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Korean-American Relations, Volume II Spencer J. Palmer

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Book Reviews

SPENCER J. PALMER, editor and compiler. *Korean-American Relations*, Volume II, 1887-1895. University of California (Berkeley) Press, 1963. xiii and 389 pp., \$7.50.

Some years ago this reviewer wrote in the old *Far Eastern Quarterly* that the history of the United States in Eastern Asia was, at best, imperfectly known and that the narratives, theories and interpretations based on this scanty information were, to say the least, archaic. What was not, out of courtesy, stated was my conviction that it would take hard, grinding work to repair the deficit. A toiling through masses of ill-written and unorganized documents to ponder them and select in a lucid order the record of events and ideas was in mind. My reason for not adding such an obvious statement was the reflection it might be assumed to have on the then-rising tide of works on American policies and experiences in Asia, which were based more on bright generalities than on spade work.

The volume here reviewed is the kind of careful and enduring work that goes far to establish the record of history. Here, viewed through Americans in Korea, is the story of the last eight turbulent years in which Korea could pretend to be an independent kingdom. These Americans had a singularly intimate view of the proceedings. The United States representatives, the private experts hired by the Korean government and the missionaries were extremely sympathetic with the Koreans, and this emotional overbalance constantly embroiled Americans in Korean affairs and intrigues. These involvements not only affected the course of affairs but because of the intimacy of Americans with the court (and this was an enormously centralized government on the grand and archaic Confucian model) we are privileged, as in probably no other series of American diplomatic documents, to perceive and grasp the inner operations of a foreign state.

Equally important and interesting is the illumination of the ambivalences of American policy and the thought behind that policy in the age of the "New Imperialism." We see easily, now the deep friendship for the Korean land and people and now the deep impatience with the backwardness and arch-

conservatism. We see, now the distaste for Japan's ambitions in Korea and now the pride in Japan's "Americanization" and hope for the same progress in Korea. The same ambivalences plagued Washington. We recognized a neutral and independent Korea and we wanted to see her remain so. Washington would take no positive steps to effect this desire (or to maintain our treaty provisions). Washington's agent at Seoul, Sill, wanted Korea to throw off Chinese influence through the assistance of progressive Japan although he distrusted Japan. The whole collection of documents makes fascinating reading. Not the least interesting is the view given in the dispatches of 1893 and 1894 of the descent into the Sino-Japanese War. If Mr. Palmer can continue with a Volume III for the last tragic years 1896-1904, he will have accomplished the first privately edited and complete series of United States diplomatic correspondence with a foreign country and will further place diplomatic historians in his debt.

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