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# Traditional Korean islanders encounters with the British navy in the 1880s: The Port Hamilton Affair of 1885–1887

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**Abstract** This article deals with the encounters between a traditional Korean rural and island population and western military forces when the British navy occupied Geomundo, an archipelago known to them as Port Hamilton, for 22 months between 1885 and 1887. The paper first outlines the sometimes painful process of East Asian countries being opened up to trade and outside influences in the 19th century, a process sometimes urged upon them by naval weapons in this era of gunboat diplomacy. This provides the setting for the Port Hamilton Affair itself when in preparation for possible war with Russia, a British naval squadron steamed into Port Hamilton and took it without reference to the local people or their national government. After brief reference to the political consequences of this action, the focus is then on what the records from the occupation and earlier investigations by the British, who had long coveted the islands' strategic harbour, reveal about the life of the islanders. The article considers both their traditional life, from a time rather before western travel accounts were written about the Korean mainland, and how the islanders fared under the British.

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### The reluctant opening up of East Asia

Korea, the Land of the Morning Calm, bore also another sobriquet in the 19th century as the 'Hermit Kingdom'; 'hermit' was used, for example, by William Elliot Griffis in the title of his book, *Corea: the Hermit Nation* (1882). A hermit is

isolated and inwardly focused and a British naval officer, Cyprian Bridge (1876: 101) was imputing such characteristics to Korea some years before Griffis's book appeared when he wrote: 'Korea is the last semi-civilised state which has resisted the attempts of foreigners to open intercourse with it'. Bridge's spatial context was the nations of East Asia, which one by one, and with much reluctance, over the previous decades had been forced to come to agreements with aggressive western nations to open themselves up to trade and other influences. China, defeated in the First Opium War of 1839–1842, had been forced to sign the 1842 Treaty of Nanking with Great Britain,

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which led to the opening of a number of treaty ports. Japan was forced into its own unequal treaties from 1854 when the Convention of Kanagawa (strengthened into the Treaty of Kanagawa in 1858) was forced upon the reluctant Asian nation by the USA under the threats of the 'black ships' of Commodore Matthew Perry in a classic example of gunboat diplomacy. As was the case with China, Japan's first treaty was soon followed by others with western nations and a number of treaty ports were opened up for trade and foreign residence.

Prior to the appearance of Commodore Perry off its coasts Japan had been just as hermit-like as Korea. Its policy of national seclusion, *sakoku*, imposed from the 1630s had kept the country almost completely isolated. A British diplomat of the period compared Japan to Sleeping Beauty, whose dreams were then interrupted by the 'eager and vigorous West' (Satow, 1921: 90). Before the interruption, Japan had had just four points of contact and trade with the outside world: with Hokkaido to the north, which was then peopled by the Ainu and was not brought fully into the Japanese realm until being colonised from 1869; with the Ryukyu kingdom (Okinawa) to the southwest, which was annexed by Japan in 1879; with Korea through a trading post at Busan managed through the strategic and sometimes contested island of Tsushima, and finally with Europe in the form of the Dutch East India Company, *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC). The VOC was allowed access to Dejima (Japanese for 'exit island'), an artificial island off Nagasaki, where both their trade and their employees could be carefully monitored and controlled. (Dejima is now in the process of being reconstructed as a heritage project and tourist attraction).

Being opened up by the treaties undoubtedly stimulated East Asian development and industrialisation. For example in Japan, the Scottish entrepreneur, Thomas Blake Glover who moved to Nagasaki in 1859, was involved with railway development and coal mining. He helped to found what are now the Mitsubishi manufacturing empire and the Kirin brewery. However, the transition towards a modern state in Japan was certainly not smooth or peaceful. There was reluctance amongst some traditionalists to accept the new arrangements and the new, foreign, people. One example was the Namagugi Incident on September 1862 when a British merchant was killed in what could be read as a dispute over precedence on the public road near Kanagawa when his party of westerners clashed with the train and retinue of Daimyo Shimadzu Hisamitsu, father and regent of the Prince of Satsuma (the name for southern Kyushu, around Kagoshima). The Namagugi Incident led directly to the brief Anglo-Satsuma War of 1863, when British warships bombarded Kagoshima. That action and other clashes with the west led some in Japan to realise that it had to modernise and the Meiji restoration of 1868 (and the violent response to it) was one result. After a somewhat bloody and contested journey Japan became a simulacrum of a western nation with a readiness to adopt colonialist attitudes – also gunboat diplomacy – in its interactions with other East Asian nations: the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895; the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, and its colonisation programme. Before such major events, Japan had imposed upon Korea the latter's first foreign – and unequal – treaty, the Treaty of Ganghwa in 1876. This was classic gunboat diplomacy (Kim, 2012), 'diplomacy with a gun to the temple' (Cumings, 1997: 102). Actual warships were involved, Japan sending ships and troops to Busan and Gangh-

wado in January 1876 with demands for a treaty in retaliation for what may well have been a rather too convenient incident in September 1875 when its warship, the *Unyo Maru*, ostensibly on a surveying mission, had attracted Korean fire from Gangh-wado. As with Japan and China, Korea's first foreign treaty was soon followed by a number of others and western trade, people and influence challenged traditional Korea.

Many elements within the 'Hermit Nation' were antipathetic towards foreign influences, including significant people such as the conservative Yi Ha-eung, always referred to (under various spellings) as the Daewongun, Prince of the Great Court and regent to his young son, King Gojong (Yi Myōng-bok). Korea had for centuries given tribute to China in a Confucian-style familial relationship, China serving as its vassal's 'big brother'. However, China had largely left Korea to its own devices and had not imposed strong controls. It is significant that the Treaty of Ganghwa, which recognised Korea as a sovereign state, was signed after the more progressive Gojong had assumed rule himself in 1873. After the treaties there was unrest: the *Imo* Incident of 1882 and the *Gapsin* Coup of 1884. These included Japanese involvement, countered by China which began to assert a much more directive approach to its 'little brother'. These two nations were to fight over – in both senses of that word – Korea in 1894–1895 in the Sino-Japanese War and a decade later, after its decisive victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905, Japan took control of Korea, first as a protectorate and then from 1910–1945 as colonial ruler. In Qing China the Boxer Rebellion at the turn of the 19th century was only one example of anti-foreign unrest.

### The Port Hamilton Affair

It is against this situation of East Asian enforced interaction with outside powers, which often stimulated strong, sometimes violent reactions within and between the nations, that the Port Hamilton Affair took place. This brought onto the stage two other nations with Asian pretensions: Great Britain and Russia. Russia at this period was actively involved in engagement with Asia, following its defeat in its European theatre in the Crimean War. Territory had been obtained from China under the Treaty of Peking (Beijing) in 1860, after which its Pacific port of Vladivostok – a name that means, somewhat challengingly, 'Ruler of the East' – was founded. Vladivostok became the base for a Russian fleet in 1872. In 1884 and into 1885 Russia had become active in its undefined border region with Afghanistan. Russia occupied the Merv oasis and, more significantly, in March 1885 clashed with Afghan troops further south at Panjdeh. This was seen to endanger Herat, a strategic town of western Afghanistan, the possession of which by Russia would threaten British India. Britain could not accept such a possibility and for a few months it seemed likely that Britain and Russia would go to war. That had an impact much further east, for Britain, properly called then the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, took pre-emptive action against Russia by seizing the Korean archipelago now called Geomundo. This group of islands encloses an extensive water body known to the British, who had surveyed the area in 1845, as Port Hamilton. The British had thought of seizing this strategic asset in both 1860 and, more seriously in 1875. Finally, in April 1885 it was taken. Two principal reasons can be advanced for the action at this time. Firstly British possession

would deny the islands and associated harbor to Russia which was thought to be in search of an alternative or at least an additional naval base in the region, one which did not suffer Vladivostok's seasonal problems of ice and fog. Secondly, possession would facilitate any action to be taken by the British against the Russian fleet and naval base at Vladivostok should war break out.

That the British felt able just to seize what they accepted was Korean territory must be seen in the context of those decades of western involvement with – and often aggression towards – East Asia. The seizure was another example of gunboat diplomacy, although in this case, it was more gunboats than diplomacy at least at first. For the British did not negotiate for possession of the islands, did not ask the leave of the Korean authorities, still less of the c. 2000 native islanders resident there, who lived in four villages, two each on the islands now called Seodo (formerly Sodo) and Dongdo (Sunhodo). On 15 April 1885 the powerless and helpless islanders would just have observed what must have been the startling appearance of HMS *Agamemnon*, an ironclad turret battleship of 8510 tons, accompanied by HMS *Pegasus*, a six-gun sloop of 1130 tons and HMS *Firebrand*, a small gunboat. The ships anchored in Port Hamilton and within a short time the British began to construct shore facilities for a resident garrison. This was on the third island of the group, then called by the British, Observatory Island, which now, as Godo, houses the chief central place of Geomundo, the village of Geomun.

'Diplomacy' followed the gunboats, since seizure of these Korean islands in such a peremptory fashion was regarded as shocking even when set against the backdrop of western activities in East Asia; even if set against the contemporary endeavour of colonialism. The British diplomats in East Asia, their masters in London, and their contacts and counterparts of other western nations as well as Korea, Japan, China and Russia became much involved in dealing with the political and geopolitical consequences of the Port Hamilton Affair. In a nutshell, Korea continually protested, to be fobbed off by British obfuscation and prevarication with the constant refrain that the occupation was only a temporary expedient. China and Japan could not publically condone the seizing of territory, not least through fears that the action would serve as a precedent for others, for which read Russia, to do likewise. Privately they were more sanguine about the action, for they did not wish to see Russian expansion in the region. In the end, after the threat to British India from Russia in Afghanistan had receded through the agreement on a demarcated boundary line, China was able to negotiate an agreement with Russia that the latter would not seize the islands if the British left. They did leave, having decided that the benefits of maintaining the islands would not repay the cost of fortifying them and once the necessary political guarantees were in place they could pull down their huts and sail away. The aim of this present article is not to deal further with the political situation, but rather to focus on what happened to the Koreans involved.

### Western accounts

The opening up of the nations of East Asia brought Europeans and Americans into much greater contact with the area and its people than had been possible before. Diplomats, traders and

travellers began to pen accounts of these ancient lands, newly exposed to a foreign, western gaze. One of the most entertaining and enthralling given his eye-witness reportage of many significant scenes and events is *A diplomat in Japan* by Sir Ernest Satow, which was published in 1921 based on journal entries made decades earlier. Satow, for example, was involved in the immediate aftermath of the Namagugi Incident of 1862 and was actually aboard HMS *Argus* when that ship was part of the British naval squadron that bombarded Kagoshima the following year. Regarding mainland Korea, publications by early British and American representatives in Seoul are significant, especially the writings of Britain's William Carles, who has been described as 'the first European traveller of standing in Korea' (Lautensach, 1945: 49). Carles wrote a report for the British government on his travels in Korea in 1883 and again in 1884; he gave a lecture on the country to the Royal Geographical Society in January 1886, which was published in the Society's then journal (Carles, 1886) and published his book, *Life in Corea*, in 1888. Carles was aware of the European ignorance of Korea and its customs and consciously set out to inform his readers about the country. His book has an account of his own experiences in being appointed to diplomatic service in Korea but mainly concerns the extensive journey he made, largely in the north of the country. As well as detailing his travels (and travails) Carles writes about agriculture, industry, history, pottery, geology, antiquities, religion, fishing, mining, the weather, language, and gives an account (not first hand, he was not present) of the *Gapsin* Coup of 1884.

An American counterpart of William Carles was George Clayton Foulk who, before taking over from Lucius Foote as US representative in 1885, had travelled widely around the south of Korea in both September 1884 and that November. The second trip was the longer, a 900 mile (c. 1450 km) journey in sedan chairs with two companions, Chŏn Yangmuk and Chŏng Su-il, accompanied by a servant, two grooms and 12 chair bearers. The party had five trunks, three bags and a camera, tripod, gun, also a money basket to carry the near valueless Korean coins, three kilogrammes weight or 1000 one pun coins to the American dollar. One of their horses carried the money, which had to be replenished en route (Hawley, 2008). Another western traveller in 1884 was a German geologist, Carl Christian Gottsche, who made two journeys in June and August, but largely restricted his observations to geology.

The fact that the travels of these westerners could only begin after Korea's 1882 Shufeldt Treaty with the US, its first with a western nation, makes earlier observations from visitors to Geomundo all the more valuable for the light they throw on rural life in traditional, pre-treaty Korea. These accounts date back to Captain Belcher's survey of Port Hamilton in 1845, with much more detail available from contacts in 1859, 1875, 1884 and then comes the records from the British occupation of 1885–1887. Two themes emerge. First what the archives and accounts reveal about the quotidian life of the Koreans living on Geomundo. This is an exercise in social history; the islanders were not *yangban*, not high status, not rulers or officials, but what in Europe would have been seen as peasants. Secondly, the later accounts show how the islanders' lives were affected by the advent of the British military, not, as will be seen, amongst them, rather beside them. The accounts interrogated here come from the original manuscripts, only some of

which were printed up, held mainly at the British National Archives at Kew, outside London.

### Traditional life at Port Hamilton

Captain Sir Edward Belcher named the anchorage Port Hamilton in 1845, after the then Secretary to the Admiralty. In the book that emanated from his Asian surveying voyages on HMS *Samarang* (Belcher, 1848) he noted four fishing villages on the islands, with social leadership being exercised by elders in the absence of any civil authority or military personnel. Later accounts in the pre-annexation period add more detail. Charles Wilford, a botanist collecting for the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England, made a ten-day visit to Geomundo in May 1859 and left a journal.<sup>1</sup> Two further accounts emanate from a British navy fact-finding mission of August 1875 when the British were considering the seizure of Port Hamilton: a naval officer, Cyprian Bridge, wrote an article describing the islands in the *Fortnightly Review* (1876) and Francis Plunkett, a British diplomat normally stationed at Tokyo, prepared a report on the islands for the Foreign Secretary.<sup>2</sup> In the event the British did not then take Port Hamilton, largely for fear that doing so would encourage other nations to follow suit and annex territory in the region. However, as described above, the political situation between Britain and Russia worsened in 1884, so the idea of seizing the islands was revived and another report was commissioned, this from Commander Reginald Carey-Brenton of HMS *Merlin*.<sup>3</sup>

These accounts confirm that no military forces or civil authorities resided on Geomundo. There was no doubt that the islands and their inhabitants were Korean, speaking that language and paying taxes to the mainland but, as Carey-Brenton noted, the islands were ‘perfectly neglected’ by their nation, which seemed unaware of the archipelago’s strategic potential. Even the official who received the taxes – usually paid in salt and/or rice – was said never to appear. In the absence of outside authority it was the village elders who kept order, apparently using a tobacco pipe to chastise the unruly. William Carles (1886) later described such Korean pipes as having a stem long enough to be used as a walking stick. The four villages were said to house around 250 people each, although Bridge had the more northerly of the villages on Seodo, now also called Seodo, (formerly Chang-tsun) as the largest. One village, probably Deokchon (Tek-tsun) on Seodo, was described by Wilford as being attractively sited with houses that he compared in appearance to beehives, neatly thatched and surrounded by stone walls. Plunkett saw the houses as mushrooms with their convex thatched roofs visible behind the high walls that separated them from other dwellings. The writers could not have known these were just the

*chogajip* houses of the poorer classes to be found widely across Korea at this period.

Strangers were not normally allowed into the settlements never mind the houses, but Carey-Brenton did get to visit a house after arguing that this was the usual custom of his country. Before he could do so, word had had to be sent ahead to warn the women of the house to hide away, for interaction with strangers or even sight of them was not permitted. All the reports mention this but, again, these westerners would not have known they were describing a national characteristic. On his mainland journeys George Foulk found that Korean women who observed him, ‘sneak up hills and banks off the road, hide their faces, and even lie down to hide behind rocks’ (Hawley, 2008). Wilford, who unashamedly had crept up to a house and peered over its wall, described island women as wearing dresses of calico, fashioned like an English gown with a broad waistband and a skirt reaching to the ground above bare feet. Men, he noted, wore white flowing robes with loose trousers. He was particularly taken by the wide-brimmed hats worn by married men, which it transpired were also common elsewhere (Carles, 1888). The island men were curious about the foreigners they encountered. Charles Wilford initially commented on the good behaviour of those who came to visit him, although later he remarked that he could not keep them out of his tent and that he found their overt physicality to be troublesome. This sentiment was echoed by Francis Plunkett when reporting on a meeting with islanders on a large mat spread beneath a tree. He was careful to observe that the men were neither hostile nor rude, but did remark with surprise upon their close physical inspection of him in a manner that would not have been familiar to this mid-Victorian, upper class, Irish gentleman (he later became Sir Francis), for the locals put their hands in his pockets, felt up and down his legs and arms to discover what he had on underneath his outer garments and tried on his hat. Men usually had their pipes and, in addition to the use of tobacco, consumed much alcohol. From descriptions by Plunkett and Bridge this was probably *makgeolli*, made from rice. Both found its taste to be sour. Wilford and Plunkett remarked on the men (they could not judge the woman) as being dirty and there was much evidence of the ravages of smallpox. On the positive side the British and Irish visitors noted high literacy rates and that the villages contained schools.

Fishing was the principal economic activity on Geomundo with limited subsistence agriculture, which was carried out, largely by the women, although men did the ploughing. Cereals, especially millet and rice, with sweet potatoes comprised the principal crops in the stony volcanic soils. Bridge noted that the slopes were green with unripe millet in 1875. The islands’ tough grass was not suitable for sheep and nor were poultry kept, although there were some cattle and pigs. One agricultural constraint was the limited supply of fresh water on these small islands.

### Interactions

It might be expected that being peremptorily occupied by foreigners without warning would have been entirely to the Geomundo islanders’ detriment. However, island peoples are often of a practical bent and there is evidence to indicate that they not only made the best of their new situation but also

<sup>1</sup> Kew Collectors, Charles Wilford 1857–63. Royal Botanic Gardens Library KCL/13/1.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Plunkett to Sir Harry Parkes, 11 August 1875, enclosure in Parkes to the Earl of Derby. Correspondence Respecting the Relations Between Japan and Corea and the Proposed Occupation of Port Hamilton by Great Britain. The National Archives (TNA) FO 881/2700.

<sup>3</sup> Reginald Carey-Brenton, (1885) Port Hamilton Report, 26 December 1884. Admiralty Foreign Intelligence Committee, 67. TNA ADM 116/70.

tried to exploit the British. Additionally, Carey-Brenton had observed that the islanders had no particular political views. Perhaps the hurt caused to Korean national pride by the occupation was something that did not particularly concern the locals, their nation being rather distant from – and neglectful of – their islands. Further, the British were rather sensitive in their dealings with the islanders. From the start there was a policy of keeping servicemen away from the locals: the shore garrison was housed on the hitherto uninhabited Godo (Observatory Island); the marines were forbidden to leave camp; and the sailors were kept on the ships except when working. This enabled island cultural traditions to be maintained, especially the requirement for women to be kept away from strangers or men outside their family. In June 1886 Admiral Sir Richard Vesey Hamilton, Commander-in-Chief of Britain's naval China Station, was quite open about the advantages this policy had brought, not only to the quietude of his responsibility of Port Hamilton, but also in the wider political sphere.

Although these islands have been in our possession for over a year, there has been no sexual communication between our men and the native women . . . the respect paid to their customs has raised our national character not only in the islands but has spread to the mainland and, doubtless to North China.<sup>4</sup>

That the island women were not molested by British service personnel was, of course, a good thing, but only in a negative way in that no harm was done. There were also positive benefits from the occupation. One was in the opportunity it provided for employment. Outside labour was brought into carry out skilled work, such as building the barracks, but there was sometimes unskilled work available for the island men and at times up to 300 were employed, especially on building a breakwater from Dongdo towards Godo to narrow the entrance into the inner harbour. Further, the daily log kept by the base's senior officer records him in December 1885 receiving a deputation of islanders seeking further employment.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps as a consequence, a team from the islands was working the following month on levelling a parade ground on Godo. Indeed, after a theft of tools thought to be the work of labourers from the Korean mainland, it was determined that none but Geomundo men could be employed on Godo, except regarding skilled work outside their experience or competence.<sup>6</sup> However appreciative they were of the islanders, the British still felt able to refuse a request for a loan to pay taxes, an example of islanders trying to exploit the situation in which they had been placed.<sup>7</sup>

Initially, wages were paid in food but once the local shortages that were causing problems to islanders in early 1885 were overcome by such earnings a deputation of elders asked for cash payments instead and a British official had to visit the mainland to secure a large enough quantity of the near valueless Korean coins to meet this demand. A contract for labour was posted on 25 August 1885, which set out the wage rate,

'forbade idleness or skulking' which if detected would see the labourer reported by his overseer to the British officer who could order wages to be stopped. Theft would lead to dismissal.<sup>8</sup>

Another opportunity regarded the leasing of land to the British. Godo was not settled but patches of it were farmed and the British were willing to compensate farmers for appropriating their land. Geomundo might have been seized by an ironclad battleship presumably ready to have discharged its armament in the unlikely eventuality of opposition but, initially anyway, the occupiers recognised that islanders had rights to their land, that this was not *terra nullius*. Always unsure if and for how long they would be in occupation of Port Hamilton, the British did not buy land, but leased it on a rolling six-month contract. In July 1885 owners of plots required on Godo were brought onto their land to demonstrate its extent by walking round its boundaries, with other farmers watching to help keep their colleagues honest. A naval officer marked the boundaries on a map and plots were then leased by the British, who paid six month's rent in advance.<sup>9</sup> This event was of sufficient note to be drawn to the attention of the Marquis of Salisbury, the British Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister.<sup>10</sup> Other plots were taken later for facilities such as a hospital and graveyard as the British presence matured. The islanders were keen enough to lease land in order to receive a regular income from their holding without the necessity of working it, but there was some disappointment when it was made clear that they would remain responsible for paying taxes due on their land.

Whilst it is clear that the Korean islanders got some benefits from the British presence in terms of employment and, for some, the leasing of land, there was also a downside beyond any hurt to identity. In political discussions at the government level there was a constant refrain that Geomundo had been taken only as a temporary measure, which in the end did prove to be the case, but *de facto*, if never *de jure*, the British were in charge. Until a few weeks before abandonment it was not known what was to happen and a rule of law had had to be imposed to deal with situations that arose, although the British did not interfere with local issues within the villages, the Korean justice system remaining in place and there are records of magistrates visiting during the occupation. British justice was imposed with regard to islanders' interactions with the military. A naval officer reported to a newspaper that it was 'imprudent' to be over-kind to the Koreans, 'it was found politic to give them an occasional fright, with perhaps a touch of physical argument . . . severity tempered by mercy or mercy tempered by a little stick' (Cole, 1886). Actually it was a whip that was used and the Senior Officer's log reports at least three cases where Koreans were flogged. There are other instances of fines being imposed on islanders for theft and, in another case a village headman was fined for allowing a Japanese man to set up a brothel, a type of establishment that had been seen as counter to good order and military discipline. An earlier

<sup>4</sup> Admiral Sir Richard Vesey Hamilton to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 1 June 1886, enclosure in the Secretary to Sir Phillip Currie, 17 July 1886. Further Correspondence Respecting the Temporary Occupation of Port Hamilton by Her Majesty's Government 1886. TNA FO 405/36.

<sup>5</sup> Port Hamilton Senior Officer's Log, 25 December 1885. TNA ADM 116/71.

<sup>6</sup> Log, 14 February 1886. TNA ADM 116/71.

<sup>7</sup> Log, 20 April 1886. TNA ADM 116/71.

<sup>8</sup> Enclosure in William Aston to Roderick O'Connor, 3 September 1885. Correspondence From Corea 1885. TNA FO 228/795.

<sup>9</sup> Log, 6 and 8 July 1885. TNA ADM 116/71.

<sup>10</sup> Admiral Sir Montague Dowell to Roderick O'Connor, 4 July 1885, enclosure in O'Connor to the Marquis of Salisbury, 16 July 1885. Correspondence Respecting the Temporary Occupation of Port Hamilton by Her Majesty's Government, 1885. TNA FO 405/35.

short-lived brothel had led to the death of a marine who, with others, escaped from the barracks to make use of its services but drowned when the boat capsized – he could not swim and was anyway weighed down by the heavy load of coins in his pockets.<sup>11</sup> Another issue regarded the need felt by the British to protect people who worked for them. This applied particularly to an interpreter whose village headmen thought was involved in a theft of tools. He, like other suspects, was brought, bound, to the Senior Officer, who immediately demanded, the man's release, not because it was likely that he was innocent – all agreed the man was a rogue and he was soon dismissed back to the mainland – but because he worked for the British. The headman was told sternly by the officer that 'if he ever dared to treat anyone employed by our Big Queen in the same manner I should flog him'.<sup>12</sup> It was clear then who was master on the ground and on the water at Port Hamilton/Geomundo, however nuanced the political discussions about sovereignty might be at the diplomatic level.

Matters could have got worse for Geomundo's inhabitants. If the British were to keep hold of Port Hamilton for an extended period, the anchorage would have had to be fortified. In an emergency, as with the threat of immediate war with Russia in early 1885, the navy could use its ships to defend the base. Long term, that would not be an effective use of naval assets, there are better uses for ships than acting as static gun platforms. So there were plans to provide fortifications on Geomundo itself, which, if built, would have necessitated the British moving from Godo onto Seodo and Dongdo. Had this have happened, despite initial claims that the islanders would not be affected adversely by the British occupation, there would have been the complete deportation of the indigenous population. Their continued presence would not have been conducive to the operation of what would then have become a much more extensive military base. Admiral Hamilton was worried about this; he felt deportation would be a moral outrage but his concern was not for the islanders, rather it was for the 'immense harm' that would be caused to Britain's reputation.<sup>13</sup> Armand Powlett, a naval officer at Port Hamilton, had advised Admiral Hamilton that in such a restricted spatial setting as Geomundo 'there is not room for civilization and barbarism to exist side by side'.<sup>14</sup> Captain Powlett did not identify to which categories the islanders and the invaders belonged, but in the event, the British had not had to venture beyond Godo before civilization and barbarity were separated by their giving up occupation on 27 February 1887.

## Conclusion

The brief Port Hamilton Affair was of a political and geopolitical significance belied by the small scale of its actual activity.

<sup>11</sup> Log, 19 November 1885. TNA ADM 116/71.

<sup>12</sup> Log, 26 and 27 September 1886. TNA ADM 116/71.

<sup>13</sup> Admiral Sir Richard Vesey Hamilton to the Secretary of the Admiralty, 1 June 1886, enclosure in the Secretary to Currie, 17 July 1886. Further Correspondence Respecting the Temporary Occupation of Port Hamilton by Her Majesty's Government 1886. TNA FO 405/36.

<sup>14</sup> Captain Armand Powlett to Admiral Sir Richard Vesey Hamilton, 7 April 1886, enclosure in the Secretary to Currie, 4 June 1886. Further Correspondence Respecting the Temporary Occupation of Port Hamilton by Her Majesty's Government 1886. TNA FO 405/36.

It is an interesting example of the somewhat aggressive approach to East Asia displayed by the West at this period when gun boat diplomacy was quite commonly encountered and the nations of the region were opened up, rather against their wishes. The Affair also speaks to the rivalry between Great Britain and Russia in Asia, sometimes referred to as the Great Game. However, this paper focused more on what light an interrogation of the archives relating to Port Hamilton could shed on Korean social history. Given Britain's long standing interest in the Geomundo archipelago, rather in what advantages possession of its splendid harbour might bring to its navy, there were enquiries and reports about the islands and their people in advance of the first western travel accounts to be written about the Korean mainland. Documenting the housing, economic and social activity, and gender relations to be revealed was one achievement of the paper. Another was to detail the way in which the islanders interacted with the British occupiers often to their advantage, although the fact that the local people would have been deported had the British extended their operations demonstrates where true power lay on this island edge of empire.

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