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Summary of Michael Mansfield's Master's Thesis: "American Diplomatic Relations with Korea [1866-1910]"

Mike Mansfield's master's thesis, "American Diplomatic Relations with Korea [1866-1910]," not only studies the changing relationship between the United States and Korea at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, which the title would suggest, but it also frames Korea's position within a larger discussion of fluctuating power dynamics and shifting international aspirations amongst the world's powers (namely France, Great Britain, Russia, China, Japan, and the United States). Mansfield's study takes place during a decidedly turbulent time in Korea's history in which the then politically-unified peninsula changed from a Chinese tributary state, to a *de facto* independent state, to a colony in the Japanese Empire. During this time period, Korea-U.S. relations ebbed and flowed, yet throughout all of it, the United States did not value the relationship as highly as the Koreans did, and this incompatibility ultimately lent to the peninsula's return to servitude.

The period between the 1860s and 1890s saw a process of slow independence from China coupled with Korean trepidation about open relations with foreign powers. Interestingly, Korea did not undergo a traditional independence movement borne of violence or even strong diplomatic actions, but rather, a gradual disintegration of its tributary status with China that culminated with Prince Kung's declaration that the two countries' connection was "only ceremonial," not political. At that point, the Western powers, as well as Japan, vied for influence on the peninsula, and though Korea repeatedly refused making trade deals or peace treaties for several years, it finally relented in 1879 when it opened the port of Gusan to Japanese trade. Three years later a treaty between Korea and the United States was signed, and in the three years after that, almost identical treaties were signed with Great Britain, Italy and France. In short, Korea was open. Yet, almost as if to insure against the risk of becoming more open, the treaty between the United States and Korea included a declaration of mutual protection in Article 1 stating, "If other powers deal unjustly or oppressively with either Government, the other will exert their good offices, on being informed of the case, to bring about an amicable arrangement, thus showing their friendly feelings." This clause proved to be very important to the Koreans, as they would eventually attempt to use this provision over the next thirty years to compel the United States to intervene in future conflicts, yet the United States would remain neutral, leaving the peninsula to its fate.

In the next twenty years between the 1890s and the 1910s, Korea was caught between the converging interests of China, Russia, and Japan. All wanted control and influence for different purposes. China, interested in reclaiming its preeminence on the continent, attempted to control the peninsula and limit the influence of other countries. Russia, in the midst of developing its naval power in order to rival the British, was interested in acquiring a year-round, never frozen port through which it could establish its navy. Finally Japan, believing Korea was imperative to its own security, included the peninsula in its imperial vision. Mansfield shows how these conflicting militaristic interests converged on the peninsula and ultimately pushed these states into the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese wars with Korea caught in the crossfire.



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While great power dynamics were playing out on the Korean peninsula, the United States seemed only vaguely engaged. American commercial interests were insignificant and diplomatic ties were unsubstantial. In fact, the greatest connection between the two states was one of philanthropy, due to the large American missionary population in Korea in 1903. Speaking on the importance of the missionaries, Mansfield notes, “whatever interests the United States showed in Korea, the missionaries can be thanked” (79). Even at the inception of the relationship with the U.S.-Korea treaty, the United States’ greatest interest in the peninsula was the security of vessels shipwrecked on the Korean shores and, as maritime technology improved and shipwrecks became less common, this simple motivation waned. Ultimately, the lack of American investment in the peninsula led the United States to refuse aid and protection to the Koreans during the Japanese, Chinese, and Russian military provocations, essentially disregarding their diplomatic promise to the contrary in Article 1 of the U.S.-Korean treaty.

Ultimately, Mansfield’s “American Diplomatic Relations with Korea [1866-1910]” is about a small Asian state and the inordinate importance it held. It is about the familiar story of imperialism overcoming sovereignty, and nationalism overcoming globalism. It is less about a greater, abstract ideal than a recognition and evaluation of the state of U.S.-Korea relations. Yet, if I were to decipher a deeper, more profound lesson from this paper, it would simply be the dangers of indifference. Given that the United States had no imperialistic, economic, or political interests in Korea, it was unsympathetic to the peninsula’s fate, which, ultimately, led to Korea’s colonization. If we are to believe that imperialism is “wrong,” then there seem to be two failures here: 1) the United States’ policy of ignoring the obligations it agreed to in order to avoid complications—a policy that, one could argue, led to Korea’s demise into servitude— and 2) the “great powers’” indifference to the well-being and success of the Korean state. The former seems like a lesson in forethought, meaning that international agreements have long-standing consequences that, if not properly considered, can lead to failures within the international system. In this case, it seems the United States sold long-term promises it was not prepared to honor in order to protect the short-term interest of the safety of its vessels and missionaries. The second failure—the great powers’ indifference to the success of Korea— seems to underscore the risks of zero-sum, competition-based tactics in foreign policy. Mansfield’s paper can be read as a call to uphold multilateral cooperation and understanding in international relations, which seems fitting given his commitment to promoting these principles through his long career in public service.

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