market, if only the state would agree to allow for foreign trade. Although the Korean government was averse to signing any treaties or engaging in trade, by 1876, the Japanese successfully negotiated the Treaty of Kanghwa with Chinese officials acting on behalf of Korea. Thus began the competition between Japan and China for supremacy in Korea and leadership in Korea's international relations. As Kirk Larsen has demonstrated, this competition was marked by the Japanese efforts to establish exclusive access to Korean markets and the Chinese attempt to institute a system of multilateral imperialism in Korea, in which China allowed for, even invited, other imperial powers to sign unequal treaties with Korea so that no single country could

²⁰ Ibid.

dominate Korean affairs.²¹ By doing so, Chinese officials hoped to keep other imperial powers at bay so as to be able to continue to promote Chinese interests in Korean politics. This multilateral imperialism was similar to modern Western imperialism that granted access to the markets and policies of a less powerful country to multiple imperial powers, and it was also used by China to shield Korea from some of the excesses of the unequal treaty system that had been implemented beginning with the Treaty of Nanjing.

Despite Chinese and Japanese interest in integrating Korea into the system of international law, the political realities of mid-nineteenth century Korea meant that, from the perspective of official policy, imperial overtures from Japan and the West were entirely unwelcome, and even early Chinese efforts to encourage Korea to sign treaties went ignored. When King Kojong took control of the government in 1874, however, this began to change. Unlike his father, Kojong, though often characterized as a weak-willed sovereign, demonstrated an interest in the West and began cautiously implementing a self-strengthening program not unlike that in China. Not only were several treaties signed, first with Japan and then with a handful of Western countries, but in the early 1880s, several steps were also taken to at least experiment with Western ideas and technology, especially those pertaining to the military. In 1881, thirty-eight Korean students and artisans were sent to the Tianjin arsenal to study military technology, and in 1884, students were sent to Japan under the supervision of Fukuzawa Yukichi for military studies, including one of the 1884 coup leaders, Sŏ Chae-p'il.²² Also in 1881, the "Gentleman's Sightseeing Group" took an informal extended tour of Japan to study Meiji reforms, and their number included several Enlightenment Party members and allies, including Hong Yŏng-sik, one of the five coup leaders, and Yun Ch'i-ho, Kim's protégé.

²¹ Ibid. This is Larsen's core argument in his study of late-nineteenth-century Sino-Korean relations.

²² For a summary of Kojong's pre-1884 support of Western reforms, see Ch'oe, "The Kapsin Coup of 1884," 112.

Whereas earlier Chinese and Japanese advances were primarily political and mercenary in nature, by 1882, the imperial competition over Korea had reached the point of military intervention with the soldiers' mutiny in July and August 1882. Apparently, the Taewongun had been "stirring up internal trouble" as early as March 17, as Li Hongzhang's memoirs indicate.²³ Li also wrote in the same entry that the Japanese were causing trouble in the capital, as Yuan Shikai, residing at that time in Seoul, conveyed to him that "many Korean traitors, in the pay and service of the Mikado's agents, are ready at the word from their masters to make trouble about the Japanese legation, thereby offering an excuse for Hanabusa [the Japanese minister in Seoul] to appeal to the Tokio authorities."²⁴ These tensions reached a breaking point in July.²⁵ The efforts discussed earlier to reform the Korean military eventually came to the peninsula itself, as some units of the Korean army began to be reformed along Japanese and Western lines. For some time, the reformed units of the military had received preferential treatment, and there was rising tension between the reformed and the traditional units. This came to a head when one traditional unit, the Muwi Regiment, rose up against those officials charged with distributing rice. This was a relatively minor incident until the Taewongun, who had retired after Kojong assumed rule, redirected the soldiers' ire toward the Korean government led by the Min family, the Japanese community in Seoul, and the opening of Korea to the modern world represented by those groups. The riots were so fierce that the Japanese legation, headed by Hanbusa Yoshitada, fled to Incheon, and while on route, they were assaulted by Korean soldiers, resulting in the deaths of six Japanese and the injury of five. Once the news reached Beijing and Tokyo, both governments dispatched troops to suppress the uprising. Li Hongzhang also ordered that the

²³ Li Hongzhang, *Memoirs of Li Hung Chang*, ed. William Francis Mannix (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 250.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 251.

²⁵ This is a summary of the sequence of events provided by Martina Deuchler. For a more complete analysis of the 1882 uprising, see Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys*, 130-4.

Taewongun be seized and escorted to Li's property near Tianjin, where he was held in veritable house arrest until 1884. After the incident had been suppressed, fifteen hundred soldiers from both the Chinese and the Japanese armies continued to be stationed in Seoul.

Although Korea had to pay reparations to Japan after the incident on account of the Japanese who were killed and injured, and also because of the damage done to Japanese property, leading Korean officials were still far more inclined to cultivate a close relationship with China than with Japan. Therefore, for the following two years, though Japanese continued to be stationed in the capital, it was the Chinese forces and officers, especially Yuan Shikai, who were given priority by Min officials and who were able to exercise considerable influence in Korean politics. The presence of soldiers from both countries, as well as the fact that the political situation after 1882 favored the Chinese, led to escalating tensions within the Korean government that led to another conflagration in the capital, this time led by a group of men interested in realizing a completely different future for Korea.²⁶

By 1884, then, the situation in Korea was characterized by raising tensions between competing forces on numerous levels. First, the ministers in the government largely favored slow reform based largely on the Chinese model of adapting Western technology for Korean needs but rejecting Western ideology and culture. This was challenged by a growing number of intellectuals and scholars, including Kim Ok-kyun and his Enlightenment Party, who favored more adaptation to the West and a greater adherence to the modernity the West offered. This was further complicated by two foreign governments, China and Japan, who sought their own

²⁶ Li Hongzhang's approach to Korean affairs was not the only one voiced in China in the wake of the 1882 incident. In Samuel C. Chu's study of Zhang Jian, a businessman and contemporary of Li Hongzhang, Chu argues that Zhang advocated for a "vigorous policy in Korea" to check Japanese imperialism, including such measures as annexing the northern part of the peninsula into the Qing empire, appointing a resident-general in Korea and stationing troops there, and "encouraging Korea to put her own house in order, modernize her armed forces, and act in conjunction with Chinese troops in Manchuria." In the end, however, Li's recommendation, which Chu characterizes as the "peaceful penetration in Korea and the balancing of one power by another" became official policy. Chu, *Reformer in Modern China: Chang Chien, 1853-1926*, 15.

interests on the peninsula, each vying for control over the relatively small kingdom that was essential to regional security. The multiple layers of emotion and politics that entered into this situation are reflected in two comments in Li Hongzhang's memoirs that show both the sense of competition with the Japanese that Li felt and acted upon, as well as his own ambivalence towards Korea. The first was an entry made on March 17, 1882 in which he complained about his new responsibility for handling Korean affairs. As the head of the Zongli yamen, the equivalent of a ministry of foreign affairs, this actually was not within the scope of his authority, since as a tributary country, Korean affairs should have been handled through the Board of Rites. Nevertheless, as China's most capable statesman, he was given the responsibility of handling this delicate issue. In his complaint, he writes,

Without edict the Throne has commanded me to assume sole and complete charge of our interests in the Hermit Kingdom, and it now behoves [*sic*] me to prepare for such emergencies as may arise in that troubled and troublesome country. With scarcely a tribute that was worth while in all these hundreds of years, Korea has ever been independent and even resentful of our influence or interest; but just so soon as trouble looms up on the horizon, from causes having their source either within or without the kingdom, she comes begging for help. And help has never been denied, for the people of the country are our people, and they share with us the everlasting dislike for the pygmy Nipponese, with their strutting ways and ignorant presumptions. We taught the Nipponese what little they knew in the beginning, which they speedily unlearned, supplanting that knowledge with a vain assumption of superiority in most matters. They

treat the Koreans as rank inferiors, and have come to believe that because of its proximity Korea is a vassal state.²⁷

This is followed later by a comment in Li's memoirs written when the Taewongun was en route from Shanghai to Tianjin on August 11 in which he reflected, "If this man were not such an inborn detester of everything that pertains to Nippon or the Nipponese, I should be tempted sorely to make his head a decoration upon the Yamen walls."²⁸ These remarks, almost certainly not intended for any audience other than himself, given the ease with which he complains about the emperor's orders, reflect an interesting tension within the man who largely directed China's imperial efforts in Korea. There is both a sense of [contempt] for Korea and also an understanding that both were united against Japan, which is clearly framed as the primary offender. This reflects China's broader policy towards Korea and Japan during this period, as China sought to transform the old tributary relationship with Korea into a modified semi-imperial system governed by international law. This was not necessarily done with a sense of endearment toward Korea but because China recognized the rise of Japan and the new struggle for hegemony over the region. This struggle would continue to develop over the next two decades and was largely shaped by two serious events, one in 1884 and one in 1894, and at the center of which was one unlikely Korean intellectual, Kim Ok-kyun.

²⁷ Li, *Memoirs of Li Hung Chang*, 249-50.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

CHAPTER III

KIM OK-KYUN'S EARLY LIFE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REVOLUTIONARY

In this chapter, I turn to the central questions of this study, namely an examination of Kim's life through the lens of intellectual history, and begin by examining Kim's early life and career, focusing on the ideologies and experiences that shaped his later reform movement and revolution. In this and the following two chapters, I argue for two interrelated readings of Kim's development as an intellectual and of his intellectual and political ideologies. The first is for a reading of Kim's life and thought as an instance of Korean intellectual history. Given that Kim was Korean, this is hardly a bold claim. Nevertheless, English-language scholarship on Kim and his reform movement tends to uncritically identify Kim's movement as a pro-Japanese, even mimetic, venture, and to credit this to Kim's interest in Meiji Japan and his close relationship with Fukuzawa Yukichi.¹ As such, the complexities of his thought are largely overlooked. On the first page of what is the only English-language account of the aftermath of the coup, Yŏng-ho Ch'oe states, "Inspired by the transformation taking place in Meiji Japan, these Korean reformers hoped to emulate the Meiji restoration and subsequent reforms in Japan."² Although Cook does examine Kim's thought in more detail than does Ch'oe, whose main focus is on the political changes in Korea after the failure of the coup, even Cook places Kim's thought essentially within a larger Japanese discourse on modernity when he writes, "In the first half [of his life,] Kim's inspiration came from China; in the second half it was Japan."³ Here we see Kim's agenda reduced to being an iteration of a nineteenth-century Japanese development.

¹ I use the term pro-Japanese to refer to a stance that was strongly influenced by contemporary Japanese developments. My critique here is not that Kim was not influenced by Meiji thought and developments, but rather that this is an inadequate characterization of Kim's political and intellectual agendas. In other words, there is a history here that goes far beyond the influence of Japan on Kim's thought.

² Ch'oe, "The Kapsin Coup of 1884," 105.

³ Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 27.

Prominent in these arguments is the role of Fukuzawa Yukichi in shaping Kim's development. Conroy's account of Kim Ok-kyun and the coup is telling in this regard:

Fukuzawa also gave Kim and Pak [Yŏng-hyo] some lessons in theoretical politics, the main point of these being that "all civilized nations in the world, including Japan, have sovereignty, but Korea with a culture 2000 years old still belongs to big old China. For the first time Kim and Pak realized the true significance of independence."⁴...Probably Fukuzawa felt, in fleeting moments at least, some misgivings about the contradiction involved in spreading "civilization" by force, but he did not allow this to dampen the enthusiasm of Kim, Pak, and Kakugorō [Shin'ichirō] even when their prospectus for progress in Korea came to include a revolutionary plot, complete with assassination targets. It seems doubtful that Fukuzawa was in on all the final gory details, but certainly he knew the general outline of what his pupils and advisees were scheming. To that extent he did "*write the plot and train the actors.*"⁵

Here, Conroy attributes the coup and the thought behind it almost entirely to Fukuzawa, leaving to Kim and his party the role of puppets in Fukuzawa's own vision for Korea and Japan. Of course, the problems with this scholarship can be attributed to the eras in which it was written, with Conroy writing in the 1950s and Cook in the 1960s and early 1970s. Nevertheless, since there has not been any further scholarship published in English on the topic of Kim Ok-kyun and the 1884 coup, with the exception of Ch'oe's article cited above, these problematic conclusions have acquired the status of truth. I argue instead for a closer reading of Kim's thought that

⁴ Here Conroy quotes Tabohashi Kiyoshi's 1940 *Kindai Nissen Kankei no Kenkyū* (*A Study of Modern Japanese-Korean Relations*). This is extremely problematic given that it was a study written by a Japanese scholar in the midst of the Second World War during which time the Japanese state pursued a policy of *kōminka*, or imperialization, in the colonies. Although it is entirely possible that Kim and Pak had not given serious consideration to the idea of independence before meeting with Fukuzawa Yukichi, evidence for this would need to be found in a more reliable text than Tabohashi's.

⁵ Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910*, 138-9. Emphasis mine.

reflects Korea's own unique history and that clearly situates that history in a regional network of engagement with Confucian thought and with the modern world. Far from its being a mere mimesis of Japanese thought, I argue, Kim's thought had a unique intellectual lineage that drew from Korean, Chinese, and Japanese sources that Kim turned to in response to the circumstances faced by Korea in the 1870s and 1880s.

Secondly, I argue for a reading of Kim's thought, and by extension of modernities in China, Japan, and Korea during this period, that does not conform neatly to the conservative-progressive dichotomy. As noted above, Kim's thought has generally been identified with Japanese thought. This is done in contrast with the agendas of member of the Min clan and others in the Korean government, who are generally identified as being pro-Chinese. There is good reason for this, as Kim himself identified as a leader of "enlightenment" (K. *kaehwa*, 開化) and strongly supported a closer relationship with Japan and the development of Korea along similar lines as those during the early Meiji period. Nevertheless, for present-day scholars to continue to uncritically accept this binary results in the elision of any space in which to discuss Korean thought during this period, as though Korean thought exists at either pole of a divide between China and Japan. This is a binary that has been additionally defined as between conservatism and progressivism, respectively, which is implicitly assumed in the way that, even to the present, scholars discuss Korean reform movements until Japan's colonization of Korea in the early 1900s. My contention is not so much against the use of these terms to try to understand better the general thrust of an individual's thought but rather the values that are associated with each term that colors how we evaluate something that is "conservative" or "progressive." In their most basic meanings, "conservative" refers to an ideology, or an element within a larger ideology, that gives preference to pre-existing thought, tradition, or ways of life.

“Progressivism,” on the other hand, seeks to break out of existing modes and explore new ways of being. If we are to label an ideology as progressive or conservative, it must be done with the awareness that it is an ideology formed by the individual according to the rationality of that individual. In other words, both conservative and progressive thought develops in response to contemporary circumstances in accord with one’s own values and experiences to promote a certain vision for the future.

The problems with these labels are not inherent in the basic meanings of either term but rather in the way they are used. First, there is a tendency among scholars to give preference to progressivism over conservatism.⁶ For example, the aftermath of Kim Ok-kyun’s progressive 1884 coup has been framed as, because it was rashly carried out, precluded any possibility for Korean progress over the next decade as rigid conservatism set in and thereby laid the foundation for its colonization in 1910.⁷ Secondly, by adhering to the conservative-progressive paradigm, we run the risk of ignoring the complexity of intellectual history, as an individual’s thought generally does not neatly conform to either category. I propose, then, that instead of examining Kim’s thought through the lens of either conservatism or progressivism, that we understand it as representative of an independent development that included mixed elements of both. Influenced by his early education, his studies in *sirhak* learning, and by his later experiences in Japan as he observed the Western modern through the lens of Meiji reforms, it represents not a complete denial of that which was “Chinese” nor a mimesis of “Japanese” reforms. Rather, he drew from

⁶ Although there are certainly studies that examine conservative thought on its own terms, the trend in the historiography has been to focus more on individuals who represent engagement with Western ideas, even when the influence of native discourses is taken into account. For examples of this trend, see Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*; Chu, *Reformer in Modern China*; Cohen, *Between Tradition and Modernity*; and Levenson, *Liang Ch’i-Ch’ao and the Mind of Modern China*.

⁷ This is the basic argument in Ch’oe, “The Kapsin Coup of 1884: A Reassessment.”

both and from Korea's unique experiences to fashion a vision for the future of Korea that, to him, seemed to be the most promising and realizable.

Education in Korean Confucianism

Kim was born into a minor branch of the Andong Kim clan and adopted at a young age by a fellow clan member.⁸ Despite the fact that, as an Andong Kim, he was officially considered to be from Andong, the capital of North Kyōngsang Province in eastern Korea, he was raised near the capital, present-day Seoul, and trained in the Confucian classics in the typical fashion of the sons of the *yangban* elite.⁹ As an adolescent, he likely enrolled in the *Sōnggyun-gwan* (成均館), the national academy in the capital where the majority of successful exam candidates received their higher education.¹⁰ Kim received an education in the dominant school of Neo-Confucian thought that focused on the teachings of the famous Song scholar Zhu Xi (1130-1200), a school so dominant in Korea that “no answer [on the exam] was likely to gain the applicant admission to the official ranks which was not drawn from an orthodox interpretation of his works.”¹¹

On March 12, 1872, when Kim was barely twenty-one years old, he received highest honors on the higher civil service exam, a testament to his literary skills and his understanding of neo-Confucian thought. This positioned him well for a career in governmental service, and shortly afterwards, he took up his first post in the office of the inspector general. Around this time, however, his career took an atypical turn, as he apparently began studying “practical

⁸ For an extensive examination of Kim Ok-kyun's early years, see Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 13-26.

⁹ In the memorial erected for him in Tokyo after his death, he is identified with Andong rather than with the region around present-day Seoul. Pak Sun-chae 白淳在, Sin Il-ch'öl 申一徹, Chin Yong-ha 慎鏞廈, and Yi Kwang-rin 李光麟, eds., “Tonggyōng ūi Kim ssi myo” “東京의 金氏墓,” *Kim-Ok-kyun chōnjip* 金玉均全集 (Seoul: Asia Munhwasa, 1979), 159.

¹⁰ Key P. Yang, and Gregory Henderson, “An Outline of Korean Confucianism: Part II: The Schools of Yi Confucianism,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 18, no. 2 (Feb. 1959): 271.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

learning,” or *sirhak* (實學) learning, in the house of renowned Chosŏn statesman, Pak Kyu-su.¹²

Kim’s reason for turning to *sirhak* learning is unclear, though it is likely that it was related to his relationship with Pak, whom he likely met through the dowager Queen Cho, who was Kim’s aunt and who had once lived on the property where Pak’s house was located. Regardless, it is evident that in this teaching Kim found something that resonated with him, as he became a serious student of this school of thought along with others who would later help him lead the coup.

The origins of the *sirhak* tradition can be traced back to the late sixteenth century, but it came more fully into being in the mid-seventeenth century.¹³ According to In K. Hwang, *sirhak* “combined two major thought currents: the realistic approach of the school of Han Learning (*K’ao-cheng hsueh*) pioneered by the Chinese scholar Ku Yen-wu (1613-1682), and Western Learning which was also introduced from China about the same time.”¹⁴ Both the Chinese and Korean traditions had their roots in the fall of the Ming, with Korea experiencing the double blow of the Manchu invasions and also the establishment of the Qing, with which the Chosŏn court had to negotiate a tributary relationship, as well as the Hideyoshi invasions from Japan from 1592 through 1598.¹⁵ In both of these traditions also, scholars rejected the Neo-Confucian thought that had come to dominate in the intellectual and political circles of both countries as the source of their current respective social ills, the rise of a barbarian dynasty being chief among them, and purported to represent the original interpretations of Confucian teachings from the Han dynasty. Perhaps the most notable difference between Neo-Confucian thought and this new

¹² Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 29-31.

¹³ For an analysis of the *sirhak* school, see Yang and Henderson, “An Outline of Korean Confucianism,” 267-71.

¹⁴ Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*, 80.

¹⁵ For an in-depth study on the Chinese Han Learning, and evidential scholarship more broadly in late imperial China, see Benjamin A. Elman, *From Philosophy to Philology: Intellectual and Social Aspects of Change in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

school of practical learning was the object of study. In Korea, the debates of Neo-Confucianists centered on the metaphysics of being and the “Four-Seven” debate.¹⁶ The terms of this debate and the source of the controversy were outlined briefly by Chǒng Yagyong, a Neo-Confucian scholar of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

Yi Hwang wrote that principle issues the Four Beginnings and material force follows it, but in the case of the Seven Feelings, material force issues them and principle mounts it. Yi I argued instead that material force issues both the Four Beginnings and the Seven Feelings, but principle mounts them. Ever since, scholars in Korea have sided with one or the other of these positions and quarreled with those who took the opposing position. The Two sides have grown so far apart that it seems impossible for them to find any common ground.¹⁷

Though the terms of the debate mean little to most present-day individuals, these concerns were pressing in Korean intellectual circles through the majority of the Chosŏn period. When *sirhak* studies developed in the seventeenth century, then, it was in response to the abstract nature of this metaphysical debate, which *sirhak* scholars “viewed as preoccupied with empty formalism and ritual trivialities.”¹⁸ This countercultural inclination in Korea reflected a philosophical preference for the material world and a deep interest in practical application of knowledge to contemporary problems, particularly in the field of economics, as well as in inquiries into the nature of the world. “They took a critical attitude toward existing social, political, and economic institutions, and recommended practical progressive reforms.”¹⁹ Although *sirhak* remained

¹⁶ For an extended study of the “Four-Seven” debate, see Edward Y.J. Chung, *The Korean Neo-Confuciansim of Yi T'oegye and Yi Yulgok* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995).

¹⁷ Chǒng Yagyong, “What the *i/ki* Debate is Really all About,” trans. Donald Baker, in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol. 2, *From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 269.

¹⁸ Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*, 80.

¹⁹ Ibid.

identified with Confucianism, as Key P. Yang and Gregory Henderson have argued in their survey of Chosŏn era Confucian schools, “the posture of the *Sirhak* tended toward the anti-orthodox (from the Confucian viewpoint), the unconventional,” making *sirhak* “one of the most independent and original” schools of Confucian thought in Korea.²⁰ In K. Hwang’s words, “Practical Learning thought became the basis for opposition politics.”²¹

Kim’s early association with Pak Kyu-su and with *sirhak* studies is central to understanding his later decision to take up arms against the Korean government. Despite his success in the orthodox tradition, around the same time that he received the highest honors in this system, he began studying the unorthodox *sirhak* studies, an intellectual development derived from Korean, Chinese, and Western traditions, under the tutelage of one of the most outspoken opponents of Korea’s continued isolation at mid-century, Pak Kyu-su, grandson of the famous *sirhak* scholar Pak Chi-wŏn.²² Although it was Pak who ordered the destruction of the American ship the *Sherman* in 1866, as Key-Hiuk Kim has demonstrated, it was also Pak who advocated that Korea engage with Japan in the early 1870s in the wake of Japan’s shift to gunboat diplomacy, which was an effort to force Korea to sign a treaty and inaugurate a new trade relationship between the two countries.²³ In fact, according to Martina Deuchler, “Only Pak Kyu-su favored the acceptance of the Japanese letters,” which had been sent in 1873 to announce the formation of the new Meiji government to the Korean government.²⁴ The timing of this conflict with Japan and of Kim’s studies with Pak strongly suggests that, although Kim himself was

²⁰ Yang and Henderson, “An Outline of Korean Confucianism,” 268, 267.

²¹ Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*, 80. A more thorough discussion of the *sirhak* intellectual tradition based on readings of *sirhak* texts from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries is certainly warranted, but it is outside of the scope of the present study to engage in such a discussion, and so I limit my remarks on *sirhak* to observations made by other scholars.

²² My comments here on Kim’s *sirhak* studies under Pak Kyu-su are summarized from Cook’s more detailed account. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 29-30.

²³ Key-Hiuk Kim, *The Last Phase of the East Asian World Order: Korea, Japan, and the Chinese Empire, 1860-1882* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 52, 204-55.

²⁴ Deuchler, *Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys*, 21.

likely not personally involved in the discussions of how to receive Japan's overtures, he was very possibly privy to the development of the dispute as understood by Pak. In short, Kim passed the civil service exam and secured a governmental position at the same time that he began studying an unorthodox school of Confucian thought with the very man who advocated for a pragmatic approach to the Japanese question in the midst of what was arguably the greatest foreign challenge Korea had experienced since the Manchu invasions in the seventeenth century.

In many ways, the roots of the 1884 coup are found in Pak Kyu-su's home and not in Japan, though Japan would later come to play an important role in the development of the coup. Pak's home became a gathering place for like-minded literati who were interested in the answers *sirhak* studies seemed to offer for Korea's contemporary situation, and among these men were not only Kim but also Pak Yŏng-hyo, Hong Yŏng-sik, and Sŏ Kwang-bŏm, four of the five men who led the Enlightenment Party and the 1884 coup. The fifth man, Sŏ Chae-p'il, would join them in 1884 after he returned to Korea from a training program in Japan's military academy. Pak Yŏng-hyo later credited his and Kim's interest in modernization and enlightenment to these meetings, and "they were particularly inspired by Pak Chi-wŏn's idea of the 'equality' of all men."²⁵ They were further struck by the conditions of contemporary Korea:

Since the maladministration of the Taewŏn'gun, I had a feeling of regret and I thought that in future days I must reform the government. Sŏ Kwang-bŏm and Kim Ok-kyun thought the same way... At that time the political situation was terrible. Not only were offices sold but also all the taxes were received by tax collectors who were sent privately

²⁵ Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 31.

by Queen Min. Anyone who was hated by the Min family could not live. After we saw this, we were indignant.²⁶

According to Pak's account, and as was borne out later with the execution of the coup, these men saw a true crisis in their society, and they responded to it through serious study of an unorthodox Korean intellectual tradition that put aside questions about the nature of substance and addressed contemporary problems on the basis of "practical learning."²⁷

During this time, he also became acquainted with a Buddhist monk, Yi Tong-in, who had illegally traveled to Japan, and "it was with Yi...that Kim's thinking about modernization and reform apparently began to be influenced from the direction of Japan rather than China."²⁸ It is evident that, as we will see, due to Kim's experiences in Japan and especially in his relationship with Fukuzawa Yukichi, he evidently cultivated a strong affinity for Japan and for the ideal of the Meiji Restoration. Nevertheless, his background in *sirhak* studies indicates that his interest in reforming Korea stemmed not from a desire to replicate modern Japanese political and intellectual thought in Korea but rather from a deep dissatisfaction with contemporary Korean politics and society. This no doubt shaped his perspective as he travelled to Japan in the early 1880s, arguably making him receptive to the Japanese model of modern development.

Kim Ok-kyun Travels to Japan

²⁶ Qtd. in Ibid. As noted earlier, Cook does not offer any citations for his sources. In his bibliography, he includes two of Pak Yŏng-hyo's writings, "Kaehwa e taehan Sangso," which was published in 1966 in a supplement to *Sindonga* (新東亞) (date of writing is unknown); and "Kapsin Chŏngbyŏn" ("甲申政變"), published in 1926 in *Sinmin* (新民). It is quite possible that these statements reflect Pak's later reflections that likely were shaped by the passing of time and were potentially colored by the Kabo reform movement of 1896 or by Japanese colonial rule, or both. Nevertheless, given the paucity of information about this early period, Pak's statements do offer insight into the development of the Enlightenment Party and their agenda. This party was not a formal organization, but rather should be considered as a political faction within Korean politics.

²⁷ I do not mean here to dismiss contemporary ideologies that continued to engage with neo-Confucian texts and values. This study is a close examination of one approach to the modern world, and as it clearly was based on this unorthodox *sirhak* learning, I have chosen to spotlight this school of thought. A larger and more comprehensive project would examine multiple perspectives among Korean intellectuals during this time and not arbitrarily assign value to any one over but rather examine the ideologies that informed each and the values that each sought to promote.

²⁸ Ibid., 33.

When the “Gentleman’s Sightseeing Group” toured Japan in 1881, Kim Ok-kyun was not included among their number. Nevertheless, he was eager to visit Japan, and early the next year, he received permission from Kojong to travel there unofficially.²⁹ Though the Andong Kim family had diminished in status, throughout Kim’s early career until 1884, he apparently maintained a remarkably close relationship with the king. Kim held a mid-rank position in the censorate, which allowed him regular access to the king.³⁰ Also, Pak Yŏng-hyo was a relative of the king, and he developed a very close relationship with Kim, which likely also allowed him to develop a close relationship with the king. Finally, until the coup, unlike his father the Taewongun, Kojong was willing to develop relationships with Japan and the West and proved to be quite sympathetic to many of the ideas of the reformers.³¹ These combined factors formed the background against which a young man like Kim Ok-kyun was able to receive the king’s permission to leave the country.

Kim and Sŏ Kwang-bŏm arrived in Pusan to leave for Japan in mid-March. A March 15 article published in the Japanese-run Pusan-based newspaper, the *Chōsen Shimpō*, discussed Kim’s upcoming travels:

The famous Kim Ok-kyun of Korea’s enlightenment party, now by order of the king, in preparation for crossing to Japan, recently came down from Seoul and is presently staying at the lodging of the old government office. The story is that he is going by order of the king, but we have to obtain more details. Kim’s entourage is said to be made up of several tens of people.³²

Two days later, another article was published in the same paper:

²⁹ For a detailed account of Kim’s first trip to Japan, see *Ibid.*, 37-49. Again, the details I provide are summaries of what Cook provides in his book. Unless noted, however, the arguments made are my own.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

³¹ Ch’oe, “The Kapsin Coup of 1884,” 11-2.

³² Qtd. in Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 39.

The purpose of Kim's trip to Japan is not just to look at our country's present-day circumstances. Rather, by order of the king, we believe that he intends to have preliminary talks with concerned high officials about borrowing money for Korea. Anyhow, Kim is a very talented and strong-minded individual and a leader of Korea's enlightenment party.³³

Several points of interest emerge from these two selections. First is that the enlightenment party is mentioned twice. This indicates that not only had a faction formed that was identified with the idea of "enlightenment," itself an idea directly associated with modernity developed in Japan in the post-Restoration period, but also this faction had gained sufficient notice so as to attract the attention of a Japanese newspaper in Pusan. Secondly, Kim is clearly identified as a leader of this faction. Finally, we see that, at least according to the newspaper editors, Kim would travel to Japan in order to inquire about borrowing money from the Japanese government. This first trip to Japan was unofficial, which is to say that, though he had the king's permission and apparently no small number of attendants, he was not sent to conduct government affairs.³⁴ Therefore, while Kojong may have personally asked Kim to sound this matter out, Kim was not officially sent to Japan to begin to negotiate a loan. Nevertheless, as we will see later, the question of obtaining financing to enable the enactment of reforms was foremost in Kim's mind throughout his life, including during his exile after the coup. From these points, we can draw the conclusion that, even though scant documentation remains from this time period that involves Kim Ok-kyun, the themes that were prominent later in his life—enlightenment and financing—had already taken root before his first trip to Japan, and he had already risen to a position of acknowledged leadership in these areas.

³³ Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37-8.

After this initial unofficial trip, Kim traveled to Japan two other times on official business before the 1884 coup. The first of these official trips came shortly after his return to Korea in August 1882.³⁵ While he was away, the 1882 military uprising had just occurred in July. In the aftermath of the uprising, Korea and Japan negotiated the Treaty of Chemulp'o, which stipulated that an envoy mission be sent to Japan. Pak Yŏng-hyo was selected to be the plenipotentiary envoy, and Kim was ordered to accompany the mission. In fact, whether it was because of a level of travel exhaustion remaining from his first trip, or perhaps because he wished to appear modest, he initially attempted to decline the order to go.³⁶ This proved impossible, however, and soon he returned to Japan as a member of an official mission.

Despite serving in at least a semi-official capacity on the mission, it seems that Kim did not spend a great deal of time with the mission but instead attended to other affairs in Tokyo and other regions of Japan.³⁷ Though he was apparently not directly engaged in the negotiations, it seems that, given the above account of his being ordered to join the mission, he was there on official business. During this second trip, he was tasked with exploring possibilities for procuring a loan from the Japanese government. William G. Aston, who was the British consul at Kobe at this time who was later marginally involved in the planning of the 1884 coup, spoke with Kim on the ship en route to Japan, and later wrote to Sir Harry S. Parkes, British minister in Tokyo, saying,

³⁵ For Cook's full analysis of Kim's second trip to Japan, see *Ibid.*, 51-71.

³⁶ *Kapsin illok* opens with this account. Kim does not give his reasons for attempting to decline the order. Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, *Kapsin illok* 甲申日錄, in *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, 23.

³⁷ Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 61. In fact, Cook goes so far as to argue that Kim was an unofficial member of the mission because Pak did not include his name on the registry of the mission given to Japanese officials upon their arrival. Nevertheless, the aforementioned account in *Kapsin illok* indicates that not only was Kim ordered to accompany the mission, he was not even able to decline the order. I suspect this discrepancy is due to the likelihood that Kim was sent to Japan not to deal with matters concerning the 1882 incident but to make inquiries about raising a loan for Korea.

Kim Ok-kiun, whom you have already met [in Tokyo the previous summer], is unquestionably much the ablest and shrewdest man of the part of Koreans who came over by the “Meiji Maru.” He is, however, very unpopular in his own country and is obliged to keep in the background and exercise through others the considerable influence which he possesses...He spoke of negotiating a loan of one million dollars with which to pay the indemnity to Japan. This would be better, he said, than to hand over their Custom’s Revenues to Japanese control. Although he holds no official position in connection with the present Legation, he has the entire confidence of the Ministers... Kim has a sufficiently good opinion of his own abilities. He said to me that there were only three men in Korea who were competent to form an important decision and to act upon it without reference to China – viz. the King, Pak [Yŏng-hyo], and Kim himself...³⁸

In *Kapsin illok*, Kim relates that he discussed the possibility of borrowing twenty thousand *yen* with Inoue Kaoru, who at that time was serving in the foreign affairs office.³⁹ Though he was not successful in acquiring the full amount, he did negotiate a loan for 170,000 *yen*.⁴⁰ Not only was Kim ordered to accompany the mission in order to explore the possibilities for a loan, but he had also already given this matter a significant amount of thought. We also see here the intimation that Kim was already falling out of favor in government circles in Korea, though there is no reason to believe that, at this point, the relationship between him and Kojong was similarly strained. Finally, there are suggestions here of Kim’s opposition to what he would refer to in the *Kapsin illok* as the Qing party (K. *Ch’ŏng p’a*, 清派, K. *Ch’ŏng bae*, 清輩, or K. *Ch’ŏng dang* 清黨), indicating that by this point, the lines had already been drawn between those who favored

³⁸ Qtd. in *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁹ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 23-4.

⁴⁰ Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, Pak Yŏng-hyo 朴泳孝, Yu Kil-chun 俞吉濬, Sŏ Chae-p’il 徐載弼, *Chōsen kaikaha senshū* 朝鮮開化派選集, ed. Tsukiashi Tatsuhiko 月脚達彦 (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2014), 10.

reform and those who were identified with trying to preserve ties with the Qing. It is entirely likely that by this point, the reform agenda was already strongly influenced by Japanese reforms. At least at the level of discourse, Korea's future was possibly being framed in terms of a choice between China and Japan, though as I argue later Kim's intellectual and political agenda was more layered than this.

Kim returned to Korea in March 1883, and he found the conditions remarkably different than when he had left Korea the first time in early 1882. The situation in Korea looked increasingly bleak by 1883. After the coup, Kim looked back to this period and gave a caustic account of corruption between Min officials and Paul George von Möllendorff, who had been hired on the recommendation of Li Hongzhang to serve as "inspector general of Korean customs and advisor to the Korean Foreign Office," allowing Li to exert considerable influence in Korea.⁴¹ The Japanese who had accompanied Pak Yŏng-hyo back to Seoul to serve as technicians, returned in despair to Japan. One man lamented, "The state of affairs being what it is, Korea's independence is virtually hopeless."⁴² Kim found the financial situation bleak as well, and convinced Kojong to allow him to pledge whaling and lumbering rights in Korea as security for a loan.⁴³ Tasked with this mission, he set off again for Japan in June 1883.⁴⁴ This time, he went with the intention to actually secure a loan, rather than simply inquire about the possibilities. During the eleven months he was in Japan, however, the Japanese government was following a policy of retrenchment, and money was not easily available. Also, in the wake of the 1882 incident, China's position on the peninsula was greatly strengthened, and Japan had no option but to lay aside its imperial agenda on the continent for the time being. Kim therefore met no

⁴¹ Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea*, 115. On Kim's comments about von Möllendorff, see Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 24-5.

⁴² Qtd. in Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 75.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ For Cook's account of this third trip, see Ibid., 73-100.

success in receiving a loan. Kim went home from this third trip despondent and perhaps already making plans for drastic action. Indeed, one Japanese, Iida Sanji,

Remarked unequivocally that Kim left Japan with a plan for bold and decisive action already in mind. Handing Iida a bamboo screen on which he had written a poem, Kim allegedly said, “Everything seems to be going well now, but we can’t tell whether we will succeed or fail. If things go well, I will send you a telegram. At that time, please come quickly. I think our period of separation will be short, but please take this as a keepsake.”⁴⁵

I quote this at length not only because of the suggestion that Kim had already begun planning a drastic course of action before he had left Japan, but also because of the personal message Kim left with Iida. Iida Sanji was a protégé of Fukuzawa Yukichi, who had supervised a group of Korean students who had come to study at Fukuzawa’s Keio University in 1883.⁴⁶ The friendship between Kim and Iida evidenced in this “keepsake” points towards the very personal nature of the connections that formed Kim’s social life and that would have a profound influence on his intellectual and political development. I conclude this chapter, then, with the man who played one of the most prominent and significant roles in Kim’s life and his views on the modern world: Fukuzawa Yukichi.

Kim Ok-kyun and Fukuzawa Yukichi

Though Kim did not mention Fukuzawa Yukichi at any great length in any of his extant writings, his friendship with Fukuzawa is well attested in secondary scholarship.⁴⁷ Even in these works, the fine details of this relationship are not very clear. Kim met Fukuzawa on his first trip

⁴⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁶ Michael Weiner, *The Origins of the Korean Community in Japan, 1910-1923* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989), 118.

⁴⁷ Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*; and Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*. Kim’s relationship with Fukuzawa is discussed multiple times throughout both of these studies.

to Japan, a connection that was “established through an an [*sic*] ‘enlightened’ monk, Yi Tong-in.”⁴⁸ It is impossible to say the extent to which Fukuzawa influenced Kim’s thoughts on Korea’s future in East Asia and the modern world.⁴⁹ Although it goes too far to credit Fukuzawa with the source of Kim’s thinking on modernization, it is very likely that, Kim already having become interested in reforming Korea along Western lines, Fukuzawa was able to strongly influence the ways that Kim thought about reform. This certainly seems to have been Fukuzawa’s intention, as he had already begun to imagine Japan as the leader in East Asia by this time. Among their topics of discussion seem to have been the necessity of separating Korea from China; the necessity of political parties to carry out reform; and Fukuzawa’s ideas on independence, civilization, progress, and egalitarianism.⁵⁰ Additionally, it is quite evident that Fukuzawa strongly encouraged Kim and the other Koreans with whom he met to actively reform Korea, though the extent to which he was personally involved in the planning for the 1884 coup is also unclear. Quite possibly for his own interest in seeing Japan replace China as the foremost imperial power in East Asia, Fukuzawa strongly supported the efforts of these young reformers to repudiate China and to follow Japan’s path of modernization, though the extent to which he advocated the type of violent revolution that was pursued in December 1884 is unclear.⁵¹ Though this may have been partially based on Fukuzawa’s own convictions as a self-avowed proponent of enlightenment, there is certainly at least a hint of imperial interest here as well, though there is no way of knowing the extent to which Kim was aware of such an interest.

⁴⁸ Hwang, *The Korean Reform Movement of the 1880s*, 83. Yi Tong-in is a fascinating figure. He was responsible for exposing Kim to books on Western learning, and he also sought to play a leading role in Korea’s modernization. However, little is known about him or about his death. According to Hwang, “soon after Yi was appointed to a newly established state office (for managing ‘modernization’ programs), he was kidnapped and to this day his end remains a mystery. It was suspected that he was murdered by the pro-Chinese (anti-Japanese) element,” pp. 85-6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵¹ Cook goes so far as to argue that “Fukuzawa took advantage of Kim and used him as his tool.” Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 223.

Even though the details remain unclear, Kim's relationship with Fukuzawa should not be discounted, and nor should the possibility that, in the wake of their meetings, Kim's own thought developed in a direction different from Fukuzawa's own. In short, Kim's views of the world developed out of a lifetime of education, networks, and personal observations that were centrally connected with Korea's situation at mid-century and also the nature of the competing Chinese and Japanese imperialisms in Korea. Beyond international politics, Kim's thought also developed in a transnational network of personal connections, as his relationship with Fukuzawa, as well as with other Japanese, clearly reflects. That his thought developed and existed in a transnational network only serves to underscore the syncretism of his program, a syncretism that was made possible by Korea's particular position in East Asia at this moment in history, as Kim drew from multiple sources, both indigenous and foreign, to understand the world and imagine a future for Korea therein.

CHAPTER IV

A KOJONG RESTORATION? THE DEVELOPMENT OF A REFORM AGENDA

On the evening of December 4, 1884, members of the highest levels of Korea's government gathered at the newly built post office in the capital for a celebration of its opening. Little did the guests know that the celebration was but a ruse to gather Korea's most essential politicians in one location to facilitate the violent overthrow of the current government by murdering Min clan-supported ministers. Around 10 o'clock, a fire broke out at a nearby palace, disrupting the celebration and signaling the beginning of the coup. In the ensuing panic, six ministers were killed, many other partygoers were killed or injured, and King Kojong was kidnapped and brought to the Japanese legation. Thus began the period of "three days over all under heaven" (K. *samil ch'ŏnha* 三日天下), the brief rule of the Korean government by the Enlightenment Party. On the third day, the Chinese troops in the capital had organized a counterattack, killing one leader, Hong Yŏng-sik, and forcing the reformers and the members of the Japanese legation to flee for their lives to Japan.

Though it ended unexpectedly after only three days, the coup was the product of many months of planning and the consequence of many more years of historical and personal development that we examined in the previous two chapters. Historians generally attribute the coup to the strong influence of Japan and the West on the Enlightenment Party, led by Kim Ok-kyun in particular, and also his four co-conspirators, Pak Yŏng-hyo, Sŏ Kwang-bŏm, Sŏ Chae-p'il, and Hong Yŏng-sik, who wanted to see Korea open to the Western world along similar lines as the Japanese after the Meiji Restoration. Feeling their political program to be impossible in the current oppressive climate in which the conservative Min clan operated only to keep itself in power and sought closer ties with what they saw as the equally backwards Chinese government,

and also fearing for their lives, these men developed a plan to remove the Min from power and set the country along the path of modern reforms. Not only did they underestimate the strength of the Chinese forces in the capital, but they also overestimated the moral strength of their program. Not only did few Koreans have any way of knowing the goals behind the program to kill the majority of high-level officials and kidnap the king, but also to the extent that individuals did know about the coup, they associated it with Japanese villainy. In short, it was a coup without any apparent popular support outside of the circle of conspirators and their allies.

In this chapter, I turn from a narrative history of Kim's early life to an examination of Kim's extant pre-coup writings to understand the development of his political and intellectual program that ultimately led to the coup. I argue that, rather than seeing Kim's 1884 program as an instance of a Japanese-style reform, as it is generally understood, we instead see his agenda as one that was informed by the history outlined in the previous two chapters, namely the larger global and regional developments of nineteenth century East Asia, as well as his own education in Neo-Confucianism, his later training in the unorthodox *sirhak* school, and his experiences in Japan set against the political upheavals in Korea in the early 1880s. While I do not deny the importance of Japan's Meiji Restoration on the development of Kim's intellectual and political agenda for the 1884 coup, I argue that this is a program that, though informed by Chinese and Japanese experiences and contemporary politics, represents a distinct development that occurred in the particular context of late-nineteenth-century Korea.

I begin with a close analysis of the only two documents that remain of Kim's writings before the coup to offer suggestions as to the substance of his plans for Korea's future. In moving away from the daily activities that led up to the coup, which are featured heavily in the historiography of the coup, and focusing solely on what we can glean of Kim's intellectual and

political program from these two earlier documents, we see more of the substance of Kim's vision for Korea's future. We see a man deeply interested in Korea's economic future who promoted a change in governmentality in order to preserve the people's health and order society to realize economic goals. We also see a man who, even though he planned an armed rebellion against the government, was interested not in destroying the monarchical system but rather in restoring the king to his former position in what would have possibly been termed the "Kojong Restoration" had the coup been successful, an echo, I argue, of seventeenth-century debates about the relationship of Korea to China after the fall of the Ming. The image of Kim that emerges is that of a man interested first and foremost in Korea's independence, an independence that he found so endangered in 1884 that he planned his ill-fated coup. Although this image appears on the surface to be a model of progressivism, I complicate it by looking at Kim's unique synthesis of traditional Confucian thought and new ideas about the modern world that were strongly influenced by Japan. In this we can see the development of an approach to the modern world that is derivative neither of Chinese nor Japanese thought but rather has at its origin a fundamentally regional history.

A Korean Approach to the Modern World: Kim Ok-kyun's Pre-Coup Intellectual Agenda

Although Kim Ok-kyun was a prolific writer, the passage of time has left us only a handful of his articles. Nevertheless, two of his earliest writings shed valuable light on his intellectual program for Korea. The first, "A Proposal for the Governance of Roads," was completed on December 14, 1882.¹ Initially presented to King Kojong, who distributed it to his

¹ I will hereafter refer to this document as "the 'Proposal.'" The original is found in Kim Ok-kyun, "Ch'ido yangnon" "治道略論, in *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, 3-19. The document is written in Classical Chinese. Cook has provided a translation of this document, which I will use here, as I have found it to be a reliable translation. Cook, "Appendix B. 'Kim Ok-kyun's Memorial on Modernization' and 'A Short Essay on the Construction of Roads,'" in *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 238-244. I have used my own translation of the title, however, as I believe it is the more literal translation.

ministers, and later printed in periodicals in Japan, this document is a rather lengthy exposition on how to maintain roads in Korea and why this is necessary for Korea's modernization. The second one is a letter Kim wrote to Japanese politician Gotō Shōjirō, and that was guaranteed by Fukuzawa Yukichi, sometime while he was in Japan between June 1883 and May 1884 for the third and final time before the coup. This document, "Suggestion for a Reformation of Korea," quickly outlines the ways that Korea's government needs to be reformed, as well as the need for funds, ammunition, and manpower from Japan.² The conclusions that can be drawn from these documents are necessarily provisional, as both the "Proposal" and the "Suggestion" are quite short; there was one to two years between the writing of each, a period in which domestic and international politics changed drastically; and they are addressed to entirely different audiences. Nevertheless, as the only two pre-coup articles written by Kim that remain, they provide essential evidence to understanding the intellectual content of and the motivations behind the 1884 coup.³ One other document that relates to the coup, the *Kapsin illok*, is also available for study, but I am deliberately excluding it from this chapter, as Kim wrote it after the failure of the coup in the first few months of his exile in Japan. Therefore, while it is a valuable source for other considerations of the coup, it cannot reliably be taken to reflect Kim's thoughts and motives prior to the coup.

Kim Ok-kyun wrote the "Proposal" during his second trip to Japan as an unofficial member of the delegation sent to Japan following the 1882 mutiny. The pretext for writing the

² I will hereafter refer to this document as "the 'Suggestion.'" Kim Ok-kyun, "Chosŏn kaehyŏk ŭigyŏn sŏ" "朝鮮改革意見書," in *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, 109-19. I have not found a translation for this document. Although the document itself is written in Classical Chinese, I have primarily relied on the transcription provided by the editors, as the original handwriting is often indistinct, though where the original and the transcription differ, I translate the character in the original.

³ Kim apparently wrote one other document, "箕和近事," prior to the coup in 1882 during his first trip to Japan. This would be an invaluable document to study, as it likely contains some of Kim's first reflections on Meiji Japan, but unfortunately, the document has yet to be found. (I hesitate to translate the title, as its meaning is not immediately apparent, and without knowing the contents, any figurative translation of the title is not possible.) Paek Sun-chae, Sin Il-ch'ŏl, Chin Yong-ha, and Yi Kwang-rin, eds., "Haeje" "解題," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, viii.

“Proposal,” as Kim outlines in the preface, was that he met with the plenipotentiary and vice envoys, Pak Yŏng-hyo and Kim Man-sik, respectively, and in their meeting they discussed the construction of roads. After they asked Kim Ok-kyun to make a suggestion on the matter, he chided,

I said that we need great changes in our country. I reminded the two envoys that they had been burdened with a great responsibility when they were sent abroad, and that when they returned to Korea and reported on their mission, they should make great suggestions for the future of the nation. I told them that this was their responsibility and asked how they could focus their attention only on the construction of roads.⁴

Pak Yŏng-hyo and Kim Man-sik then convinced him that the future of Korea rested on agriculture, and that agriculture depended fundamentally on improved roads and infrastructure. Kim Ok-kyun then undertook to write this memorial to King Kojong to offer a suggestion as to how to improve Korea’s roadways in order to realize a more prosperous future for Korea. The “Proposal” is therefore important not only for Kim’s specific discourse on infrastructure but also on how this discourse reveals elements of the future that he imagined for Korea.

The preface of the “Proposal” addresses such concerns as the hygienic imperative for improved road infrastructure and government, and the ways improvements in agriculture will result in significant economic development. Kim himself did not articulate this latter point, though its inclusion in his preface as a persuasive argument for the need for improved roads indicates his agreement with it. This argument, offered by one of the envoys, gestures at an interest in market-based economic developments in Korea based on a strong agricultural base:

Even if the crops are grown well, however, if the distribution system is bad, they cannot be transported from one place to another. This is why construction of roads is of first

⁴ Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 239.

importance. If we have good roads, one man can do the work of ten. *The other nine can transfer their abilities to other tasks. People who formerly had nothing to do will then be regularly employed. This will contribute to both individual and national welfare.*⁵

Even though this was not Kim's own statement, its inclusion in the preface, as well as his own involvement in procuring Japanese loans and in serving as the Second Minister in the Board of Finance in the reform government, indicate that Korea's fiscal future was of deep interest to Kim. The proposal that they improve agricultural methods in order to create surplus labor that can work in "other tasks" suggests that the envoys first of all placed value on moving Korea away from a subsistence-based agricultural economy, and second that they may have been open to or even imagined the development of the market structures generally associated with capitalism. There is not enough information here to know exactly what they thought about capitalism or a market economy, but it is evident that they are interested in reforms that would result in economic growth and that are significantly different than the subsistence-based system advocated by many contemporary officials.

A second point from the preface relating to Kim's program for Korea is the question of hygiene. References to the unhygienic conditions of Korea's roads from this period can be found in sources from non-Korean observers.⁶ Korea's international reputation for being unhygienic was clearly of concern to Kim, as he wrote,

Now, in all nations of the West, there is great technical progress, but medical science has been put in the first place. This is because it is concerned with the lives of the people. In our country, from public buildings to the houses of common people, facilities are dirty

⁵ Ibid., 239-40. Emphasis mine.

⁶ See Duus, *The Abacus and the Sword*, 397-423; and Samuel Hawley, ed., *Inside the Hermit Kingdom: The 1884 Korea Travel Diary of George Clayton Foulk* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

and crowded. Drainage ditches are dirty, blocked, and give off a bad smell which no one can stand. Foreigners ridicule such things.⁷

Kim contrasted the current situation with that of the ancestors who “appointed special officials to assume responsibility for building and repairing the roads and bridges for irrigation control.”⁸

Here, we see a narrative of the past and present that is similar to contemporaneous Chinese narratives, namely the narrative of descent from an idealized past that necessitates present action in order to realize a revitalized future. This future, as is suggested by the above contrast with the interest of Western powers in matters of hygiene, is one that incorporates medical science and modern hygienic methods to ensure the health of a population that, as he outlined in the proposal itself, needs to be ordered and instructed in order to condition the behavior of its members in a way that will promote national prosperity.⁹

The body of the “Proposal” is an outline of seventeen points, which can be roughly divided into two parts. The first is Kim’s suggestion for the initial reconstruction of roads and hygienic systems. This involved hiring foreign technicians, who were already selected and who accompanied Pak when he returned to Korea, as well as constructing pipes for sewage systems and installing toilets in individual homes. The second, which is comprised of the majority of the seventeen points, concerns the bureaucratic structures for maintaining a modern road and hygienic system. This extended far beyond the simple creation of offices and appointment of

⁷ Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 239.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ This was a vision of Korea’s future that directly engaged with global discourses of modernity and hygiene as laid out in Ruth Rogaski’s famous work, *Hygienic Modernity*. Kim’s use of the word *wisaeng* (衛生), which is the focus of Rogaski’s study, is interesting, because it indicates that Kim was using this new vocabulary of health that was gaining traction in Japan during this period. One significant difference is that Rogaski’s work is interested in the imposition of such modern standards directly through imperial rule, while Kim is here advocating similar reforms (minus the hypodermic needles) outside of direct imperial rule. Nevertheless, as this discourse developed in the context of Western imperialism and came to represent a universal value of modernity, Kim’s own advocacy of a type of hygienic modernity must be understood as part of a larger history of imperialism. Indeed, that Kim articulated such a vision represents the extent to which this value had gained universal currency, both in Meiji Japan and also among members of the Korean elite. Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

officials to oversee the implementation of road and hygiene programs. Kim advocated the establishment of a detailed population census, arguing that in Europe and America, “They keep track of the sex, births, deaths, and movement of the populace,” an “indispensable procedure for administering a country.”¹⁰ He also directly involved the population itself in the success of this program. Although, as he noted in his conclusion, “these regulations should be carried out first by the nobility, not the common people,” nevertheless, the lives of the “common people” are implicated in every step.¹¹ This is a program that will guard the health of the people, an indication of a shift in governmentality to a “right to make live” system, as Takashi Fujitani has termed Foucault’s understanding of the change in government structures from the “pre-modern” to the “modern” state.¹² In this system, the state assumes the responsibility of keeping the population alive in order to maximize the labor resources available to the state and society. It is also a program that requires the complicity of the people in the execution of their own subjection to this new governmental system. As for Kim’s intentions, he no doubt was motivated to advance this program for the sake of the people, as well as for the state. Nevertheless, as the program he suggested involves the posting of regulations “for the information and guidance of the citizens” and a system of punishments,¹³ both of which are essential to conditioning the behavior of

¹⁰ Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 243. The correlation between the census and the modern state has long been recognized by scholars, perhaps most prominent of whom is Benedict Anderson in his famous study of the development of nationalism. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 163-85. This is true in the development of modern imperial states, as well, as is evident in Bernard S. Cohn’s work on colonialism and knowledge in British India. Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: the British in India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹¹ Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 244.

¹² Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011).

¹³ Kim did not give many details concerning the type of punishments he envisioned, but it seems that he at least considered manual labor as way to recompense for violating the regulations he proposed. For instance, he wrote, “Violators should be punished according to the degree of violation in a manner similar to that now in force with regard to cleaning up snow in the winter time.” Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 241.

citizens in a modern system, there is a clear sense of a modern governmentality that, as Foucault demonstrates, is less than benevolent.¹⁴

Although the “Proposal” seems to be primarily concerned with improving the conditions of roads, it is clear that much more is at stake, and that Kim’s vision of a modern future for Korea as seen in this one document goes far beyond Korean infrastructure. There are two imperatives for the reformation of roads. First is for the development of an agriculture-based economy that generates surplus labor to be used in other economic sectors. This indicates that Kim and the envoys were interested not simply in fiscal solvency but also in future economic growth. Second, one problem with the roads was the significant amounts of waste that had accumulated on them, endangering the health of the people and making Korea an international laughing stock. Suggesting that Korea, too, should be “concerned with the lives of the people,” Kim argues for a bureaucratic implementation of a new hygienic system undergirded by an entirely new system for gaining knowledge on individuals’ private lives through a census and by a system in which their behavior is conditioned to align with the state’s goals for road use and hygienic systems. Essentially what Kim is envisioning is, in Foucauldian terms, an entirely new governmentality that is based on an extensive bureaucratic system designed to coordinate the activities of citizens and officials alike to promote economic growth in the name of the financial and biological welfare of the people.

Written one to two years later, the “Suggestion” is a dramatically different document than the “Proposal.” While the “Proposal” is premised on a sense of optimism for the future and a belief that the program as outlined can be achieved, the “Suggestion” speaks mostly of what is wrong with Korea: its rampant corruption and the need for dramatic structural change. The force

¹⁴ Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 242. For Foucault’s primary thesis on governmentality, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Modern Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Random House, 1995).

of these critiques far surpassed his earlier suggestion to create government offices to promote hygienic conditions. This difference can be accounted for in multiple ways. One possibility is that, as the “Proposal” was addressed directly to King Kojong to be delivered by the plenipotentiary envoy, Pak Yŏng-hyo, Kim was simply not in a position to advocate revolution. When he wrote confidentially to Gotō Shōjirō, however, he was at much greater liberty to reveal his dissatisfaction with the Korean government and belief in the need to “sweep away” the current officials.¹⁵ Another explanation is simply that Kim’s own perspective had changed in the intervening year(s). While he had been away from Korea for the better part of two years before he wrote the “Proposal,” in the time that he spent in Korea before his third trip to Japan, he surely noticed changes in Korean politics since the 1882 mutiny that ran counter to the vision he had expressed in the “Proposal.” Therefore, by the time he wrote the “Suggestion” he was entertaining the possibility of armed rebellion that he would not have advocated when he wrote the “Proposal.”

Regardless of the reason, there is a distinct difference in tone between the two documents, as well as a difference in the content addressed. While the “Proposal” focuses on a constructive plan for the future, the “Suggestion” focuses primarily on Korea’s problems and the role of the Japanese in helping address these problems, though no specific plan is articulated. There are many technical problems with the document, making a complete translation unrealistic, as it seems that some characters are missing while others make little sense in context, indicating that there are likely graphical errors in the text. Nevertheless, the general meaning of the text is quite clear. Kim begins with a discussion of the decline of Korea to its present lamentable state, as well as a suggestion for how to amend this situation, which includes a restoration of King Kojong:

¹⁵ Kim, “Chosŏn kaehyŏk ŭigyŏn sŏ,” 111.

Chosŏn, one country for these 400 years, has not had reform through use of arms neither had any famine, and from high to low the people's hearts have been content [and at ease]. Very recently, there is unexpectedly a case in which every country under heaven [is ordering society and then entering into contracts], arriving at the path of progress... Despite the brilliance of the king, this [his brilliance] has been cut short by the accumulation of corrupt customs these 400 years. It is the case that there must be a great and expansive reform of the government. Afterward, the king's power can be honored and the people's lives be protected.¹⁶

Although several characters in the next part of the text are indistinct, it is evident that Kim understood the king to be concerned, and he suggested that the king confided this to him personally. He continued by describing Korea's vassalage to China and proposing that, "In casting aside the fetters [of vassalage], we will be able to stand uniquely and be a completely self-governing country."¹⁷ He then arrived at what seems to be his central purpose for writing—how to reform Korea's government. He offered two solutions. The first was, if the king issued a "secret decree," the reform could be carried out peacefully, and the second was if the king offered his "tacit approval," force could be used.¹⁸ If this second option was to be carried out, Japanese personnel must be employed, which brought Kim to the next order of business, namely procuring a loan, armaments, and steamships from Japan, though it seems that this was an independent request from his suggestion that Japanese forces may be employed if the second option is pursued. He completed his letter with a proposed contract between the two men, including bold statements such as, "The feeling of righteousness that bind you and me together,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ I here employ the translations Cook uses for 密勅 and 密意 as "secret decree" and "tacit approval," respectively in his brief discussion of this document. Although these are not completely literal translations of either phrase, they are the clearest options available in English, I believe. Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 94.

already there are naught but the four words of ‘live together, die together,’” and he concluded with leaving the decision about the matter up to Gotō.¹⁹ Despite the idiosyncrasies of the letter, it is evident that at this point, Kim was at least considering the use of force, and was directly calling for Japanese help to realize his plan for Korea.

Since the purpose of this letter was to request aid from Japan and probably to also sound out the possibility of Japanese support should Kim and the Enlightenment Party choose to use force to “brush aside” those who were “greedy for power and [were] carelessly lax towards their contemporaries,” it is not surprising that Kim did not articulate as clear a program for Korea as he did in the “Proposal.”²⁰ Nevertheless, there is some indication of his intellectual program embedded in the document, primarily his continued support for King Kojong and his promotion of Korean independence. In the “Proposal,” he made numerous references to the king’s role in upholding the country, expressing a continued veneration for the king. This can easily be explained by the fact that the memorial was addressed to the king, and so it is possible that those were merely empty words. Here, however, we have a clear statement made privately that Kim remained very loyal to the king, and in fact, it seemed to him that corruption had sullied the king’s position and reputation. If the corrupt ministers were swept away, however, then the king could be restored to his former glory. Therefore, Kim’s interest is not in social or even political revolution. It is closer in character to Japan’s Meiji Restoration. Through the restoration of Kojong’s authority and the appointment of ministers who would reject corruption and factional infighting and focus on the reformation of the country, Korea could gain its independence in the modern world, and thereby pursue the vision of a modern bureaucracy and economic system that Kim outlined in the “Proposal.”

¹⁹ Kim, “Chosŏn kaehyŏk ūigyŏn sŏ,” 113, 115-6.

²⁰ Ibid., 111.

Kim's interest in Korean independence and in a strong monarchy, what I have termed as an attempt to carry out a "Kojong Restoration," was no doubt related to the Meiji Restoration of 1868. I argue, however, that it was also tied to a longer Korean discourse on kingship vis-à-vis the Qing Empire in that the assertion of a strong monarchy in Korea was discursively tied to a corresponding independence from China. As discussed in Chapter Two, when the Han Chinese Ming Dynasty capitulated to the Manchu Qing Dynasty in 1644, both the Chinese and the Korean worldviews were deeply shaken. One of the ways this was manifest in Korea was in debates over the person of the king. Until 1897, Korea's sovereign was referred to as a king, as this was a position lower than the Chinese emperor.²¹ This was a symbolic deferral to Chinese suzerainty, and as a result, the position of the Korean king came to represent Korea's position within the sinosphere. It so happened that shortly after the Ming fell and while Korean officials engaged in a fierce debate over the extent to which the Chosŏn state should defer to the new Qing Dynasty, King Hyojong (r. 1649-1659) died.²² Hyojong was not an eldest son, but because his older brother had died before inheriting the throne, Hyojong became king. The question arose over whether his stepmother should mourn Hyojong's death as that of an eldest son, of a younger son, or of a sovereign. As Jahyun Kim Haboush argues, the oddity of this discussion was that it even occurred at all, and that is why this episode so clearly illuminates the tensions over Korean identity during this period.²³ The full history of the debate is too complicated to discuss here, but in essence, the question came down to whether or not Hyojong should be considered a legitimate ruler due to his position as a younger son. Under a strict interpretation of Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucian ideology, the answer was no. Yet, after much debate, the argument that Hyojong was

²¹ In 1897, the Korean Empire was formed, with Kojong assuming the new title of emperor.

²² This is a summary of the central argument set forth in Haboush, "Constructing the Center," in *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 46.

indeed a legitimate ruler eventually won. This “ritual controversy,” Haboush argues, “represented a site on which different epistemes of the world and self constructed by seventeenth-century Korean intellectuals clashed,” a battle that grew directly from the rise of the Qing, as well as the Hideyoshi invasions at the end of the previous century.²⁴ One result of this, and the one that is seen in the debate over how to mourn Hyojong’s death, was that Korea no longer looked outside to China for a source of authority. Instead, by breaking with the principles set down by Zhu Xi and posthumously granting Hyojong the full ritual ceremonies due to a legitimate sovereign, Korean officials at this time “vested the Korean king with the task of creating the new order” consciously distinct from the new Chinese order.²⁵

In essence, the tensions over identity, either a Korean identity or that of a vassal state, was fought over the body of the king, and in the mid-seventeenth century, the victorious party was that which advocated an epistemological break from China as ruled by the Manchus, though not, of course, from Confucianism. Kim’s advocacy for a strong monarchy can be understood in much the same way, I argue. The question of the position of the Korean king in relation to the Chinese empire was arguably what Chang Hao refers to as an “internal dialogue,” an intellectual discussion that stretched across the centuries and that was not generated by the coming of Western imperialism.²⁶ When Kim argued for a strong monarchy that necessarily represented an estrangement from China, he was engaging with this internal dialogue and asserting the polemic that Korea should not be under Chinese sovereignty. I argue also, however, that the terms of the debate had changed from the seventeenth century, and perhaps this can be attributed at least in part to the ideals of the Meiji Reformation and of national sovereignty under international law. Kim was not arguing that Korea needed to be the vanguard of Confucianism, which was one of

²⁴ Ibid., 86.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Chang, *Chinese Intellectuals in Crisis*, 9-10.

the issues at stake in the earlier debate. Instead, his advocacy for a strong monarchy functioned to assert that Korea once again break away from Chinese-dominated epistemologies in favor of that of “enlightenment,” which was a deliberate attempt to identify Korea’s future to some extent with Western and Japanese forms of modernity, though as I argue below, Kim’s own thought was far more syncretic in nature than such a simplistic statement would imply.

Given the prominence of the role of Japan in the “Suggestion,” the employment of Japanese troops in the 1884 coup, and the high likelihood that Kim was deeply influenced by his understanding of the Meiji restoration as told by Fukuzawa and as he observed in post-restoration Japan, it would be easy to conclude that Kim and the Enlightenment Party were on a mission to reform Korea in the same way Japan had reformed a generation earlier. Although the influence of Japan is unmistakable, as I have discussed, the question of the Korean kingship has a longer discursive history that goes back much earlier than the nineteenth century, and so labeling the “Kojong Restoration” as pro-Japanese mimicry is simplistic and incorrect. I additionally take issue with such a categorization because the equation of Japan with progressivism in late nineteenth century East Asia is a dangerous argument. It discounts any effort to engage with the modern world that is not a form of Westernization as something that is traditional, conservative, irrational, and foolhardy. Additionally, the absence of a serious engagement with Korean history in the context of East Asia has allowed for the dominance of China and Japan in scholarship, with China representing conservatism and Japan representing progressivism. This ignores intellectual developments in Japan that do not align with the Western modern, prevents an understanding of Chinese thought as fruitfully engaging with the modern world and with the Western modern, and does not acknowledge a space for Korea in the intellectual history of East Asia except as it relates to Chinese and Japanese thought, unless we

see Korea as Mary C. Wright did as so uniquely rigid that “If inadaptable is used to characterize China, what word is there left for Korea?”²⁷

In examining Kim’s intellectual agenda for the future of Korea prior to the execution and failure of the 1884 coup, I have attempted to move the discussion of the coup away from political machinations and the day-to-day development of the path to revolution by focusing instead on what we can understand of the purpose behind the coup from Kim Ok-kyun’s perspective. By looking at this agenda against Kim’s own background, we can complicate the idea that this was a progressive movement based on an interest in or mimesis of Japanese reforms during the early Meiji period. First, Kim’s unorthodox views likely did not begin with a direct engagement with Japan but rather in the house of Pak Kyu-su, with whom he studied *sirhak* learning. This is important because it suggests that his interest in seeing Korea pursue a path other than isolation did not correlate with his experience of Meiji Japan. Rather his interest in Japan was quite possibly conditioned by his training in an unorthodox or even anti-orthodox native Korean discourse that positioned itself in relation to the Han rather than to the Song classics.

Second, in his references to Korea’s decline from a more prosperous and righteous past, he frequently framed his argument in appeals to the sages. The fact that this does not appear in the “Suggestion” means that it is possible that this was a rhetorical device for his Korean audience. Nevertheless, absent evidence to the contrary, we should take his words seriously while keeping in mind the rhetorical power of such statements. In the “Proposal,” his thirteenth point begins, “Laws regarding criminals are written in the classics. They are applied in foreign countries and in nearby Japan. In our own country, however, they are not applied well according

²⁷ Mary C. Wright, “The Adaptability of Ch’ing Diplomacy: The Case of Korea,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 17, no. 3 (May 1958): 364.

to the sages.”²⁸ He even appealed to past wisdom in a parenthetical statement when he argued that carts should be driven by men rather than by animals, even though he recognized the benefits that horse-drawn carts would bring: “If man-powered carts are sufficient for transportation, then cows and horses should be used for farm work. Using cows and horses to pull carts will keep the animals busy and immune from disease, *but this is not the way of the sages*.”²⁹ This appeal to the sages was further emphasized by a memorial Kim apparently wrote on May 30, 1879 in which he wrote,

We stopped our discussion of general history at the ninth book. If we don’t read through the whole work, it will be impossible for us to understand the harmony and disorder of historical evolution. You should teach us by your good example. You must devote more time to study without interruption. Especially nowadays when we have many foreign visitors, we cannot help but study intensely the way of conducting good relations with neighboring countries and of controlling the barbarians.³⁰

This was written shortly after the time frame that Cook gives for Kim’s switch to being influenced by Japan but before Kim actually traveled there. What we see here is an explicit understanding that the reading of ancient histories will aid in contemporary international relations.

The above examples of Kim’s appeal to what is essentially a Chinese tradition should not be taken as an argument that we should see Kim as having been fundamentally driven by a Chinese intellectual agenda rather than a Japanese one, as that still replicates the binary between China and Japan in the intellectual history of East Asia. Rather, I argue that they demonstrate that Kim’s intellectual development and political program for Korea was not solely rooted in a

²⁸ Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 243.

²⁹ Ibid., 242. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Cook, “Appendix A: Chronological Outline of Kim Ok-kyun’s Career,” *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 234.

Japanese progressivism. Secondly, I argue that Kim's thought and approach to the modern world was grounded in a Korean intellectual tradition and in contemporary events in Korea. While his thought certainly engaged with Chinese and Japanese discourses, this influence should not be understood as derivation. We should rather understand Kim's interest in reform along Western lines in order to restore the king and promote the health and prosperity of the people and the country's economy while not violating the precepts of the sages as a development of Korean intellectual history embedded in regional discourses and a Korean approach to the modern world as understood from Kim's vantage point. In this way, we can study and appreciate the relationship of Kim's thought to other discourses of how to survive and prosper in East Asia during this period while not simultaneously subordinating his thought as merely an instance of a derivation from Chinese or Japanese thought.

CHAPTER V

THE COUP OF 1884

In the previous chapter, I discussed Kim Ok-kyun's role in the 1884 coup as understood through the two documents remaining of his pre-coup writings. Although neither gives direct information as to why he and his party decided to take violent action against the government, as we have seen, both shed light on his interests in reform and his vision for Korea. This was a syncretic vision, I argued, that combined elements of his own education in Confucian studies, as influenced by his studies in *sirhak* learning, and his experiences in Japan, particularly his friendship with Fukuzawa Yukichi, as well as one that engaged with a centuries-long debate concerning the relationship of Korea to China. To this point, my conclusions have necessarily been tenuous, based as they are on a close reading of two documents and supplemented by Cook's detailed but unannotated study of Kim Ok-kyun through the 1884 coup, yet they have been based on evidence that can be firmly connected to the pre-coup period.

In this chapter, I cautiously examine *Kapsin illok* to understand better the reasons why violent reform was chosen and what were the goals of the coup. I focus not on the day-to-day development of the coup but rather on what the document says about Kim's understanding of the coup when he wrote it in 1885 and therefore what were possibly some of the factors leading to a violent revolt. In the final section of the chapter, I offer a summary of the events of December 4 through December 6 as described by Kim in *Kapsin illok* and by Philip Jaisohn, formerly known as Sō Chae-p'il, when he gave an account of the coup in an English-language section of the American newspaper *The New Korea* in August 1938. In this section, I give particular attention to what the coup itself reveals about the goals of its leaders, especially those of Kim Ok-kyun.

Despite the problematic nature of the text, I rely heavily on Kim's *Kapsin illok*, or "The Daily Record of *Kapsin*," for my analysis of the coup itself.¹ The reason for this is twofold. First, as this is a study on how the life of Kim Ok-kyun in particular reflects the regional nature of the history of modernity in late-nineteenth-century East Asia rather than the history of the Enlightenment Party and their failed coup in 1884 more broadly, a close reading of a document written by Kim about the coup is absolutely essential. Additionally, this is the only record of the coup that was written close to the time of its execution and failure, and so it stands alone as a first-hand account of the coup and its development.² Nevertheless, the document is so problematic that some Korean scholars have completely denied its utility whatsoever.³

The most serious problem with the document is that it was written in late 1885 after the failure of the coup, when Kim had begun his life in exile in Japan. This is contrary to what the name and structure of the document suggest, which instead strike the reader as essentially that of a diary written as the events were unfolding. After-the-fact reporting is hardly sufficient reason to disregard a document. All documentary evidence, after all, is fundamentally shaped by perception, both of what really happened, as well as the relative importance of different events. What makes *Kapsin illok* particularly suspect, however, is the detail that it purports to provide of day-to-day events that were recorded months after their actual occurrence. Kim provides detailed

¹ Kim, *Kapsin illok*. This is a scan of one of the original manuscript versions of the text (there are multiple versions with minor variations). Therefore, this edition includes the original page numbers as well as the page numbers for the edited volume as a whole. In all of my citations, I refer to the page numbers that are part of the set for the entire edited volume.

² To supplement my reading of the *Kapsin illok*, I also examine the account of the coup written by Philip Jaisohn, previously known as Sō Chae-p'il, a junior leader of the Enlightenment Party in 1884. This account was one part of a series of articles published every two weeks in an American newspaper, *The New Korea*, meant to educate Korean Americans about their native country.

³ Abstract to Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, *Kapsin illok* 甲申日録, trans. Cho Il-mun 趙一文 (Seoul: Kōnguk taehakkyo Ch'ulp'anbu, 1977), 155-157. This is a Korean translation of *Kapsin illok*, which was originally written in Classical Chinese. The editors also provide a transcription of the original Chinese following the Korean translation. There are minor discrepancies between this transcription and the original handwritten copy included in *Kim Ok-kyun chōnjip*. Although I used the Korean translation to aid my reading of the Chinese, all citations for *Kapsin illok* refer to *Kim Ok-kyun chōnjip*.

accounts of conversations and events occurring daily from October 30 through December 6, 1884, signaling with his use of pronouns that he meant for the conversations to be read as direct quotations rather than as paraphrased statements. The level of detail he provides for each day certainly gives the document an appearance of comprehensive coverage and therefore of reliability. When we take into account that the document was written months after the events themselves and there is no evidence that Kim based his writing of the *Kapsin illok* on a diary he wrote at the time, or even that he did maintain a diary during this time, however, the effect of time on memory calls into serious question the credibility of the *Kapsin illok* as a true “daily record.”

Also, one function of this document may have been to place the blame for the failure of the coup on the Japanese legation headed by Takezoe Shin'ichirō and to entirely absolve Fukuzawa Yukichi from any responsibility either for its coup or for its failure.⁴ Indeed, Fukuzawa Yukichi appears only once in the record, when, as recorded on the entry for November 21, Kim Ok-kyun asks Inoue Kakugorō to collect detailed information for him on “Fukuzawa *sensei*,” as well as the Japanese government’s current “appearance,” almost certainly a reference to the government’s position vis-à-vis Korea and the reformers, which is a frequent topic of discussion in the account.⁵ So, the document certainly functions to write Fukuzawa almost entirely out of the history of the coup, whether or not that was an intention, which cannot be verified. As for the Japanese legation and Takezoe Shin'ichirō, certainly in the document they frequently strongly encourage Kim and his party to take advantage of the conflict between China

⁴ Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 136. If this assessment is true, it is particularly interesting in light of the fact that when Fukuzawa Yukichi's own newspaper, the *Jiji shimpō*, published news about the coup, it emphatically denied the participation of Japanese in the coup, even though it is evident that Fukuzawa knew about the coup and about the participation of his protégé, Inoue Kakugorō in the coup. Aoki Kōichi 青木光一, *Fukuzawa Yukichi no Ajia* 福澤諭吉のアジア (Tokyo: Keio Gijuku Daigaku Shuppankai, 2011), 38-9. Therefore, it is entirely possible that Kim wrote *Kapsin illok* as a corrective to Fukuzawa's own published account of the event, possibly reflecting tension between the two men in the wake of the failure of the coup.

⁵ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 52-3.

and France that was going on at the time to reform the Korean government, and there are numerous assurances of Japanese military support for such reform. Also, while the document often regards the Japanese with suspicion and they were not privy to all aspects of the plan for the coup, party leaders frequently met with the Japanese, especially Takezoe and Inoue, to discuss the coup plans, and there is ample evidence in the text that they not only were aware of many of the fine points of the plan but also agreed quite strongly with it. Finally, the Japanese troops did indeed prove insufficient for their Chinese counterparts, and the coup failed.

Nevertheless, there are other possible ways of understanding the text that do not involve the intention of placing blame for the coup and its failure on the Japanese. First of all, we must acknowledge the possibility that, even if all of the events and conversations recorded in the document perhaps did not occur on the days indicated or even with the exact words that were written, there is a good possibility that they all did occur with the content more or less the same as was written in the account.⁶ In other words, barring conclusive evidence to the contrary, we must admit the possibility that the document is an “accurate” account, that it is a faithful rendering of the events that occurred from the perspective of Kim Ok-kyun in 1885 in Japan as he remembered them occurring in 1884. Takezoe and other Japanese officials in Korea at the time may well have encouraged Kim and other Enlightenment Party leaders to rise against the Korean government and then not have chosen or been able to provide sufficient military support. Secondly, one possible evidence for the document being strongly tainted with historical rewriting

⁶ Of course, when the conversations were conducted through speaking, as opposed to through “brush talk,” which also happened quite a bit, they were in spoken Korean or Japanese. As the *Kapsin illok* was written in literary Chinese, all of the spoken discourse was necessarily translated by Kim and therefore does not represent the actual sounds that were spoken. What I mean here, then, is not that Kim necessarily wrote the conversations as they were spoken but rather accurately provided a translation of those utterances in literary Chinese using the pronouns that indicate a directly spoken phrase. The question, then, is did Kim provide an accurate translation, an accurate paraphrase made to look like a quotation, or a deliberately changed or even fabricated statement to create the narrative he wanted his audience to learn. As I argue here, without evidence to such fabrication, we should strongly consider the possibility that the document is an attempt at a faithful rendering of recent history, without laying aside entirely the possibility that Kim had ulterior motives when writing the *Kapsin illok*.

would be if Kim and his Enlightenment Party were elevated in the text. On the whole, the coup leaders do appear as persecuted reformists who were more or less pushed into drastic action, which may or may not have been the case, but there are numerous instances in which the coup leaders are portrayed as less than noble. For instance, on the night of December 4 after the coup has more or less taken place and Kim is accompanying King Kojong, Kim berates two members of the coup, likening one to a “rat” or a “bug,” because Kim felt he was treating the coup too casually.⁷ Also, and more generally, if we read the treatment of the Japanese by the text as an effort to blame the Japanese, then the reading of the Korean leaders necessarily is one of being duped by the Japanese. Instead, the coup leaders appear in the text as calculating and actually initiating the plans for the coup, regarding the Japanese, and especially Takezoe, with suspicion until it appeared that the Japanese truly are interested in helping the party carry out its plan. Therefore, if the text was indeed an effort to convince its audience of a particular understanding of the coup, it was not that the Japanese were to blame, except perhaps in not providing sufficient military support to guarantee the coup’s success.

Despite these problems with the text and the reality that there is no way to rely on it fully as an accurate rendering of the events leading to the coup, or even as a document revealing the motivations behind the coup, it is still an invaluable document for scholars of this event and its participants. The reading I propose of *Kapsin illok* is one that probes the text for information about the motivations and goals of the coup itself. Earlier, we saw how Kim’s pre-coup writings indicated certain features of his overall vision for Korea, but there is a disconnect between these ideals and the ultimate decision to carry out the coup. The *Kapsin illok* can help to bridge this gap to provide understanding about why the coup was decided upon and what were the specific goals for this reform. Additionally, this document can be used to better understand the

⁷ Ibid., 85.

intellectual agenda of Kim and the coup leaders at the time of the coup. As indicated, my conclusions here are provisional and represent one possibility based on a certain reading of the text that takes it as a relatively faithful rendering of the events of 1884 *as they were understood by Kim in 1885*. Read in this way, *Kapsin illok* offers more than just a potentially suspect daily record of the events leading to the coup. It reflects how Kim in either 1884 or 1885, or both, was deeply concerned about Korea's financial situation, on which his entire program of reforms hinged. He decided to carry out the coup largely because of the personal danger he felt as the antagonism between him and the Min party deepened and as Chinese troops in Seoul appeared to be preparing for military action. Finally, the descriptions of the daily activities of party leaders and their Japanese and Western contacts indicate that there was a social effect influencing the decisions of party leaders, as well. Largely alienated from other officials in the government, these men seemed to spend a significant time with each other not only planning the coup but also sharing meals together and drinking rather regularly. This likely created an environment in which Kim and other coup leaders were constantly being affirmed in their course of action as the most reasonable and realizable solution to Korea's problems. This was intensified by the perceived support of Japanese, British, and American officials, as well as Kim's belief that he had King Kojong's backing for his reform plans. These factors combined to give rise to a coup, a coup that had such fundamental flaws that, after the fact, observers were baffled as to how Kim and his party could have possibly believed that they could be successful in such a foolhardy venture.

Preparing for Revolution

Kim began *Kapsin illok* not with the daily record beginning on October 30, 1884 but rather with his second trip to Japan in 1882. The first part of *Kapsin illok* is a brief summary of select events that apparently form the background against which Kim understood the

development of the coup when he wrote the document in 1885. In this introduction, we see three themes that feature prominently in the daily record itself. The first is a concern for finances, and this is one of Kim's primary motivations for the coup. His omission of any discussion of his first trip to Japan is striking and perhaps indicates that in 1885, Kim did not regard his connection with Fukuzawa Yukichi initiated in 1882 as important an influence as his discussions of finances that occurred in his second and third trips. As noted earlier, Kim went to Japan for the first time in 1882 ostensibly to study Japanese Buddhism, and it was during this trip that he met Fukuzawa Yukichi, who is generally regarded as a major influence in Kim's intellectual development as a reformer. Perhaps he did not want to implicate Fukuzawa in the coup, as discussed above, or perhaps Fukuzawa's influence on Kim was not as strong as has been argued by scholars.

Regardless of the reason, in *Kapsin illok*, the only reference to this trip is that Kim was sent back to Japan shortly after he returned to Korea because of the military uprising in Seoul in 1882. He focused instead on his second and third trips, and here his main interest was in procuring funds, particularly for strengthening the military. He related a conversation he had with then foreign minister Inoue Kaoru in which Inoue said, "Now, my country's expansion of military power, it is not simply a matter of my country's innate nature. For the matter of your country's independence, it is also something you must give attention to."⁸ Kim then continued to discuss how he met with other (unnamed) Japanese officials and discussed the current situation of the East, focusing particularly on Korea's problem of finances. He wrote, "They all thought that if the Korean government appointed a commissioner, then this matter [of Korea's finances] could be brought to completion."⁹ These discussions point at another recurring theme throughout *Kapsin illok*, and one that was prominent in the "Suggestion," as well, namely Korea's

⁸ Ibid., 23-4.

⁹ Ibid., 24

independence. The connection between finances and independence seems to have been central to Kim's approach to Korea's future. Although, as we saw, he certainly had a far more sophisticated view of Korea's future than simply getting loans for the government, as his numerous discussions of finances throughout *Kapsin illok*, as well as his appointment as finance minister in the reform government, indicate, he had a strong interest in procuring funds for reform projects.

Kim returned to Korea after his second trip to Japan in 1883, and the period of time between his second and third trips seems to have been crucial in his decision to carry out the coup. Again, the focus is on finances, but in this section of his narrative, he also introduced what is the central conflict in *Kapsin illok*—the deep mutual antagonism between him and Paul Georg von Möllendorff, a Prussian whom Li Hongzhang recommended to advise the Korean government on matters of finances and currency, and the related growing conflict between Kim and the Min clan. Kim apparently noticed unfair dealings between von Möllendorff and Min officials in the process of minting the *tang'ochun* (當五錢) coin that resulted in enriching the Min family at the state's expense.¹⁰ He brought this matter before Kojong, who seems to have more or less ignored the problem and instead sent Kim back to Japan to procure a three million *yen* loan, which he was unsuccessful in doing. In the narrative, then, this conflict between Kim and von Möllendorff and the Mins is fairly short, but as the reader continues through the document, this conflict appears frequently, and the only potential source of the conflict that is given is this dispute over the *tang'ochun*.

The third major theme in the introduction to *Kapsin illok* is Kim's suspicion of Takezoe Shin'ichirō. This, too, is connected with von Möllendorff and sheds light on the depth of the

¹⁰ Ibid., 24-6.

antagonism between the two men. The account in the introduction is really quite brief. As Kim was preparing to leave for Japan for his third trip, Takezoe came to Seoul to be stationed at the Japanese legation. Kim wrote that the meeting between himself and Takezoe was “truly deep.” But, Takezoe apparently also had close relations with von Möllendorff, and when Kim told Takezoe that von Möllendorff could not be trusted, Takezoe disagreed.¹¹ Despite the brevity of the description of this encounter, it profoundly influenced later dealings between Kim and Takezoe in October and November 1884, as Takezoe was regarded with suspicion until he was able to prove that he was truly interested in the reformers’ cause, and even after that, this former suspicion was frequently brought up. This indicates either that in November and December 1884 the reformers still held onto some of this suspicion, or that while writing in 1885, Kim wanted to remind his reader that at the beginning the Korean reformers did not trust Takezoe, who was the head Japanese official in Korea at the time.

The first part of the introduction to *Kapsin illok* as I have summarized here reflects what, at least in 1885 if not in late 1884, Kim considered either important to the background of the coup or what he wanted his audience to think about the coup. Korea’s pressing need for funds formed the foundation of Kim’s later actions, as Korea’s independence and the development of military strength relied on the ability to receive foreign loans. Korea’s financial prosperity was endangered by the corruption of the ruling Min clan and their collaboration with Paul Georg von Möllendorff. Finally, even the Japanese emerge as potentially suspect, though this later changes in the text, as Takezoe was initially portrayed as being close to von Möllendorff.

The immediate cause for the turn towards violent reform, which Kim was already considering while in Japan for the third time, is suggested in the second part of the introduction. In the third month of the year *kapsin*, or May 1884, Kim returned from Japan, and he commented

¹¹ Ibid., 26-7.

on government corruption in *Kapsin illok* and also discussed the personal attacks being levied against him. Accusing four members of the Min clan, Min T'ae-ho, Min Yong-mok, Min Yong-ik, and Min Ŭng-sik, of scheming to increase their power, he then wrote, "That so-called *tang'ochun*, on account of fraud, the people's conditions (K. *minchŏng*, 民情) are constrained daily, and the country's circumstances (K. *kukse*, 國勢) are daily inundated. The danger is indeed such that cannot be sustained."¹² Additionally, by the time he returned to Korea, any remaining communication between von Möllendorff and Kim had been cut off. Kim writes in his record an account of what von Möllendorff told Min officials: "Now for the purpose of eliminating the evil in Korea, it does not reside in the *tang'ochun*. It is urgent that first Kim Ok-kyun is eliminated. He has falsely accused all of you of one hundred things, causing trouble for you. It is all Kim Ok-kyun."¹³ Though it is unclear how Kim obtained this information, and it is therefore entirely possible that this exchange never took place, it is evident later in the journal that Kim and his party felt their lives to be in immediate danger. Therefore, whether or not this exchange actually took place, it is quite conceivable that Kim believed that it had and that he, his cause, and his party were in grave danger. The introduction concludes with a lengthy account of Takezoe's return to Korea and his reconciliation with Kim Ok-kyun.

In his introduction to *Kapsin illok*, Kim laid the groundwork in the first ten pages of the document to provide the larger and more immediate reasons for the coup. First, I argue, was the pressing need for funds. The Japanese were unwilling to provide a sufficiently large loan to Kim during his third trip. No doubt, this colored the way he reacted to the changed situation he found in Korea when he returned, namely what he considered to be rampant corruption, as well as increasing antagonism from the Min party. Already having considered the possibility of forced

¹² Ibid., 28-29.

¹³ Ibid., 29.

reform, he must have felt a sense of desperation upon his return that likely compelled him to consider the possibility more concretely. The affirmation of Takezoe's interest in Kim's cause and the alliance forged between them in the months before the daily record begins likely functioned to enliven Kim's spirit. With the help of the Japanese, it would perhaps be possible to root out the problems in the government, namely the Min leaders and von Möllendorff, and enact the reforms that Kim had been considering and developing for a number of years by now. He had already written the letter to Gotō Shōjirō pleading for Japanese aid, and the situation in Seoul had changed so that the head of the Japanese legation firmly indicated his commitment to Kim's cause. Whether or not Takezoe had the blessings of his government to assist Kim is irrelevant, as Kim believed that this aid was forthcoming and chose his course of action accordingly. Of course, this particular reading of the introduction is somewhat speculative, as Kim provided a narrative account but not a strong sense of his own emotional reaction. Nevertheless, given the evidence already examined of his pre-coup political and intellectual thought, as well as the fact that he did ultimately choose revolution, and his deliberate decision to include the above points in the introduction to *Kapsin illok*, I argue that we are certainly meant to understand the origins of the coup to lie in this combination of factors and that it is most likely that these were the reasons why Kim in 1884 chose to violently overthrow the government.

The main body of the document is the daily record, which begins on October 30, 1884 and ends on December 6, 1884. From October 30 through December 3, the entries are centered on the numerous meetings and conversations among Korean coup leaders and between them and various Japanese, American, and British officials. My concern regarding the development of the coup is primarily with the motivations for taking violent action in December 1884, and so I will

not conduct a detailed analysis of this section of the daily record.¹⁴ Instead, I will look at those passages that offer deeper insight into the motivations for the coup than those discussed above.

On the whole, the pre-coup daily record corroborates the motivations that are found in the introduction of *Kapsin illok*. Even as Kim prepared the military details of the coup, he was already interested in exploring the options for receiving funds after the successful completion of the coup. His record for November 25, an exceptionally long and detailed entry, ends with a discussion with Takezoe and another Japanese official, Asayama Kenzō, concerning funding, presumably for post-coup reform projects.¹⁵ Takezoe offered over three hundred million *yen*. Kim was understandably doubtful that Takezoe has the authority to guarantee such an amount, and in addition to that, he said that such large sums were unnecessary at that moment because there was nothing on which to spend such an incredible sum; some tens of thousands of *yen* would do. Takezoe allayed Kim's concerns about the availability of funds by arguing that the wealthy Japanese merchant community in Korea would be willing to loan the money. This conversation continued on the morning of December 6 when Kim again raised the question of funds in his diary, this time discussing his taking up the post in the Board of Finance: "I then took up the work of Second Minister in the Board of Finance. It had to do with everything belonging to the realm of finance administration. There was some discussion [about this], but the most urgent matter was military affairs."¹⁶

¹⁴ Also, Cook offers a thorough analysis of the events leading up to the coup by looking at numerous Korean, Japanese, American, and British records that are inaccessible to me. Therefore, I neither challenge nor attempt to add to his account but rather take a different approach to the coup that, as discussed, Cook left underdeveloped in his study.

¹⁵ Ibid., 61-2. Kim did not give details concerning what he would use the funds for. Given the reform agenda, which includes the fourteen reforms the reform government enacted after taking power, which included reforming the tax structure, it is likely that this money was considered necessary to carry out the party's agenda items.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97. Kim's becoming finance minister was likely already decided, most likely before the coup. Although he indicates that it was not until December 6 that he took up his post, the last part of his entry for December 4 was a long listing of the various posts and their ministers, including his appointment to finance minister. I use the title provided by Cook in his translation of the reform governments' offices and officials. Ibid., 245.

A sense of endangerment and urgency also permeates the entire record, indicating the reason why violence was the chosen method and that it was December 4 that the coup was carried out. As discussed, when Kim returned to Japan in May of 1884, he entered what he felt was a very antagonistic environment. This itself, though, is not sufficient evidence to understand why violence was pursued in December. After all, Kim and the Enlightenment Party had considerable favor with King Kojong. It is conceivable, therefore, that they could have chosen political methods to try to enact their reforms, as was discussed in Kim's letter to Gotō. I have already suggested that this environment likely pushed Kim in that direction, but the records in *Kapsin illok* indicate a far more hostile environment that I argue made violent reform seem like an absolutely necessary and immediate course of action. According to *Kapsin illok*, on November 12, Kim was summoned to an audience with King Kojong to discuss a disturbance that had occurred the night previous.¹⁷ The king had been roused from his sleep by gunshots heard in the Namsan region. It turned out that military drills were being conducted. When Kim discussed it with Takezoe the next day, Takezoe claimed that it was not his doing as consul but a decision made by the company commander.¹⁸ This was the first in a series of military movements in Seoul in mid-November. Almost a week later, the record for November 15 indicates that the Qing camp appeared to be preparing for war.¹⁹ Then on November 17, Min Yong-ik was seen visiting Chinese commander Yuan Shi-kai.²⁰ Two days later on November 19, von Möllendorff secretly delivered two cannons to Min Yong-ik, and the next day Chinese official Wu Zhaoyou delivered them by cart to a lower office.²¹ As the Min and their supporters comprised the bulk of the official positions in the government at this time, and the Chinese were

¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸ Ibid., 44-5.

¹⁹ Ibid., 48-9.

²⁰ Ibid., 50-1.

²¹ Ibid., 51.

given considerable power over Chinese and Korean troops stationed in the city, these were not necessarily moves that should have roused suspicion, but in the record they are portrayed as subversive.

The immediate need for a new government to carry out reforms was evident to all members of Kim's party and their foreign associates, and the timing was right, as well, and this formed another important factor behind the coup. The conflict between China and France over Vietnam appeared to be growing ever more serious, with the very real possibility that war would soon break out. With China otherwise engaged to the south, it would be less able to respond politically or militarily to a disturbance in Korea. Therefore, in order to take advantage of this ideal situation, the coup needed to occur as soon as possible. On December 1, Korean leaders decided to carry out the coup on the evening of December 4, with December 5 as a second option should there be rain.²² The reason suggested by the text is that Kim and his party wanted to carry out the event before the Japanese mail ship *Chitose maru* arrived, which Cook suggests was because they "may have had genuine concern about the arrival of this vessel and of the orders for Takezoe which it might be carrying."²³

The sense of the urgency of the situation, and the general consensus among both Korean and Japanese leaders that the time was ripe points to another factor that led to the coup, namely a social effect on its participants that resulted from alienation from opposing parties and intense conversation between its members. What Kim gives in *Kapsin illok* is an account of every single day from October 30 to December 6, 1884, a thirty-eight day record. Even accounting for the possibility that not all records accurately reflect what happened on those days, and it is entirely

²² Ibid., 69-70.

²³ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 69. Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 197. Cook names the ship as the *Chitose maru* (千歳丸), as do other references to the ship, but the name of the ship given in *Kapsin illok* is *Sennen maru* (千年丸). It is most likely the case that the character in the original text was inaccurate, given the close semantic relationship between 歳 and 年, and so I have chosen to use the name given by Cook and other scholars.

possible that there were a handful of days in which nothing related to the coup occurred, there is strong evidence in the document that coup leaders met regularly, both with each other and with Japanese, British, and American officials. In addition to discussing plans for the coup, these meetings very often included shared meals and no small amount of alcohol consumption. This suggests that in the immediate pre-coup period, coup leaders found themselves in an environment surrounded by like-minded individuals and buttressed by social events in which it is likely that the sense of urgency and of the justice of the plan were daily magnified.

One final factor behind the coup, though one that is less evident in *Kapsin illok* than what I have already discussed, is Kim's relationship with Kojong and his belief that the king supported his reform efforts. According to the record for November 29, Kim had an audience with the king, and because he saw that there were no court officials in the area who could eavesdrop, he spoke at greater liberty with the king than he was able to in earlier meetings. I quote the entry here at length:

I was summoned to have an audience [with the king]. As there was no one nearby to listen, I paid my respects and said, "Now, the situation of all under heaven are daily complicated. As for the domestic circumstances, they are daily in a grave situation. Certainly there is one thing of which the palace is unaware. Now, we need not be superfluous—I, your humble servant, desire to tell it to you in detail. Are you willing to listen?" His Majesty said, "Go ahead." I therefore [laid out] the military conflict between China and France, the discord between China and Japan, the plans for the East that Russia is urgently pursuing day after day, even the changes that Western countries have been planning for the East these tens of years, [and argued that we] cannot stubbornly cling to old regulations but rather we must safely rely on our situation that we ourselves

guard. I even went so far as to [discuss] reforms of the country, such as the fact that, on account of *dango* fraud, the people were unable to support and protect themselves; that, as for the mistake of hiring von Möllendorff, there had been many missteps; that the wicked court officials had been trying to conceal from his knowledge the matter of their relying on the power of the Qing; and so forth. (Note: I said a myriad of words and cannot record them all.) During the flow of the conversation, the queen suddenly came out of her inner room and said, “I have been quietly listening to your talk for awhile. The state of affairs have been urgent until now; what is your plan?” His Majesty also earnestly inquired after this. I therefore told them, saying, “At first, Takezoe and I would not discuss it. I could amply see that he was an obstruction; Your Majesty illuminated this to me. And now, Takezoe has returned, and I could see that he had a polite attitude toward me. I looked into this and found that it must have been because Japan’s policy had changed from earlier days. It seems that this was not far-removed from the matter between Japan and China. At this time, Chosŏn is the ground of Japan and China’s war. What plan should we make for the future for ourselves?” His Majesty and the queen deeply concerned themselves over this and said, “As for the conflict between Japan and China, who does it seem will be the victor?” I answered, “If Japan and China were to go to war, the victor and the losing party cannot be anticipated. Right now, if Japan and France join forces, then as for who will win, I think it will be Japan.” His Majesty said, “If that’s the case, then as for planning the policy for our independence (K. *tongnip*, 獨立), does it not reside right here in this place?” I answered sincerely, “It is according to your sagely words. It seems that among the ministers closest to Her Majesty, there is not one who does not curry favor with China and serve as China’s dogs and sheep. Although

it seems that Japan desires [our] independence, it seems that [Japan] cannot achieve it. The words that I am putting forth are related to life and death, and we are morning and night in peril, and so I am not afraid for my one body. My anger aroused to this point, I have spoken indiscriminately to this extent.”²⁴ The queen said, “Your words make it seem that you are suspicious of me. As for the survival and demise of the country, I am a woman. How could I harm the great plan? Do not conceal anything from me.” (Note: Whether this was true or false, I could not yet know.) His Majesty said, “Your heart is in the same place as mine. I know this as fact. Everything related to the great plan for the country, as this is a desperate time, I entrust you to make the plan for it. You need not worry further.” (Note: This was a sincere heart and sincere statement.) I answered, “Although I dare not serve in such a way, your sagely teachings and exhortations this day and night are on my ear. How could I dare to take on this responsibility?” I hoped to receive this secret order written by His Majesty’s own hand and always carry it with me. His Majesty laughed and signed it while also pressing it with his seal. I bowed and received it. The queen gave me food and wine as a gift. It being daybreak, we left.²⁵

As there is no independent record of this meeting, it is possible that it never happened.²⁶ Whether or not the meeting occurred as written, or even occurred at all, is of less interest to me than what it can tell us about Kim’s perspective. It is unlikely that, given the regard Kim had for Kojong, he would entirely fabricate this account, or even that he would deliberately misrepresent at least what few words the king said (his own statements or those of Queen Min, for whom he had little

²⁴ In his translation, Cho Il-mun indicates he thinks this final sentence was part of Kim’s spoken discourse. I am less convinced, as it could easily be providing additional information to the reader, but as the Chinese is unclear, I am deferring to the existing translation. Kim, *Kapsin illok*, trans. Cho Il-mun, 72.

²⁵ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 64-7. I relied heavily on the Korean version when preparing the English translation. Kim, *Kapsin illok*, trans. Cho Il-mun, 70-2.

²⁶ Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 187-8.

regard, are potentially more suspect). If Kim faithfully reported this account in 1885 based on his understanding of true events in 1884, then it is strong evidence that, though he may have been unsure of whether or not the king would support such violence, he felt that the king would support his program after the execution of the coup. Furthermore, he clearly is telling his audience that he received a royal mandate to address Korea's current crisis. Whether or not the verbal command was given, much less the written and sealed edict, Kim is communicating to his audience that he did receive such a command, and as such, his later actions were authorized by the highest power of the land. This no doubt added to his certainty that reform was necessary and violence therefore justified.

Three Days over All under Heaven: The Reform Government

On the evening of December 4, everything seemed ready to go according to plan. With the exception of Yun Ch'ŏm-jun, who declined the invitation because he was required to be in the palace, all of the invitees attended, and so eighteen Korean and foreign officials were present at the opening banquet of the new post office. Kim asked the chef to take his time preparing the meal. Seated at the table, Kim tried out the code language that had been designated to differentiate between friend and foe in the dark December night. Speaking to Shimamura Hisashi, a Japanese collaborator who was sitting next to him, Kim used Japanese and asked him, "Do you know *heaven* (天)?" Shimamura replied, "*Good* (ヨロシ)." ²⁷ The code complete, they drank several rounds of alcohol. Suddenly, Kim had to excuse himself because someone from his house had come to speak to him. The preparations for the arson of the nearby building had been discovered, and there was no way to set the fire there. Kim told the man to light a grass house on

²⁷ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 80. The actual code words were 天 and ヨロシ, as they were written in *Kapsin illok*, with the former to be used by the first individual, to be replied to using the latter by second individual. The text explicitly says that ヨロシ was to be spoken in Japanese, but it does not specify the language for 天. It is likely that either Korean or Japanese could be used for the question, but in this case Kim decided to use Japanese.

fire instead and returns to the banquet. Around the time that tea was served, around 10 o'clock according to later accounts, a clamor could be heard from outside that there was a fire. Kim got up immediately and looked out the window, while Min Yong-ik ran outside and returned bleeding with one ear missing. Han Kyu-chik, one of the evening's targets, said that he and his party would take responsibility for the fire, as it needed to be attended to quickly.

Kim and his group then rushed over to the palace to retrieve the king. Finding the doors shut, Kim commanded a retainer to open the doors, and they entered the palace with about fifty soldiers. They did not immediately alert the king, who was still unaware that anything had occurred. Instead, Kim first commanded the palace eunuchs to exit the hall and then ordered that the king be woken up, who by this time had heard a commotion and Kim's voice. When the king asked what was going on, Kim told him about the situation at the post office. The king asked, "This disturbance, did it come from the Qing? Or from the Japanese?" Kim had not yet answered him when from the northeast they heard the gunshots fired by a palace woman who was collaborating with the reformers. Kim then turned to the king and said that he must write to the Japanese legation to ask for troops and to command Takezoe to come. They took the king to another nearby palace where he was placed in a room with only one entrance guarded by two soldiers. As Philip Jaisohn reflected more than fifty years later, "For all intents and purposes the king and his family became captives of the much-maligned reformers, whose advice they had to follow under the changed circumstances."²⁸

December 5 began with a visit of American, British, and German officials in Seoul. They initially offered thirty soldiers each to help guard the palace, but later the German official returned to inform the new government officials that had decided they would only protect

²⁸ Jaisohn, *My Days in Korea and Other Essays*, 18.

foreigners. Takezoe then had an audience with the king and, as Kim related, discussed with him the future of Korea in the context of global trends:

“He [Takezoe] also took the circumstances of each country in the world (天下) to demonstrate that domestic governance cannot but reform, and so forth. He then continued with how the maintenance of the military cannot but be vigorous.”²⁹

The rest of the day’s conversations seem to have been focused on questions of troop placement and continuing to militarily secure the new government. Toward the evening, they heard the noise of Qing troops outside, which Kim noted was Yuan Shikai and Zhang Guangzhuan meeting with Wu Zhaoyou’s camp. Nothing came of this at this time, and Kim closed his entry for December 5 with the fourteen-point program for the new government:³⁰

1. The Taewongun should immediately be accompanied in his return (Note: As for the empty ritual of advising the imperial court in China and offering tribute, it is suggested that it be abolished)
2. Put an end to [the practice of] rich and powerful families, establish the authority of the equality of the people, use the people to choose officials, and do not use officials to select people.
3. Reform the law of land tax through the country. Put a stop to the treachery of officials, and rescue the people from their destitution while enriching the country’s finances.
4. Remove household attendants. We will temporarily employ at the same rank those among them who are excellent in their talent.
5. As for those who especially afflict the country with their evil and corruption, declare them guilty.

²⁹ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 92.

³⁰ Ibid., 95-6.

6. The grain loan system in the provinces should be abolished forever.³¹
7. Put an end to the royal library.
8. Quickly put in place a system of patrol to protect against burglary.
9. Put a stop to favoring the public office of merchants
10. Consider releasing those who have been banished or prohibited from holding office.
11. Make the four barracks into one. Take those from among this barrack who are robust and quickly establish a close guard. (Note: The commander of the army is to be the crown prince)
12. The governance of all that belongs to the category of domestic affairs is under the jurisdiction of the fiscal administration. Abolish all other offices dealing with finances.
13. The ministers meet together (Note: The new ones are fewer than six men; their names do not now need to be written) daily and hold discussions inside [palace] doors. Discussions are to be about those political matters to be established, and [the ministers] are also to announce and carry out government orders.
14. Besides the state council and the six boards, all superfluous offices are to be abolished entirely. Have the ministers convene to discuss and begin this matter.

Thus ends Kim's entry for the only full day of the reform government's rule. Unaware that the following day they would be escaping to Incheon and then to Japan, they began to set in place the political system they had envisioned to create both political and social change. The list that Kim gives is quite striking in many respects. The punishment of corrupt officials and the reformation of the tax system are hardly surprising, as corruption was a primary motivation for the coup in the first place and changes in tax collection procedures in the nineteenth century had

³¹ For point six, I use the translation given in Kim Ok-kyun, "Kapsin Reform Edict," trans. Han-kyo Kim, in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol. 2, *From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period*, 349.

indeed encroached upon people's livelihood without adding noticeably to the public coffers.³² Yet other measures, perhaps most notably the promotion of equality for all people, are quite surprising, especially given Kim's earlier acceptance and even promotion of the *yangban* class and of class distinctions in general. What is additionally noteworthy is the deliberate preservation of certain aspects of Korean politics. The demand that the Taewongun return to Korea is surprising, given that the Taewongun was an early active opponent against engagement with the West. This likely reflects first of all the esteem with which Kim and his party held the king and his family, as well as the strong dislike for the Min clan, which rose to power in opposition to the Taewongun. Also, the decision to have the crown prince serve as the head of the military is also surprising, since other ministers were to be chosen according to their talent.

The fourteen-point program is even more striking when compared to the what Philip Jaisohn remembered fifty years later, and this contrast opens up questions about the extent to which we understand this fourteen-point reform agenda as Kim's own, which directly engages with the question raised in the historiography of whether or not Kim was interested in people's rights and equality. Jaisohn's account reads as follows:

I cannot recall all of the new laws, but the most outstanding ones were the abolition of class distinctions among the people, such as different kinds of *yangbans*, the middle class and the commoners; the reorganization of law courts, the army, the tax offices and the treasury; all appointment of government positions to be made through examinations of the candidates' qualifications; establishment of public schools in every district in the country; improvement of public sanitation, highways, better housing for the poor; cutting

³² Yumi Moon, *Populist Collaborators: The Ilchinhoe and the Japanese Colonization of Korea, 1896-1910* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 22-45.

off the top-knots; wearing of foreign-style clothes; stabilization of national currency; abolition of slavery; and many others.³³

Clearly, there is significant overlap between Jaisohn's memory of the reform program and the fourteen points Kim recorded in *Kapsin illok*. What interests me are the points Jaisohn raised that seem to indicate a type of people's rights ideology and that differ from Kim's list, most particularly the elimination of class distinctions and the establishment of public schools. While it is quite possible that, at least in some of these points, Jaisohn was conflating the 1884 reform government and the Kabo Reforms of 1894 to 1896, we must acknowledge the possibility that the reform program was more extensive than the fourteen points and that it was quite likely that other reforms were planned for future enactment. Outside of these fourteen points, there is no indication in any of Kim's other extant writings examined to this point that he was interested in removing class distinctions.³⁴ Of course, as mentioned earlier, very few of Kim's writings remain, and so perhaps this accounts for this difference. Perhaps Kim was indeed a people's rights advocate. But I also suggest that we consider an alternate interpretation of both these fourteen points and the difference between Kim's and Jaisohn's accounts—the 1884 coup and its program were not solely the product of Kim's design. Indeed, Kim, or any other individual, may not have even been the original author of the fourteen points. As Pak Ŭn-suk suggests, the 1884 coup was not even the product of only the five main leaders but in fact was influenced by lower-level members of the movement.³⁵

Therefore, although I do not directly oppose the argument that Kim was an advocate of egalitarianism and of people's rights, I regard such an argument with deep suspicion. First, to be

³³ Jaisohn, *My Days in Korea and Other Essays*, 18.

³⁴ In Kim's letter to Kojong written while he was in exile, which I discuss in the next chapter, he did discuss the need to remove the literati class and to promote public education, but given the lack of available evidence, I am unwilling to read this back to the pre-coup period.

³⁵ Pak Ŭn-suk, *Kapsin Chŏngbyŏn yŏngu* (Sŏul-si: Yŏksa Pip'yŏngsa, 2005).

able to productively discuss the possibilities that he was such an advocate, the meanings of “people’s rights” and “egalitarian” would have to be properly defined in the context of the movement in the early 1880s. Second, even if it could be determined that on some level these are accurate categories for the ideologies of at least some members of the movement, given the paucity of Kim’s extant articles, we cannot determine the extent to which he originated such a platform or even agreed with it. I find it more productive to not try to place Kim’s thought in such a category without sufficient evidence, and instead acknowledge that this is a possibility but to rely on Kim’s own writings to understand better his own reform program based on the available evidence. In both Kim’s earlier writings as well as in the fourteen points, what we see is in fact a curious intellectual and political program that would make little sense if we try to place Kim Ok-kyun’s thought firmly on the side of progressivism and Japanese influence. Although more research is necessary to be able to place the finer points of his agenda in their full context, what is evident is that the program envisioned by Kim is not an instance of derivation or simply of progressivism but demonstrates an active engagement with multiple discourses with which he had contact and formed in the midst of a national and regional ideological conflict regarding the proper response to the paradigm shift occasioned by the coming of the West.

CHAPTER VI

EXILED IN JAPAN: REVOLUTION FROM ABROAD

December 6 began early with Kim sending a letter to Yuan Shikai, blaming him for barricading the palace doors and warning him that, “If after this there are further senseless things like this, then there definitely cannot be any good words between us.”¹ Not long afterward, Takezoe informed Kim, Pak Yong-hyo, and Hong Yǒng-sik that the Japanese soldiers could not be stationed there for very long and that they would need to return to the rest of the army that day. Startled, Kim argued that if the soldiers were to leave, the coup would surely fail, and then he asked Takezoe to wait for three days before having the soldiers return to the rest of the army. It seems that they compromised; although the soldiers would return, there would remain ten lower-ranking officers to serve as instructors for guarding the palace. Their conversation then turned to funds, “that which is said to form the foundation of the country.”²

I [Kim] said, “Now, as for the distress of my country’s finances, you know it well. There is something [I would like] to propose to Japan. Now, your country’s mail boat will arrive in less than a day. We must urgently discuss and decide on it.” Takezoe asked, “How much gold?” I answered, “Giving five million would be right. First, three million, and then we can discuss the urgency of the present. Thinking about it, for the merchants of your country, gathering together three hundred million, it is definitely not easy. Only this matter of going into debt, it is sought from foreign countries, and I do not yet know how to do this. (Note: I used the true circumstances and perception to speak deeply on this matter). Takezoe laughed and said, “Right now the Japanese officials do not trust my words. Even though it is difficult for our merchants to suddenly set up a great amount of

¹ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 97.

² Ibid., 98.

funds, there seems to be three million *yen* saved up, and it can be set up. Set your heart at ease...”

Not long after this conversation concluded, Kim heard that a Qing official wanted to come have an audience with the king, but Kim would not allow it. “If it is Wu [Zhaoyou], Yuan [Shikai], or Zhang [Guangzhuan], these three men, I will allow him to be admitted, not some nameless petty officer. How could one so easily have a [royal] audience?”³ And so he sent out Pak and Hong, and they talked over the matter in detail, presumably with the “nameless petty officer,” and they were presented with a letter for the king written by Wu Zhaoyou in order to assure the king of the security of the city and the intention of the Chinese military leaders to remove the reform government:

Great King, I heard that last night in the palace you were unnecessarily caused to be alarmed.⁴ Now, there is good fortune due to the king’s great blessing, and inside the capital and out it is peaceful and quiet as always. I implore the Great King to set your heart at ease. Three battalions of my troops are set in place, guarding so that there is no trouble. Compiling this statement, I bow respectfully. Your Majesty, be at ease.

Commander Zhaoyou, respectfully yours.

Shortly after they received this letter, the siege began. According to Philip Jaisohn’s recollection, Queen Min was largely responsible for the Chinese attack, as she succeeded in communicating with the Qing troops by writing a note,

³ Ibid., 99-100. I rely heavily on the modern Korean translation of this letter, as the exact meaning of the original Chinese is unclear at points due to ambiguous language. Kim, *Kapsin illok*, trans. Cho Il-mun, 103. It is interesting that Wu himself did not deliver the letter, nor did either of the other two high officers. I suspect this is because if one of the three leaders of the Chinese troops had personally come to deliver the letter or to have an audience with the king, who was at this point at least the figurehead of the new reform government, it would have bestowed on the reform government a certain level of legitimacy, which was not at all the wish of the Chinese military leaders.

⁴ This no doubt refers to the movement of the Qing troops that was heard and noted in *Kapsin illok* in the entry for December 5th.

[T]elling Yuan of the scanty number of students who were doing the guard duty and the number of Japanese soldiers on the palace grounds and asked him to come with his soldiers and rescue her from the detention by the Progressives whom she designated as the rebels or traitors.⁵

She put this note on the bottom of an empty dish, and, “When the note was discovered by a kitchen servant he rushed it to the Chinese camp on the other side of the city and handed it to Yuan.” This provided Yuan with sufficient information to know that the palace guard would be no match for his army. According to F.A. McKenzie, “Between 2,000 and 3,000 Chinese soldiers, under Yuan Shih Kai, supported by 3,000 Koreans, attacked the palace. It was defended by 140 Japanese soldiers, who fought desperately, trying to hold the long line of the walls.”⁶

Of course, the strength of the Chinese troops, which the reformers had grossly underestimated, was primarily responsible for the defeat of the reform government, but there was another, perhaps more fundamental, reason, as well. As discussed by contemporary observers and remembered by Philip Jaisohn, outside of its circle of allies, the reform government did not receive any level of popular or official support for its program. Yun Ung-nyŏl, father of Yun Ch’i-ho, a junior associate of the Enlightenment Party, predicted the coup would fail even while the reform government was in power. Yŏng-ho Ch’oe summarizes his reasoning as follows:

First, to seize power by means of intimidating the ruler violated the accepted norms and proprieties. Second, one could not hold power for long by relying on an external force (that is, Japan). Third, since the coup had no public support, there would surely be popular revolts against the reformers. Fourth, once the Chinese learned of the true nature of the coup, they would use force to defeat it, in which case the Japanese would be

⁵ Jaisohn, *My Days in Korea and Other Essays*, 20.

⁶ F.A. McKenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea* (New York: E.P. Dutton & CO, n.d.), 35.

outnumbered. Fifth, several members of the Min clan and some high officials beloved of the king lost their lives in the coup. Even if the coup were successful, how could its leaders expect to remain in power by opposing the will and ignoring the desires of the king and the queen? And finally, if the reform leaders had a sufficient followers [*sic*] to fill positions within the government, they might have had a chance of succeeding. But they had neither the trust of the king nor the support of the people. Moreover, while the Chinese were preparing to move against them, the reformers would be opposed by the king and the queen, with no political support whatever from without. How could they survive under such conditions?⁷

Philip Jaisohn also faulted the disconnect between the reform movement and the population as one reason for its failure. In his August 25, 1938 entry for *The New Korea*, he wrote, “If even ten percent of the Korean people had supported the reform Korea would have been reformed and its sovereignty saved. I doubt that there was any one, outside of the small circle of reformers, who had the correct idea of the motives of our movement.”⁸

The distance between reform leaders and the Korean population is starkly evident in George Clayton Foulk’s account of the immediate effects of the coup on the Korean countryside communities. Foulk was an American Navy officer who taught himself Korean and was stationed in Korea, and he had decided to take a tour through the southern part of the peninsula in the latter part of 1884. The disturbance in Seoul rippled through the countryside, as rumors abounded about the nature of the incident and who was killed. Foulk, obviously not a Korean, felt himself to be in great danger of being mistaken for a Japanese, who bore the brunt of the

⁷ Ch’oe, “The Kapsin Coup of 1884: A Reassessment,” 107-8.

⁸ Jaisohn, *My Days in Korea and Other Essays*, 22.

population's suspicion and anger. On the evening of December 8, the day he first heard about the incident while he was still approximately 100 miles from Seoul to the southeast, he wrote,

I have not money enough to go beyond Ch'hungju and must enter the Yongmun rabble there. Foreign hating wretches (Sonpi) are on my road. I am not known as other than a Japanese, who are hated by Koreans. I am alone and there is prospect of anarchy in the land.⁹

During the time that the actual events of the coup and its suppression were still unknown, both he and especially his Korean servants found themselves in grave danger.

The reality is, of course, that it is unlikely that there would have been any way prior to the coup for the reformers to rally support in the countryside, but perhaps more importantly, even if there had been a way, there would have been little motivation to join the cause. As for officials, most were likely placed in power during the Min's rise to power. Even if they had been in office before the rise of the Min during the period that the Andong Kims were in power, by 1884 the political system in Korea had reached a point of equilibrium in which it would have likely been viewed as highly disadvantageous to throw in their lot with a group of upstart literati who were clearly marginalized in the government. Finally, the reform program proposed would have not benefitted them whatsoever. If anything, it would have undermined their authority in the local communities and severely affected their incomes with the restructuring of the tax system. The lower classes of Korean society would have certainly benefitted more from the plan proposed, but if Foote's travel diary can be trusted, it would seem there was such a dearth of information about the outside world and a strong sense of hatred towards foreigners, who were understood to be Japanese, that it is unlikely that any would have agreed with the reformers, who had clear connections to Japanese and to other foreigners. Of course, Foote's account can be

⁹ Hawley, ed., *Inside the Hermit Kingdom*, 138.

labeled Orientalist for his particular critique of Korean society at the time, even if it was often a sympathetic critique, and he frequently disparages Koreans he came across for their backwardness. Nevertheless, the evidence strongly supports the conclusion that, outside of the Enlightenment Party and its allies in the capital who helped carry out the coup, it was an isolated movement entirely detached from the larger Korean society.

Whether or not the coup was fated from the beginning to fail, it was clear by December 6 that the reformers had no hope of continuing the reform government, and they beat a hasty escape, arriving in the Japanese legation that evening. On December 7, Takezoe ordered the destruction of legation records and the evacuation of Seoul.¹⁰ The reformers accompanied their Japanese co-conspirators to Incheon, where they boarded the *Chitose Maru* and thereby escaped to Japan, where they landed on December 11. Not all of them made it, however. Of the leaders, Hong Yŏng-sik was the only one who did not survive: when he escorted Kojong back to the Min and the Chinese, he was immediately killed. Except for the remaining four leaders, and perhaps a handful of lower-level collaborators, the rest of the Enlightenment Party and its allies were killed. Additionally, many of the family members and acquaintances of coup leaders were put to death or given the option of going into exile. The tragedy and human cost of the failure of the coup is made only more poignant when compared with an entry Kim later wrote for November 24 about a meeting between himself and the British consul-general, William G. Aston. Aston had asked, “If there is a time in which there is a change, how will you all [Kim’s party] defend yourselves?” Kim replied, “If there is an incident, I will be with the king – together with him, I will live and die, and that is all.”¹¹

Life in Exile

¹⁰ Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 220.

¹¹ Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 56.

When Kim and the other leaders of the coup arrived in the capital, the Japanese government was none too pleased to host what were, in fact, wanted criminals. Yet, with the world's eyes on Japan, the Japanese government had no alternative but to abide by the dictates of international law. During this period, Japan was continuing to work toward the goal of treaty revision so as to no longer be subject to the unequal treaty system and, by extension, to be recognized as a world leader.¹² Therefore, the government had no choice but to provide asylum for the reformers despite the Korean government's demand that they be returned, and it did so by appealing to international law and the protection of exiles under that law.¹³ The reformers nevertheless did not receive a warm welcome.¹⁴ There is no extant account written by Kim reflecting the thoughts and feelings of these men during these initial months, but reflecting on this period nearly fifty years later, Philip Jaisohn offers some insight into this experience:

When we reached Tokyo after many narrow escapes from death we found ourselves homeless, penniless, and friendless. The Japanese treated us shabbily and at times were actually hostile. I will never forget the terrible experience I had during my few months' stay in Japan. I often went for two days without food and occasionally without shelter. Had it not been for one or two Americans in Yokohama, I would have perished from hunger and exposure.¹⁵

This treatment can probably be explained by the difficulties to the government in its treaty negotiations with China and Korea that the presence of the refugees in Japan presented, as well

¹² Perez, *Japan Comes of Age*.

¹³ Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., "Haeje," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, xi. This was arguably a way for Japan to demonstrate its "civilization" to the West. It was also an external standard to which the Japanese government could appeal to avoid the domestic problems that would have arisen if Japan had sent the coup leaders back to Korea, and this standard was, at least to some extent, shared by Japan, China, and Korea. The suppression of the coup caused no small stirring in Japan at this time—it seemed possible for awhile that Japan would go to war with Korea over the incident—and so the Japanese government would have risked a domestic backlash if it had extradited the refugees. For the possibility of war, see Aoki, *Fukuzawa Yukichi no Ajia*, 69.

¹⁴ Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910*, 174.

¹⁵ Jaisohn, *My Days in Korea and Other Essays*, 22-3.

as the larger implications for Japan's imperial interests on the peninsula that the coup would have. Eventually, all of the leaders except for Kim, who refused to leave, decided to travel to America, though Pak would return to Japan after only a short while. According to Conroy, it has been suggested that the Japanese government even sent money to Fukuzawa Yukichi, who had taken them in, to cover their expenses, either in part or in full, for their travel to America.¹⁶ In essence, they were bribed to leave. Philip Jaisohn, however, remembers it somewhat differently, as he wrote,

I was so disgusted with the Koreans and equally disappointed at the treacherous behavior of the Japanese that I decided to leave the Orient and seek a new life in America. Prince Pak Young-hio and Soh Kwang-pom came to America with me and Kim Ok-kiun remained in Japan.¹⁷

Very likely, the reason why the other reformers left Japan was related to both factors suggested above. On the one hand, the Japanese government clearly felt that continued protection of the Koreans would be a liability and therefore may well have paid their expenses, and on the other hand, after spending months of planning what they thought would be a successful rebirth of the Korean government only to fail must have been beyond disheartening. Regardless of whether or not the Japanese government did not pay for their passage to America, this despondency compounded by the cold treatment the exiles received was sufficient cause for them to seek their futures elsewhere.

The more interesting question is why did Kim stay in Japan instead of accompany the others to America. As the acknowledged leader of the Enlightenment Party and of the 1884 coup, he more than the others would pose a potential threat to Japan, and so the government no doubt

¹⁶ Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910*, 174.

¹⁷ Jaisohn, *My Days in Korea and Other Essays*, 23.

would have liked to have seen him out of its jurisdiction. It is most likely that his reason for staying in Japan was to continue his work on Korea's future in the modern world, and despite the many dangers that he faced in the ten years from December 1884 to March 1894, he chose to continue living in Japan. With the exception of his first two years in exile, there is little information available concerning his activities for the majority of this decade. Any articles he may have written have not survived to the present. The only materials we have written by Kim after the coup are *Kapsin illok*, which I examined in detail in the previous chapter; three of at least five letters to a Korean official still living in Seoul; two letters to a Japanese police chief; a letter to Li Hongzhang; and a letter to Kojong. For the remainder of this chapter, with the exception of the letters to the police chief, I will examine these writings in conjunction with secondary scholarship in order to shed light on his experiences in Japan and to examine the changes and continuities in his intellectual and political thought in the post-coup period.¹⁸

Subversive Activities in Japan

Not long after beginning his life in exile in Japan, Kim was once again caught up in a story of intrigue. In November 1885, the Osaka Incident, which Sharlie Conroy Ushioda refers to as “one of the most bizarre incidents in modern Japanese history,” came to life but was discovered before it was able to come to fruition.¹⁹ The events leading to the Osaka Incident were organized by “People's Rights” advocates and under the leadership of a Japanese liberal reformer Ōi Kentarō, and joined by numerous Japanese, including Kobayashi Kuzuo; Kageyama Hideko, Kobayashi's girlfriend and a liberal activist in her own right; and Gotō Shōjirō, to whom

¹⁸ As for the letters to Yoshida, the police chief, according to the editors of the volume, they are a protest against the government for sending him to an isolated island, and they also show elements of Buddhism in Kim's thought. Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., “Haeje,” *Kim-Ok-kyun chōnjip*, x. As valuable as this possibly is, the writing is so indistinct that accurately reading the letters beyond a cursory overview is simply beyond my current ability so far as recognition of handwritten characters. Therefore, rather than draw conclusions based on my faulty reading, I have decided to exclude the letters from my analysis.

¹⁹ Sharlie Conroy Ushioda, “Women and War in Meiji Japan: The Case of Fukuda Hideko (1865-1927),” *Peace and Change* 4, no. 3 (1977): 9.

Kim had written the “Suggestion.” The goal was to invade Korea “for the purpose of liberating that unfortunate peninsula from the powers of darkness.”²⁰ Imagining themselves as contemporary versions of the Marquis de Lafayette fighting on behalf of the American revolutionaries, armed with guns and bombs, this group was going to fight for Korean independence, to the death if necessary. It did not come to this, however, as the police had received intelligence about the plot and arrested over sixty people who were waiting for a ship in Nagasaki.

I have found no evidence that Kim was personally involved in this plot in any way, but whether or not he was, as word of this incident spread, he quickly became implicated. According to Conroy, it was reported within Korea that Kim “had sailed for Korea with renegade Japanese in eight Japanese junks.”²¹ Rumors also abounded that Pak, Sō Kwang-bōm, and Sō Chae-p’il were also plotting insurrection from America. As Kim was not among the sixty arrested in Nagasaki, it is unlikely that Kim was actually planning on returning to Korea with these Japanese revolutionaries, though it has been insinuated that the revolutionaries attempted to include him in their plans.²² The implication, however, that he was involved, and the understanding in Korea that he was not only involved but in fact had even arrived already on the peninsula, likely compelled the Korean government to increase its efforts to kill the man who was seen as a bandit and criminal.

Although the extent of Kim’s involvement in the Osaka Incident is unclear, it seems that he was indeed involved in subversive activities during at least his first year in Japan, and his

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Qtd. in Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea*, 175.

²² Quan Hexiu 权赫秀, “Jindai chaoxian kaihuapai Jin Yujun de riben guan ji qi dongyashi yiyi” 近代朝鲜开化派金玉均的日本观及其东亚史意义.” *Lishi yanjiu* 历史研究 no. 4 (2012): 98. Quan does not go into specifics but only indicates that Kim had had some involvement with members of Japan’s right wing party to plan an invasion of Korea. Quan does not specify that one of those times was the Osaka incident specifically, however, though Ōi Kentaro is mentioned specifically.

activities may well have been associated with the developments leading to the incident in November. The details remain obscure, but the general outline of this activity is preserved in three of at least five letters Kim wrote to Yi Chae-wŏn in the summer of 1885.²³ Yi Chae-wŏn was the oldest son of the Taewongun's second elder brother and therefore a cousin to Kojong.²⁴ According to the editors of Kim's complete collected works, Yi did not really understand the Enlightenment Party's movement, but given that Kim communicated with him after the coup by means of secret letters in which he hints at insurrection, it is safe to conclude that Yi was at least sympathetic to the reformers' cause. Perhaps because of this support, as well as his status, he was actually given what seems to have been the highest position in the reform government as "Chief State Councilor."²⁵ That he seems to have escaped punishment is most likely due to his close blood relation to Kojong. At the time Kim wrote to Yi, Yi was serving on Kanghwa Island in a position related to the military, and this was crucial to the Kim's plans, at least as far as they can be ascertained from the remaining letters. Though it is unclear how or when the letters were discovered, the Korean government revealed them in early 1886 when China, Japan, and Korea were concluding agreements.²⁶ This made China and Korea push even harder for his extradition, but the Japanese government, not finding any criminal activity, citing international law and the protection of refugees.

The language in all three letters is at times vague, and in the second letter preserved, there is even an explicit acknowledgement that Kim chose to use code language (K. *amho*, 暗號) to

²³ It is possible that the letters Yi sent in response are also available, but I have not been able to find them. We know that Kim sent at least five letters because in the third letter available, he references a fourth letter that had already been sent.

²⁴ Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., "Haeje," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, x.

²⁵ I use Cook's translation for Yi's title. Cook, *Korea's 1884 Incident*, 245. For the original listing of the reform government positions and their officials, see Kim, *Kapsin illok*, 90-1.

²⁶ Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., "Haeje," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, xi. The preservation of the letters is also unclear. According to the editors, one of the letters were found in Li Hongzhang's complete collected works, while the other was found in a book on Japanese foreign affairs. The editors do not address why these letters were preserved in these two sources. Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., "Haeje," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, x.

conceal his meaning.²⁷ Nevertheless, it is evident from the first letter that Kim was planning another insurrection in Korea possibly along the similar lines as the 1884 coup, and from all three letters that this plan involved guns, that Yi was privy to this plan, and that Kim wanted Yi to take advantage of any opportunity that arose to act on at least some element of this plan. Additionally he shared his thoughts concerning foreign affairs, and particularly his concerns about Korea's continued close relationship with China. Through these letters, then, we can get a glimpse into Kim's activities in Japan after his arrival, and we can also see some indication of his political concerns.

Kim opened the first letter, written sometime between May and July 1885, with an expression of grief, no doubt in response to what was to him the unexpected failure of the coup the previous December.²⁸ He then asserted that, despite the failure of the coup (the term Kim uses is "great event," K. *daesa*, 大事), the five-hundred-year-old country must not "topple over" (K. *chǒnbok*, 顛覆). What follows is a lengthy discussion of foreign affairs, including Kim's continued suspicion of the Qing government. He took upon himself the responsibility of foreign affairs, but he did have this to say about Korean domestic affairs:

I heard in secret that His Majesty, whose great humanity (K. *in*, 仁) is as that of Heaven,

did not punish the crimes of my party (K. *saengdǔng*, 生等). Unaware of the

consequences, he took us to be traitors and bandits and abandoned us. Even though it was

²⁷ Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, "Ch'i chi yu sǒ" "致池留書," in *Kim-Ok-kyun chǒnjip*, 123-8. For the reference to code language, see the second letter, page 126. One possible reason for the obscurity of the language is transcription errors on the part of the editors of *Kim Ok-kyun chǒnjip*. Unlike the other documents discussed earlier in this study, scans of the original handwritten text were not included. "Chosŏn kaehyŏk ūgyŏn sǒ," the "Suggestion," the only text in the collection for which both the original and a transcription are given, I found numerous instances when it was clear that the transcriber had made an error, and several other that were questionable. I am therefore cautious when dealing with the letters to Yi, because I have no way of verifying the transcription. Nevertheless, there are parts of the text where the meaning is evident, and so I base my analysis on those parts in this study.

²⁸ Ibid., 123-5. As the letter is short, I do not give individual citations for each of the excerpts I translate and provide.

not His Majesty's intension, the result was depressing (K. *ōgul*, 抑鬱). I implore you to reveal what were His Majesty's intentions on this matter.

He then asked Yi to send detailed records on this matter but warned him to use extreme caution when doing so, even to the point of using a code. This section of the letter outlines in the clearest terms available in the letter collection the plan that he and Yi were developing for further revolution in Korea, and it involved the familiar question of funds, as Kim seems to have believed that he was in a position to secure funding for Yi if it was necessary.²⁹

Concerning the world's affairs, if there is no money, then it cannot be accomplished. I already know that you do not have money. Then, if your heart is set on continuing on with a great thing (K. *daesa*, 大事), you cannot be without finances. So, if you wish to plan on secretly sending men who are willing to die into the [headquarters],³⁰ you will need a great sum of money. If you have an estimate of what the expenses will be, I implore you to record them and show them to me.

Even here the details remain obscure. The only definite information we are given is that the plan involved hiring something like a suicide unit to infiltrate the Korean military. Although there is no definite evidence, it is not unreasonable to speculate that Kim had already begun planning this before he left Korea in December 1884 and had discussed the matter with Yi, who occupied the highest position in the reform government under the king. Perhaps they had already decided on this plan in particular, or perhaps they had discussed numerous options when it had become clear

²⁹ The purpose of the funding is again unclear. In this case, it is likely it was either for reforms after the successful completion of the revolution, or for purchasing guns or hiring allies for the revolution itself.

³⁰ The meaning of the text here is not entirely clear to me. The text reads, “不可無財且欲圖營使中一窠華沁間一窠陰募死士須費多錢。”窠 (K. *kwa*) generally refers to a nest, though more broadly it can refer to a room. Given the preceding phrase 營使中 and Yi's own position with the Kanghwa troops, it seems reasonable that 窠 here refers to the base of military operations. The meaning of 華沁間 is unclear to me. It might simply refer to an individual's name. With further research, I may be able to find more specific details, but for now, I prefer to leave the meaning as open as possible.

that the reform government could not survive, and this was one that Kim found the most tenable. Whether or not he had begun planning this in December 1884, it is evident by mid-1885 that Kim was actively planning on continued reform in Korea again on the basis of some form of violent revolution.

In the remainder of the letter, Kim discussed domestic and foreign affairs, as well as his own suggestions for Korea's future. Kim heard that von Möllendorff, still employed in Korea, had begun opening relations with Russia. He expressed his continued contempt for von Möllendorff, and by doing so suggested that this invitation to Russia was among von Möllendorff's crimes.

Cho Yōng-ha [a minister who was one of the victims of the 1884 coup] was guilty of crimes punishable by death, but I do know whether or not bringing von Möllendorff was a crime. I regret that I did not kill von Möllendorff. Chosŏn people desire to assassinate von Möllendorff, and he asked for the protection of Qing troops. Killing him is also part of the first policy.

After this, he introduced the three policies he suggested that he and Yi pursue. The first was to improve connections with foreign countries so as to be able to rely on them for protection. The second was to have closer ties with domestic allies. The third was to bring Japanese to Korea in order for them to show effective ways of doing things. Kim wrote that the second policy is Yi's responsibility, while the third is his own duty. As for the first policy, it had already begun and more engagement with foreign allies would bring it to completion. He closed the letter with yet another call for caution and for a "detailed report that illuminates who is the most intimate with the inner government offices."

The second extant letter is considerably shorter than the first, and it deals primarily with foreign affairs.³¹ From Kim's position in Tokyo, though he was no doubt able to learn some information of Korean court affairs, he was of course not privy to all of the details, and so much of his discussion revolved around rumors, and, as a result, he requested more information. The rumors that he heard are as follows. It seemed that the Russians continued to pursue a close relationship with the Korean government—"some say there is a secret treaty, and some say they are being invited to protect [Korea]." This was not good news and would pose a "big obstacle to [his] affairs," and so Kim wanted more information about their "bitter plan" and its mastermind. He then continued with a discussion of the Kanghwa soldiers and the fact that they had Qing teachers and disliked the Japanese, which was also worrisome to him. What follows is a discussion of currying favor with the Kanghwa troops, perhaps relating to Kim's reference in the first letter to infiltrating the military. The letter was concluded in an intentionally cryptic manner, with four lines of somewhat parallel text, followed by a concluding statement, "As for the whether or not the matter is completed, I desire that you use electricity (perhaps a reference to telegraphy) to report. As for the above things, all the characters are code language."

付院附合於大院君之意

合圭合於桂洞之意

束前約束前營之意

³¹ Ibid., 126. The language that opens the first letter discussed conclusively establishes it as the first in the series of communication between Kim and Yi. As for the second extant letter, without Yi's replies or further evidence about the complete collection of letters, it is impossible to know if it was the second, third, or fourth letter that Kim sent. In many ways, this second letter seems to follow quite logically from the first, given Kim's reference at the beginning to the fact that the previous letter reflected the extent of his thoughts, and the more extensive discussion of Russian affairs. Still, without knowledge of the entire set of letters, it is impossible to know the exact position of this letter in the entire collection. The editors of the collection believe that this letter was also written sometime between May and July 1885.

收物收財物於李姓崔姓之意³²

There is no way of knowing if Kim referred to the entire letter when he uses the phrase “code language,” or if he was referring only to these lines. Given the overall coherency of the rest of the letter, as well as the clear insensibility of these lines, I suspect that he was referring to these lines only, though it is entirely possible that such characters as a person’s name earlier in the letter were also code language. The fact that this is in code and its meaning is therefore deliberately concealed from any reader who does not have the key for the code means that any interpretation is tenuous. Nevertheless, I believe that some meaning can be derived from the lines. All four lines conclude with a reference to someone’s views (K. *ŭi*, 意); these are all preceded by characters that can be identified as names; and with the exception of the third line, these names are preceded by the preposition *ŏ* (於). Without further information, it is difficult to know the identities of the people mentioned in the second and fourth lines, but if this reading is correct, it would indicate that Kim was interested in the views of the Taewongun (first line) and of the front military company (third line). Given that Kim frequently asked for information about certain people without using a code, or at least acknowledging that he was using one, it is strange that he chose at this point to introduce a code. The sentence preceding these four lines are arguably equally obscure, but one way to interpret it is that Kim was asking Yi to wait to deliver a letter to the palace and to wait to send a reply until the seventh day of the sixth month, probably June 7, and to use code when doing so.³³ If this is indeed the case, then perhaps Kim was providing Yi with the code phrases he wanted Yi to use in order to establish the key and allow Yi to use the

³² Emphasis mine.

³³ Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, “Ch’i chi yu sŏ” “致池留書,” in *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, 127-8. The text literally says the sixth month and seventh day, but it does not indicate if this is based on the lunar calendar or the solar calendar, and Kim uses both with seemingly little regularity in his writings. This date is probably one factor leading the editors of Kim’s collected works to determine that this and the first letter were written between May and the end of July in 1885. Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., “Haeje,” *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, x.

code in his reply. This is all speculation, but it is clear that Kim is asking for information that would be seen as so subversive that code language is necessary to protect the involved parties.

The third extant letter, which was the fifth letter written, contains the most definite evidence we have that Kim was engaged in subversive activity during his first year in Japan. It is the only letter that is dated, and so we know that it was written on the in the middle of 1885, on the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month.³⁴ Kim opened this letter expressing his “happiness and comfort.” The reason seems to be that he recently came to the conclusion that they should purchase up to one thousand guns, apparently from Japanese and American merchants. The extent to which he had considered the details of the purchase indicates that he had already begun making arrangements to purchase the arms. By this time, their plot, which is barely detailed in these letters, must have developed to the point of being almost ready to initiate, since he told Yi to act if the opportunity arises. As he closed the letter, he asked again about Korea’s relations with Russia, since Yi apparently did not convey this information to him as Kim had asked. He concluded by mentioning that he heard mail in Incheon was being searched, and so it may not be possible to send out mail. Nevertheless, he asked Yi for a detailed report about what is going on, even if the news is not good.

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from what remains of this conversation between Kim and Yi, all of which demonstrate remarkable continuity in Kim’s thought and agenda between his career in Korea and his time in exile in Japan. First is that Kim continued to try to reform Korea, and the letters suggest he was even willing to use violence as a means to do

³⁴ The editors of the Kim’s collected works believe that this letter was written in July, 1885, indicating that they believe that Kim was using the solar calendar. Nevertheless, the year he gives is based on the Chinese sexagenary cycle, which is a lunar calendar system. The only thing we can be sure of, then, is that the fifth letter was written in mid-1885. We know that it is the fifth letter because in his opening line, Kim references the previous four letters. I indicated earlier that there are at least five letters. Since only sixty percent of the letters that we know Kim sent to Yi remain, however, it is entirely possible that later letters were sent but have since been lost or destroyed.

so once again. He was clearly involved in the planning and preparation of something, perhaps a long-term infiltration of the Korean military with like-minded individuals, or perhaps a large-scale event not unlike the 1884 coup. To Kim, this must have been the most rational option following the failure of the coup to realize his vision for Korea's future. As such, from his perspective, it was hardly subversive. Given his status as a criminal and the official delegitimization of the reform agenda that he sought to enact through violence the previous December, however, in the context of post-coup Korean politics, his activities while in exile during this time cannot but be seen as subversive. Even without knowing the details of the plan, the intense secrecy with which he regarded these letters and the intensions behind them, his suggestion that Yi take action if the opportunity arises, and especially his delight at deciding on a plan to purchase one thousand firearms indicate that his intentions toward the current government officials in Korea were likely lethal in nature.

Furthermore, he clearly laid out at least part of his agenda for how he will spend his time in Japan. As was the case before the coup, Kim continued to prioritize financial matters after he went into exile. In addition to his long discussion of the importance of money to the completion of "great matters" in the first letter, in the fifth letter, he again referenced money, indicating he would take care of the finances since he had "a way of deliberately socializing with others."³⁵ Additionally, probably because the fact of his exile prevented him from being personally involved in Korean domestic affairs, he sought to take Korea's future in the international community into his hands. In addition to taking on the responsibility of forming closer ties with foreign allies, he also expressed his concern that Korea would begin developing a close relationship with Russia. There is perhaps a touch of megalomania here, as Korea's government was then staffed with individuals who were officially and legally tasked with these duties, but

³⁵ Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, "Ch'i chi yu sŏ" "致池留書," in *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, 127.

Kim in these letters continued to treat Korea's present and future as matters over which he had legitimate authority.

Finally, his antipathy for the Qing, for Korean ministers who supported Qing influence in Korea, and especially for von Möllendorff were matched by his continued respect for Kojong, commitment to Korea's future, and preference for Japan in the field of international relations. As noted above, he bluntly said that he is suspicious of the Qing and that he was unhappy to know that Qing military instructors were being employed. In the fifth letter, he even uses the phrase "Qing slaves" (K. *ch'öng no*, 清奴) to refer to soldiers who sided with the Qing.³⁶ This discontent did not extend to king and country, however, and in these letters, he continued to demonstrate the same type of loyalty to Kojong and to what he envisioned as the future of Korea as he had before the coup. The fact that he was writing to Kojong's cousin possibly shaped the ways that he discussed the king, and so, taken by itself, Kim's description of Kojong's humanity as comparable to Heaven is not sufficient to understand his post-coup attitude towards the king. What is striking in these letters is the repeated request for information about the king's views, as well as Kim's adamant refusal to believe that the king could possibly view Kim and his party as bandits and criminals. On the one hand, this reflects Kim's own conviction that he was not guilty, but on the other hand, I argue that it demonstrates an absolute trust in Kojong that he would see the situation clearly from Kim's vantage point. But, as he wrote in the conclusion of the first letter, "Although the king hates me, my heart does not change"—the preservation of the country

³⁶ Ibid. Even though Kim used the term "Qing" to refer to the Chinese government, it is unlikely that his opposition to those who supported Qing interests in Korea was based on the fact that the Qing government was led by ethnic Manchus. Kim never discussed the Manchus in any of his extant writings, and furthermore, his opposition was based not on the legitimacy of the Manchu government but rather its involvement in Korean affairs. Additionally, the Qing leaders whom he criticized the most, Li Hongzhang and Yuan Shikai, were Han Chinese.

was foremost in his mind, and his extensive discussions of Korean domestic and international affairs, as well as his own plans to reform Korea from Japan, bear witness to this.³⁷

Imagining Korea's Future from Japan

The above discussion of Kim's subversive activities in Japan could easily be interpreted as the actions of a desperate man who, having once failed to see a violent revolution to its conclusion, persisted in trying to foment revolution, possibly merely for the sake of violence. While it is entirely possible that, to some extent, Kim had become obsessed with revolution, it is an oversimplification to count either the 1884 coup itself or his activities in Japan to such an obsession. As was the case before the coup, when in exile in Japan, Kim developed and pursued a specific intellectual and political agenda for Korea's future, one that because of his status as a refugee he would be unable to carry out personally but that he sought to shape and enact through his contacts in China, Japan, and Korea, eventually leading to his assassination in 1894.

The evidence available on Kim's intellectual and political agenda is found in the three letters discussed above and in two letters he wrote in July 1886, one to Kojong and the other to Li Hongzhang. The information that can be gleaned from these documents is again limited, and therefore any conclusions that can be drawn from them are necessarily tenuous, perhaps even more so than the letters sent to Gotō Shōjirō and Yi Chae-wŏn because of the circumstances of their writing. Both letters were written in response to assassination attempt on Kim's life in June of that year. As the editors of the volume of Kim's collected works indicate, these letters likely did not reach either Kojong or Li, but they were both published in the *Tokyo nichichi shimbun* on July 9 and July 15, respectively.³⁸ The publication of both letters within six weeks of the assassination attempt raises serious questions about the circumstances of their writing and their

³⁷ Ibid., 124.

³⁸ Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., "Haeje," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, xi-xii.

intended audience(s). Though I do not question that Kojong and Li were both intended to receive the letters, the question is through what means, and for whom else were the letters possibly written? In the case of the letters to Yi discussed above, the extreme secrecy of the letters indicates that their contents were intended only for Yi. Therefore, though we cannot take this to mean that Kim was entirely open with his thoughts, we can conclude that he communicated at the very least what he wanted Yi to know. The same cannot be said about the letters to Kojong or to Li. The letter to Kojong is undated, but the letter to Li is dated to indicate that the letter was written on July 7, a mere week before it was published in the public newspaper. This raises the very real possibility that Kim deliberately wrote the letter, and likely both letters, in order to be published for a Japanese audience. Perhaps this was because he knew that the letter from a criminal would never make its way to either the Korean sovereign or to the leading Chinese statesman. Therefore, one way of trying to ensure that his intended audience members received his message was to put it on display in a public forum where it could be picked up by censoring organs.³⁹ Even if Kim's main intention was to try to circumvent the difficulties in delivering a letter to either one of these men, the reality of a Japanese audience cannot be ignored. That both letters support a strong Korea in international affairs, and especially in defense of East Asia, may reflect an awareness of this Japanese audience, in that Kim perhaps hoped to highlight the failures of Korea's contemporary government in foreign affairs to a broad audience. This is not to say that Kim was necessarily any less sincere for this audience, a question that is beyond the available evidence, but that his writing may well have been shaped by an awareness of multiple audiences to whom he wished to promote his agenda. With these questions of audience and

³⁹ This remains merely speculation. In order to confirm the possibility that either Kojong or Li read the letters in this way, further research would have to be done on the circulation of newspapers within East Asia and the extent to which the Chinese and Korean governments monitored Japanese newspapers, as well as which newspapers were monitored.

intent in mind, I now turn to a brief analysis of these two letters to try to understand Kim's agenda for Korea after going into exile and the ways this agenda both differed from and remained consistent with his pre-coup thought.

There are three essential points in Kim's letter to Li Hongzhang. The first is that Kim believed Li to have been behind the recent assassination attempts, and that this was a grave offense in light of Li's status in China and East Asia and his duties toward the region:

You are the great minister of one country. The country's safety and danger reside in your success and failure... How are you able to single out and have someone take on the responsibility of killing a man?! Ok-kyun himself guesses it must be on account of the fact that Yuan Shikai is a young disciple who has no knowledge is showing off his accomplishments to the traitorous sorts of Korea.⁴⁰

Kim's reference to Yuan Shikai reveals the second main point in the letter, which is that, although Kim respected Li and his abilities, Li's interference in Korea through Yuan Shikai was condemnable, because Yuan Shikai was childish and played games with Korean affairs. The vitriol with which Kim discussed Yuan reveals what can only be a deep-seated hatred for the man and his influence in Korean politics, a feeling that was also partially evident in *Kapsin illok*, though not to this extent. The third point in Kim's letter is a call to action to Li to lay aside petty matters, such as assassinating Kim, and work for the good of East Asia. At the center of East Asia, Korea would exist as a kind of neutral state without danger, if only Li would put an end to his current policy toward Korea.

This letter to Li Hongzhang primarily focuses on the relationship between Korea and China and how to move forward in the future as members of the same region, a point I will return to later. In contrast, the letter to Kojong, which is significantly longer, touches on multiple

⁴⁰ Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, "Yŏ Yi Hongchang sŏ" "與李鴻章書," in *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, 151.

aspects of Korean domestic and international affairs, and as such reveals to a far greater extent than any other document remaining Kim's vision for Korea's future after the coup.⁴¹ Kim opened the letter with a sentiment he expressed in his letter to Yi, namely that he could not believe that the King could himself have considered Kim a traitor. In this letter, however, he went one step further, "I suspect that it was not your wish to condemn me; the wicked officials at court are engaged in atrocious activities to vent their own enmity. Even if the cabal fabricates false accusations, I trust that it will not be able to cloud your Majesty's judgment."⁴² Kim then launched into his main argument in the letter, that the current ministers are entirely unqualified to rule Korea in the present age, and that Korea must reform in terms of both internal affairs and foreign relations. Not only had the current ministers poisoned Kojong's attitude toward Kim, but they had also demonstrated that Korea's future is of secondary importance to their political agendas.

Since some contend that the incident last year was too radical, I beg Your Majesty to reflect on it. For the last twenty long years, anyone with the family name of Min, irrespective of his competence, has been favored with a position of trust. How many among the Mins have been responsive to Your Majesty's wish and endeavored to enrich the people and formulate plans for the nation's prosperity and strength? Many of them are guilty of treasonable acts; some have undermined our sovereign rights by relying on the power of Ch'ing officials. Such crimes are too numerous to count. Not a few of these crafty officials have taken undue advantage of the queen's favor, misled Your Majesty,

⁴¹ There is an English translation available of this letter, which I rely on for my analysis, since the original is written in an older style of Korean that I am not familiar with. For the original document, see Kim Ok-kyun 金玉均, "Ch'öl Un-yŏng sagŏn kyut'an sangsomun" "池運永事件糾彈上疏文," in *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, 139-48. For the translation, see Kim Ok-kyun, "Memorial," trans. Han-kyo Kim, in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol. 2, *From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period*, 349-54.

⁴² Kim, "Ch'öl Un-yŏng sagŏn kyut'an sangsomun," trans. Han-kyo Kim, in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol. 2, *From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period*, 350.

and damaged the nation's affairs. Your Majesty has long been concerned over this situation and consulted me in confidence on the plans for removing them; at that time, I was very moved and submitted my views... What are Your Majesty's plans? What plans do the ministers have? Indeed, how many people in Korea today recognize the name England?...This is almost as if some creature has bitten our body, but we do not feel the pain, or, worse still, we do not know what has bitten us. To discuss the future of such a nation is as futile as discussing a fool's dream.⁴³

I quote this passage at length because it reflects the despair Kim felt at Korea's current situation. He clearly felt himself to be acting in the interest of the country when he carried out the coup in 1884, but with its failure, the political party he sought to remove from power had only become more entrenched. Kim wondered very earnestly what the future could possibly hold for Korea under the current political circumstances. The solution, Kim wrote, was a complete change in approach to international and domestic affairs. Instead of engaging in corruption and political infighting, the Korean government needed to reform along several lines.⁴⁴ First, as was the case before the coup, Kim argued that Chinese officials such as Yuan Shikai could not be trusted and that Korea needed to distance itself somewhat from Qing influence. Unlike we have seen in earlier documents, however, Kim in this letter revealed that he did not find Japan particularly trustworthy, either.

It is ludicrous to say that China would help us enjoy peace and tranquility. Japan intervened, for whatever motives, in our national affairs with enthusiasm at one time in

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 351.

recent years but has abruptly abandoned such efforts after the event; hence it too is unreliable.⁴⁵

He then offered a solution that I argue demonstrates a considerable change in his perspective on international affairs and Korea's role therein, as well as a continued push for internal reform:

What then should be done? Externally, we should maintain close relationships of trust with the nations in Europe and America. Internally, we should adopt reforms, enlighten the uneducated, stimulate commerce, put our finances in order, and train soldiers, none of which is too difficult to achieve. If these measures are undertaken, England will return Port Hamilton,⁴⁶ and other foreign powers will give up any intent of aggression.⁴⁷

He then continued with a discussion of internal reforms, namely the abolition of the literati class, which he had apparently advocated in an earlier thesis presented to the throne but has since likely been lost; the promotion of industry and commerce; and a strong education system throughout the country. He closed with an offer that he and the other reformers in exile would gladly return to Korea with Kojong's blessings and begin the work of reforming the country.

Both of the letters to Li and to Kojong are quite rich, and I cannot begin to do justice to the full range of ideas expressed therein. I will therefore limit my discussion to the ways these letters reflect Kim's changing views on Korean affairs in East Asia and the world. First, the core of his intellectual agenda from before the coup remained largely unchanged. Kim continued to argue against Qing interference in Korean domestic affairs, pointing very specifically at Yuan Shikai as the representative of the Qing in Korea and the one who had dealt the most harm to the country. Second, Kim's devotion to the king is, again, very evident. Two times in the letter to

⁴⁵ Ibid., 352.

⁴⁶ England occupied Port Hamilton in 1885 in order to ward off Russian aggression in the area, as it appeared that Russia was considering a location on the Korean peninsula for a warm water port.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Kojong, he expressed his belief that Kojong could not have, of his own volition, truly considered Kim to be a criminal. That was the result of the malicious lies of the Min and ultimately the machinations of Yuan Shikai. Furthermore, should Kojong invite Kim back, he would gladly return to Korea to continue to work for the future of the country. This could be accounted to a certain amount of posturing, currying favor with the king whom he had betrayed so deeply. I find it more likely, however, that Kim is here being sincere. This is a sentiment that he expressed multiple times not only in this one letter but also in the private letters to Yi, and the fact that he continued to return to this subject in his writings indicates that it was most likely a matter that continued to plague him and that he wanted to make sure to express clearly his feelings on it.

Additionally, in both letters, Kim's commitment to a new Korea is also evident. His charge against Li was leveled not on the basis of the immorality of assassination but rather on the claim that, as a public servant who had taken on the responsibility of Korean affairs, Li should have been focusing his efforts on that important task, not leaving it to an ignoramus like Yuan Shikai and spending his time plotting Kim's assassination.⁴⁸ In his letter to Kojong, we see the only articulation of a reform plan other than what is preserved in the "Proposal." While his other letters are all concerned with plans and finances, what we get in this letter is some of the substance of the reform plan for which he made plans and raised money. His criticism against the literati is particularly interesting, especially in light of scholarship that suggests that Kim promoted people's rights. Here again, I argue that such a conclusion is an oversimplification. Instead, he seems to be arguing against the customs that had developed that in many ways

⁴⁸ Of course, from Li's perspective, promoting China's interests in Korea, which was the responsibility he was actually given rather than an essentially neutral order of taking on the responsibility of Korea's affairs, absolutely intersected with getting rid of a troublemaker like Kim.

protected members of the literati class from taxes.⁴⁹ He doesn't argue against this on the grounds of ethics or philosophy but rather from a more materialist perspective—such a protection of the literati class resulted in the impoverishment of the country.

Whenever the people tried to provide for their food and clothing through their own labor, the scholar-officials siphoned off the proceeds; worse still, some people risked losing their lives in the process. It was better the people told themselves, if they avoided the danger by abandoning their work in agriculture, commerce, or industry. Idlers thus came to fill the whole country, and the nation's strength was depleted day by day.⁵⁰

Kim also argued for a reformation of the education system in order to recruit more qualified government officials, even going so far as suggesting that moral education in foreign religions could be beneficial to Korea, as well. He tied all of this to the idea of wealth, “In the world today, nations compete for greater wealth largely through commerce,” with the implication that Korea needed to act along similar lines, something for which the current system of education and preference for idle literati cannot begin to prepare. In these discussions, as has been consistent throughout his writings, Kim's reform agenda for Korea revolved around independence and internal development for the purpose of national wealth.

Despite the continuities with his earlier writing, I suggest that through these letters, we can also detect significant changes in Kim's thought, particularly as it concerns what I have referred to as the methods of his agenda. In these two letters, as well as in the letters to Yi, Kim demonstrates a far more sensitive understanding of and interest in international relations than is

⁴⁹ Yŏng-ho Ch'oe discusses this in connection with the rise of the *sŏwŏn* (書院) in the late Chŏsŏn period. While the academies initially developed in order to protect the spirit of the study of the Confucian classics from government oversight, the fact that members of the *sŏwŏn* were exempt from the military tax was one factor leading to the explosive increase in the numbers of the academies. Tax evasion was a major reason cited by government officials who wanted to regulate the academies and decrease their number. Yŏng-ho Ch'oe, “Private Academies and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea,” in *Culture and the State in Late Chosŏn Korea*, 15-45.

⁵⁰ Kim, “Ch'ŏl Un-yŏng sagŏn kyut'an sangsomun,” trans. Han-kyo Kim, in *Sourcebook of Korean Civilization*, vol. 2, *From the Seventeenth Century to the Modern Period*, 353.

evident in his pre-coup documents.⁵¹ Of course, his antipathy towards Qing interference in Korea is nothing new, but in his letter to Kojong, he acknowledges the importance of China to Korean affairs in a way that he had not in previous extant documents.

Yüan [Shikai] is basically a petty man who curries favor with Your Majesty and the queen for words of commendation to Li Hung-chang. He is unable to make plans for his own future; how could he possibly have time to develop plans for Your Majesty? I may lack wisdom, but I do recognize China's great size and the close relations between China and Korea (like the lips and the teeth), which prove the inadvisability of estrangement from China. What I cannot tolerate is the evil officials in Your Majesty's government undermining Korea's sovereign rights in collusion with such ignoramuses as Yüan Shih-k'ai and his company.⁵²

Additionally, as discussed earlier, he expressed caution about the wisdom of relying on Japan, and he furthermore suggested closer relations with Europe and America.

In his letter to Li, Kim offered a different, though not necessarily contradictory, view of Korea's place in the world. He again affirmed the "teeth and lips" relationship between Korea and East Asia, and he asserted that Li's recent decisions concerning Korea were bad for both China and for East Asia as a whole. Throughout the letter, in fact, he made several references to the shared fate of the countries of East Asia. Kim's reference to East Asia in this letter points at what scholar Quan Hexiu has argued was his development of an early pan-Asian ideology.⁵³

Indeed, Kim does seem to have situated Korea more clearly within a regional identity than he did

⁵¹ This is partially an argument based on evidence of absence, since there is no way of knowing definitively the details of his pre-coup views on international affairs given the fact that only two documents remain from that period. Nevertheless, his post-coup writings indicate a much greater awareness of regional and global politics and a keen interest in how to situate Korea within both, and absent evidence to the contrary, it seems that this could well have been a post-coup development.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Quan, "Jindai chaoxian kaihuapai Jin Yujun de riben guan ji qi dongyashi yi." Quan is quick to argue that this pan-Asianism is entirely different from Japan's 1930s co-prosperity sphere.

in his extant writings prior to the coup. Though he does at points reference “neighboring countries” in his earlier documents, it seems that in those earlier writings he was articulating a vision for Korea as independent from foreign relations, entirely standing on its own.⁵⁴ In these letters written after the coup, we see a different vision. In the letters to Yi, Kim took upon himself the responsibility of cultivating close relationships with foreigners in order to promote Korea’s interests on the international stage, and here we have a clear indication that he understands this international stage to be comprised of not only the other countries of East Asia but also Europe and America. The questions that remain, however, are to what extent can we, or should we, reconcile these two seemingly opposing statements about the close relationship of Korea to East Asia and the untrustworthiness of both China and Japan, and to what extent is this a type of pan-Asianism as Quan Hexiu has argued?

I do not see these statements as necessarily contradictory. Instead, I argue that they reflect the fact that Kim’s earlier agenda had failed, and, from his new perspective in exile in Japan, he gave more serious consideration to international relations than he had prior to the coup. To a certain extent, Kim continued to argue for the same thing—Korea needed to be independent. Yet, it seems that he imagines this independence to exist within a network of regional and global relations, and that regional network was defined as “East Asia.” In other words, there is no doubt in his mind that the Qing should not be able to interfere in Korean affairs. Yet, China could not be entirely ignored or rejected, and neither could Japan. Korea’s fate was necessarily connected to regional affairs. At the same time, however, in order to protect Korean interests, strong relations must be established with the countries of the West, so as to protect Korea from Chinese, Japanese, and Western imperialism. In short, in a way that we have no evidence that he did prior to the coup, Kim was here articulating a regional and global geography for Korea’s future. Is the

⁵⁴ Kim, “Ch’ido yangnon,” trans. Harold F. Cook, *Korea’s 1884 Incident*, 238.

articulation of the region sufficient evidence to say that Kim developed a pan-Asian ideology? If pan-Asianism is taken to mean simply an ideology that articulates a difference between the East and the West and a corresponding identification with the East, then yes, this would have to be acknowledged as a type of pan-Asianism. The question to me is, however, what type of division does Kim imagine here? In truth, there is not enough evidence to determine conclusively whether or not this is a pan-Asian ideology. What I see in these letters is the articulation of a pragmatic understanding of Korea's geopolitical situation. I do not see Kim arguing for an identity of the East but rather acknowledging that, given their geographic proximity (like the lips and the teeth), China, Japan, and Korea necessarily were subject to similar international forces—they shared the same fate. But there is not a corresponding antagonism towards the West, or a sense of solidarity against the West. In other words, this is an articulation of the reality of the existence of the region without going so far as to promote a regional identity in opposition to the West. We see at best roots of later pan-Asian ideologies, but not, in my opinion, pan-Asianism itself. Instead, based on the available evidence, it seems that Kim advocated a model of international affairs that recognized Korea's position regionally and globally and advocated developing both for the promotion of Korea's future as an independent country on the international stage.

Exiled within Japan

Kim's letters to Li and to Kojong mark the end of his remaining writings, and there is little known about his activities while in exile until his assassination in 1894. The multiple assassination attempts on Kim's life, as well as his subversive activities, eventually led the Japanese government to exile Kim to the periphery of the island nation in the summer of 1886, first to an isolated island, Ogasawarasho, and then two years later to Sapporo on Hokkaido.⁵⁵ In 1891, he was allowed to return to Tokyo, and at the end of that year, a report surfaced in the *New*

⁵⁵ Paek, Sin, Chin, and Yi, eds., "Haeje," *Kim-Ok-kyun chŏnjip*, xi.

York Times that he was threatening to burn Seoul, raising alarm in the city.⁵⁶ Such an event did not occur, however, and it may have been an entirely unfounded rumor (or Kim may well have been planning yet another revolution). Regardless of the veracity of the report, interest in Kim Ok-kyun and what were seen as his criminal acts continued, coming to a resolution only in 1894.

⁵⁶ “The Coreans Excited: Kim-Ok-kyun Threatens to Burn the Capital City,” *New York Times*, December 21, 1891.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: THE ASSASSINATION OF KIM OK-KYUN AND THE POSSIBILITIES
FOR A REGIONAL HISTORY OF MODERNITY IN EAST ASIA

Ten years after the coup and following several failed assassination attempts, the Korean government still sought Kim's head, and in March 1894, they got it. Both Kim and Pak Yŏng-hyo were targets that month, but while Pak narrowly averted disaster because he was informed of the planned assault in Tokyo, Kim was persuaded to go to Shanghai by Hong Jong-u in order to meet with Li Hongzhang. Kim had written at least one letter to Li, and was no doubt looking forward to meeting with the leading statesman in China about Korea's future. Whether or not Kim had by now adopted a "pan-Asian" perspective is difficult to substantiate, but that he was willing to leave the safety of the Japanese islands to meet with Li speaks to both Li's stature and to Kim's developing strategy to secure a modern future for Korea in the context of regional politics. Whatever Kim was planning to say to Li, however, will remain unknown, as on March 28, Hong shot Kim in the head in the Japanese hotel room they had checked into the previous day.¹ According to a later report in the *New York Times*, Hong then left the hotel secretly and was arrested the following day, but that "Instead of being arraigned as a culprit, the murderer

¹ I find it most likely that the meeting between Kim Ok-kyun and Li Hongzhang was, at the least, not entirely fabricated. A *New York Times* article dated May 13, 1894 indicated that, though Chinese authorities did not admit to the arrangement of such a meeting, a letter was available and had been read by "scores of people" that indicated that, "Li Hung Chang [*sic*] desired to see him, and would meet him if the Corean would make the requisite journey." Whether or not this letter was written by Li Hongzhang himself is unknown, as is the nature of the meeting, if it was indeed arranged. It is possible that whoever wrote the Chinese letter was party to the assassination plot. There is also the problem of where the anonymous writer of the *New York Times* article found his source. "Government by Murder: The Fate of a Revolutionist in Eastern Asia," *New York Times*, May 13, 1894. This is somewhat different from Conroy's account that Li had promised Kim money if only he would travel to a bank in Shanghai to receive it, and this is corroborated by the account given by Min T'ae-wŏn, Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910*, 223. Min T'ae-wŏn, *Kapsin chŏngbyŏn kwa Kim Ok-kyun*, 11. All accounts therefore indicate that there was some agreement by a Chinese party at least claiming to be acting on behalf of Li Hongzhang, if it was not indeed Li Hongzhang himself who corresponded with Kim Ok-kyun, but it is impossible to know if the meeting was intended in good will, if it was truly going to happen at all.

was saluted by the Chinese authorities with every token of honor and admiration.”² As for Kim’s body, it was given safe passage back to Korea on a Chinese ship. Upon its arrival in Seoul on April 9, a sign was placed on his head reading, “The guilty Kim Ok-kyun who planned rebellion and committed treason and heresy of the highest sort, this day [楊花陳頭]. Not waiting for the time for the *lingchi* [death by one thousand cuts], he is punished with beheading.”³ His body was then dismembered and its pieces paraded around the city, a solemn end for a man who, though despised by his government, thought himself to hold the key for Korea’s future.

Were it any other victim, perhaps this would be the end of his story. But Kim Ok-kyun was no ordinary victim. Despite spending the final ten years of his life as a fugitive, even cast off to the very margins of the country in which he found refuge, Kim’s death was immediately met with uproar from multiple quarters, and it is this, I argue, that throws into sharp relief the regional nature of the history at which Kim stands at the center, as well as the wider regional history of modernity that I suggested exists at the beginning of this study.

For Korean leaders, Kim’s assassination was the conclusion of a decade-long search for the leader of the greatest threat to the dynasty of the nineteenth century before the Tonghak rebellion of summer 1894. Not only was this a moment of retribution, but it also removed what was considered to be an active rebel, as it had been rumored that Kim was planning on invading Korea to once again try to overthrow the government. For Chinese officials, too, Kim’s death likely came as a relief. As we have seen his intellectual agenda was far more complex than simply being pro-Japanese, but he was nevertheless strongly identified with the Japanese and their imperial aims in East Asia, and more seriously with the worldview the Japanese represented. Again, regardless of the actual content of this worldview, it was perceived as being

² “Government by Murder: The Fate of a Revolutionist in Eastern Asia.” *The New York Times* May 13, 1894.

³ Qtd. in Min, *Kapsin chŏngbyŏn gwa Kim Ok-kyun*, 12.

marked by a denial of civilization in favor of Western barbarity masquerading as civilization. While the Chinese and Korean governments both engaged to some extent with this Western modern, the goal continued to be to use Western implements for self-strengthening in order to preserve the essential culture.

For Western and Japanese leaders, the assassination of Kim, the celebration of Hong Jong-u, and the dismemberment of Kim's body represented the depths to which China and Korea had plunged. After describing the dismemberment of Kim's body in exquisite detail, "a scene of such shocking barbarity as can rarely be witnessed in any country that has been touched, however lightly, by civilizing influences," the above-mentioned *New York Times* article condemned Korea, saying:

Such was the infamy perpetrated within sight of abodes occupied by Ministers from the enlightened nations of the West. Such was the hideous spectacle presented to the world by a Government that pleads for recognition from America and Europe, and asserts its resolve to cultivate and abide by the most advanced principles of humanity.⁴

Despite this heavy-handed rhetoric, Kim's death did not seem to have had any effect in America, at least as represented in newspapers, as it only received attention for a few days and then was no longer a news item. Not so in Japan, where a group of Japanese, including Inoue Kakugorō, who was active in the planning of the 1884 coup, organized the "Society of the Friends of Mr. Kim," whose membership included several Diet members, as well as private citizens.⁵ This society put pressure on members of the Japanese government, including then Foreign Minister Mutsu Munemitsu, to reclaim Kim's body for a proper burial. This was entirely impossible, of course, as Japan had no jurisdiction over the land and sea over which the corpse traveled on its journey

⁴ "Government by Murder: The Fate of a Revolutionist in Eastern Asia," *New York Times*, May 13, 1894.

⁵ For a brief summary of the activities of this society, see Conroy, *The Japanese Seizure of Korea, 1868-1910*, 225-9.

from Shanghai to Seoul. Nevertheless, the Society was adamant and eventually settled for a mock burial during which they presented a memorial, which can still be seen in Tokyo, and “reverently buried what was said to be a lock of his hair.”⁶ The following day, according to Conroy, a certain Matono Hansuke “audaciously called on Mutsu and demanded that Japan go to war to avenge Kim’s death.”⁷

The Foreign Ministry did not pay Mr. Matono any notice, however, but the very request, as well as the peculiar activities of the Society points to the meaning with which Kim’s death was invested. Although it was the Tonghak Uprising and not Kim’s assassination that was the immediate provocation for the war between Japan and China that was fought largely on Korean soil, his death was an important moment on the path to war, as public opinion in Japan seized the moment to rally against their “barbaric” neighbors who for the past decade had forced Japan to play a secondary role in regional affairs despite Japan’s “modernization.” Even American observers appreciated the tension of the moment, as the article in the *New York Times* suggested that regional trouble was on the horizon:

In one adjoining empire the event has been welcomed with eager satisfaction, while in another it awakens apprehensions of the gravest nature, for much of the evil which the restless and reckless conspirator set on foot will necessarily live after him, and perhaps be a cause of discord and disorder for years to come...Japan alone views the situation with a calmer eye, and is already preparing for the serious consequences which may become inevitable.⁸

⁶ Ibid., 228.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Government by Murder: The Fate of a Revolutionist in Eastern Asia,” *New York Times*, May 13, 1894. Of course, not all of Japan possessed the “calmer eye,” but American media during this period can easily be, generally speaking, faulted for a pro-Japan and anti-China stance.

I suggest that this had little to do with Kim Ok-kyun the man. Certainly he had contacts in Japan, the most noteworthy of which was Fukuzawa Yukichi. Nevertheless, he was hardly a popular figure in his life. The multiple responses to his death had more to do with Kim Ok-kyun the symbol. Despite the syncretic nature of his political and intellectual agendas, as examined in this study, his contemporaries identified him with a particular vision of the world, that represented by Japan and the West, and his death was therefore construed as the violent destruction of that vision by the very forces that represented its polar opposite. These forces were cast as being fundamentally antithetical to modernity and civilization. The brutal nature of Kim's death and dismemberment only served to highlight the barbarity to which the Chinese and Koreans were seen as having fallen, and it was this image of the barbaric Asian other that had been thrown into relief by Kim's death that these Japanese rallied against.⁹

At the beginning of this study, I suggested that Kim Ok-kyun's life and death open up questions about an East Asian history of modernity as a history of process. First, and most simply, Kim's intellectual program, the imperative for violent action, and the circumstances of his assassination were all intimately tied to an international political history of the region. This was, I have argued, primarily shaped by Chinese and Japanese imperialisms as they competed for hegemony over the region, and this placed Korea in a situation where it was necessary to side with one power or the other, or to seek protection by a Western power, which was not forthcoming. Prior to the coup, neither China nor Japan was able to exclusively influence Korean politics. In the wake of the failed coup, however, the Enlightenment Party was essentially rooted out of Korean society, and its ideas for Korea's future no longer held any currency in the

⁹ This was an early step in the development of Japanese orientalism. For an extended discussion of the Japanese creation of the orient and the development of the discourse of a barbaric China, see Stefan, Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

government for the next decade, during which Qing power increased over the peninsula.¹⁰ After the First Sino-Japanese War, it was Japan that was able to exert imperial power over Korea, ultimately resulting in the colonization of Korea in 1910. And so, on one level, we can see how Kim's life and death stand at the center of a well-known history of the late-nineteenth-century power struggle over East Asia. There is also a transnational history here, as well. Kim's crossing of borders and engaging with Japanese intellectuals is one piece of this. Other coup leaders also spent considerable time abroad, and Pak Yŏng-hyo went as far as America prior to the coup. I argue that there is a regional history that goes beyond either international politics or transnational movements, however, and that is a type of transnational history of discourses, by which I mean the circulation of ideas across borders. Of course, such a circulation is closely related to both international politics and border crossing, as discourses form and develop in the context of power relations and they have to have some medium through which to circulate through space. A transnational history of discourse, then, would take international politics and border crossings into account but would focus on the ideas themselves. For instance, such a history would examine what it meant to be modern and civilized circulated across borders and around the world through regional networks, as well as how ideas on modernity changed through the process. By looking at this as a transnational history of discourse, we can simultaneously discuss multiple layers of this history and the processes that have given rise to the "modern world," and this is at the center of my conception of a regional history of modernity in East Asia. Rather than discussing this in abstract terms, I conclude with a series of questions about Kim Ok-kyun in particular that I argue illuminate the nature of this history.

¹⁰ Yŏng-ho Ch'oe puts this in no uncertain terms in his article of the post-coup effects on Korean politics, and at least in English-language scholarship, no one has challenged this idea. Although it does seem that at least prominent sympathizers to the reformists' cause were either killed or driven out of the country, the question remains whether or not individuals continued to harbor interest in the ideas promoted by the party but were unable to express them in that political climate. Ch'oe, "The Kapsin Coup of 1884."

The first is one that I have begun to answer in this study, namely what constitutes the influences behind Kim's particular intellectual and political program? To what extent did he engage with *sirhak* traditions? With other dialogues internal to Korea? With Japanese discourses on modernity? With Western discourses on modernity? How did Chinese discourses of the modern world shape the intellectual and political world with which Kim engaged, even though he personally eschewed Chinese influence? Which global and regional networks allowed for the transmission of these discourses, and in what ways did those networks influence the information that was transmitted? Through what mediums did discourses travel? To what extent was Kim influenced by Fukuzawa Yukichi? Additionally, one important aspect of transnational flows is the question of mutual influence. How did Kim affect Fukuzawa Yukichi? Perhaps one reason that Fukuzawa Yukichi wrote *Datsu-A ron* was that the hope that he placed in Kim and his movement so strong that, when it failed, he realized that his particular vision for Korea was not universal. We can see Kim and his intellectual program representing one response to Western imperialism and the changing power dynamics in East Asia. What were other responses, not only in Korea, but also in China and Japan? What formed the networks in which these alternate discourses developed? How did these developments in East Asia influence the ideas of enlightenment and modernity? Is this type of inquiry limited to an elite stratum of society? If not, how do we study the ways that other members of society reckoned with the changes they observed in their society, and to what extent did those intellectual histories also develop in a regional context? And finally, what are the limits of such a regional model of modernity and of a history of process?

This is not to say that a more detailed study of Kim Ok-kyun can answer these questions. Nevertheless, I argue that his story points to a larger history of how the modern world was

engaged with East Asia, not merely on the level of the national but also on the level of the region. By asking these questions, we open up the possibility of accessing a more complex history of the modern experience in East Asia and around the world.

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