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Imagining a Controversy: The Taft-Katsura Memorandum in Korean History Comic Books

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Abstract
For generations of North and South Koreans, the 1905 Taft-Katsura Memorandum or “secret treaty” has been emblematic of the U.S. decision to support the Japanese annexation of Korea around the turn of the twentieth century. Although scholars of early Korean-US relations consistently point out that Taft never called the Memorandum anything more than his “personal opinion,” these academic objections have had little impact on how the Memorandum has been remembered by generations of Koreans. By distilling complex historical nuance into concise, visually appealing vignettes, comic book histories of the Taft-Katsura Memorandum in both North and South Korea seem to exert far more influence on how the event is remembered and understood than do scholarly articles, illustrating the tension between actuality and popular memory.

The North Korean Perspective: America as the Eternal Foe
In a state where anti-Americanism is an integral part of national political orthodoxy, the image of the United States as an enemy of Korea is a fixture. In a Korean comic book, the Taft-Katsura “secret treaty” is seen as the culmination of nefarious American actions leading to the 1905 Japanese colonization of Korea.

The Memorandum
The Taft-Katsura Memorandum refers to the transcript of a private conversation that took place between U.S. Secretary of War William Taft and Acting Japanese Prime Minister Katsura Tarō in 1905. As recorded in the Memorandum, the Japanese Prime Minister told Taft that Japan had no objections to America’s colonial possessions in the Philippines. Taft in turn expressed his opinion that the United States would not interfere with Japan’s plans to colonize the Korean peninsula. What at the time amounted to little more than an informal exchange of views has since been reimagined in popular memory as a “secret treaty” wherein the United States abandoned Korea in exchange for the Philippines.

Popular Memory vs. Historical Actuality
The “secret treaty” trope remains popular in Korean history comic books, despite scholarly challenges, because it effectively distills the complicated intrigue of early U.S.-Korean relations into a single historical event. As seen in the image above, the Taft-Katsura narrative can be summarized in succinct bullet points unlike more nuanced explanations of why the United States acceded to the Japanese annexation of Korea. The accessibility of such popular histories compared to specialized academic texts contributes to the widespread acceptance of the technically inaccurate but emotionally compelling tale of the Taft-Katsura “secret treaty.”

The South Korean Perspective: Betrayal by a Friend
As a reflection of South Korea’s multi-faceted historical relationship with the United States, South Korean history comic books portray the Taft-Katsura “Secret Treaty” as an example of America falling short of its high ideals by turning its back on a former friend and ally.

Conclusion
In the case of the Taft-Katsura Memorandum, the forces of historical memory have played a far more influential role in defining what happened between the three nations of Korea, Japan, and the United States on July 27, 1905 than the actual past event itself. For generations of Koreans attempting to understand early U.S.-Korean relations, the Taft-Katsura “secret treaty” has offered a convenient explanation for why the United States failed to come to Korea’s aid at a time of severe national need. Whether used to demonstrate American betrayal or America’s place as “Korea’s mortal enemy,” the story of Taft-Katsura “secret treaty” has spread far beyond the limits of academic inquiry. If history is as much a record of what people say occurred in their past as what actually happened, then the story of the Taft-Katsura “secret treaty” will forever remain enshrined as an important, if not technically correct, part of Korea’s tumultuous modern history.