Breaking Open the ‘Hermit Kingdom’
From the Dissolution of Joseon to the Splintering of Korea by Foreign Influence

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In the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), Korea lived out its longest breath of unified identity and relative social stability. Through the authoritarian maneuvering of its Emperors, Korea took on a new and idiosyncratic form of Confucianism at the commencement of the Joseon Dynasty, and this ideology greatly influenced its gradual evolution into the “Hermit Kingdom,” valuing and seeking peaceful isolation and domestic homeostasis. By the nineteenth century, though poor and undeveloped according to Western standards of modernity and economic prosperity, Korea staunchly conserved its Confucian identity anchored in strict social hierarchy and agrarian lifestyle.

As China and Japan began dealing with expansionist Western powers, and as religious missionaries and economic opportunists set their sails for the East, Korea’s fragile boundaries were crossed by unwelcomed guests. This paper aims to trace, in a broad historical fashion, the following developments: (i) how the first encounters with nineteenth century Western imperialism pushed Korea’s brand of Confucian isolationism to its most extreme point; (ii) how this informal Western imperialism and the shift from the rule of Heungseon Daewongun to his son, Emperor Gojong, heralded the breaking open of the ‘Hermit Kingdom’; and (iii) how imperialist escalation and the wars of the twentieth century resulted in the splintering of the Korean nation and its national identity. All of these developments led to the dissolution of the Joseon Dynasty as well as the gradual dilution and transformation of Confucian Korea. A special focus will be given to five particularly traumatic encounters with formal and informal imperialism, mainly the French Invasion of 1866, the grave robbing in 1867, the General Sherman Incident of 1866, the Battle of Ganghwa in 1871, and finally, the furtive Taft-Katsura agreement that led to Japanese occupation and the final dissolution of the Joseon phase of Korean history and identity.