

The Fault in Our Stars? Korea's Strategy for Survival and Germany's Rise, 1876–1910*

Dylan MOTIN

Observers often attribute the disappearance of Korea in 1910 to the failure of Korean elites to modernize the country. Yet, this explanation overlooks both Korea's foreign policy and the international power shift ongoing during the early twentieth century. Accordingly, this study uses international relations theory to shed new light on the Japanese annexation of Korea. First, it shows that the international strategy of Joseon and the Korean Empire corresponds to buck-passing, a cost-effective strategy for weak states. Second, it argues that the rise of German power during the 1900s forced the great powers to focus their attention on Europe. In doing so, they left Korea with no one to catch its buck and vulnerable to a Japanese takeover. Therefore, this article enriches both Korean historiography and the understanding of the strategies of small states.

Keywords: Annexation of Korea, balance of power, buck-passing, Joseon, Korean Empire

Introduction

Observers of the 1876–1910 period of Korean history often describe a linear path leading inexorably toward Japanese annexation (for example, Hao 2018).

*I would like to thank Kuyoun Chung, Ben DeDominicis, Alexandre Haym, Lisa Sangmi Min, Peter Moody, and the anonymous reviewers of this journal for their excellent comments. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Annual Korea University Graduate Student Conference, Seoul, May 28, 2021, and the American Political Science Association's Annual Meeting, online, October 2, 2021.

Dylan Motin (dylan.motin@kangwon.ac.kr) is a Ph.D. candidate majoring in political science at Kangwon National University and a visiting research fellow at the Institute for Far Eastern Studies of Kyungnam University

Seoul Journal of Korean Studies 35, no. 1 (June 2022): 131–161.

© 2022 Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies