Korea, Taiwan and Manchuria: Britain’s Japan Consular Service in the Japanese Empire, 1883–1941

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INTRODUCTION

Britain’s Japan Consular Service\(^1\) was not designed to operate outside Japan. Its members were trained for work there, with emphasis on acquiring the language and knowledge of the country, its people and its customs. Three factors changed this. In times of need, the availability of trained and capable staff was a great temptation. Second, promotion was always slow. Finally, with the spread of Japanese influence and the establishment of an empire, it made sense to send members of the consular service to these new places.

KOREA

The first use of staff in Korea arose from Sir Harry Parkes’ interest in Korea that began when he was Minister in Japan from 1865 to 1883. Parkes’ concern was strategic: to keep Korea out of Russian hands. To this end, in the 1870s, he campaigned for the occupation of Komundo (Port Hamilton), a group of islands off Korea’s southern coast. This was at variance with the Foreign Office view of Britain’s interests in East Asia and Parkes was told that Her Majesty’s Government were not in the habit of appropriating other country’s territory. Meanwhile, two members of his staff, Ernest Satow and W.G.Aston, began studying Korean from the late1870s because of its links with Japanese, but also providing Parkes with a solid understanding of Korea.\(^2\)

Vice-Admiral Willis negotiated Britain’s first treaty with Korea in 1882. Aston accompanied him but Willis appears to have paid little attention to his adviser. The result was a treaty generally deemed unsatisfactory. It was abandoned, and under Parkes’ guidance, a new
treaty was negotiated in 1883. To effect this, Aston, with Walter Hillier and C.T. Maude from China, went to Korea in 1883. As well as treaty negotiations, Aston leased the land on which the British Embassy still stands. In November 1883, Parkes, now Minister at Beijing, arrived to finalize and sign the new treaty.3

Parkes (and the Treasury) felt there was no need to establish a diplomatic presence in Korea. The minister in Beijing would be side-accredited, an arrangement that lasted until the late 1890s. However, there was a need for a consular establishment since British merchants were already arriving, and Parkes proposed Aston as consul general. The Treasury would only agree to temporary appointments. Other staff came from China.4

Aston’s appointment did not last long. Attending a banquet at the newly opened Korean post office in December 1884, he and the other guests were caught up in a progressive coup against the conservatives. Forced to flee on a freezing winter’s night to the United States Legation, Aston’s health collapsed. In January 1885, he left Korea. The Chemulp’o vice consul W.R. Carles took over.5 Aston returned for a few months but then left Korea permanently. He spent three years in Tokyo as Japan Secretary, then retired early in 1889. Until his death in 1911, much of his time was devoted to Japanese studies, but he never lost his interest in Korea.6

With Aston’s departure, the Korean posts moved firmly into the orbit of the China service, for whom they were plum postings.7 There were occasional exceptions. When John Jordon, who became minister in Seoul after the establishment of the Great Han Empire in October 1897, went on leave in 1900, John Gubbins from Tokyo replaced him. It is possible that there was nobody of sufficient seniority available from China in the disturbed period just prior to the Boxer outbreak. Gubbins remained until Jordan’s return in November 1901. Gubbins liked Korea, but shared with Aston a low opinion of the government.8 Another exception was Arthur Hyde Lay, who joined the Japan Consular Service in 1887, and who became vice-consul at Chemulp’o in 1902. Until retirement in 1927, he was to spend most of his career in Korea.9

Japan established a protectorate over Korea in 1905. The foreign legations ceased to exist, reverting to consulates or consulates general. There appears to have been some British procrastination, which worried the Japanese, but this was to make sure that Jordan did not lose out financially rather than a wish to maintain the status quo.10 Despite Japan’s clear dominance of the peninsula and the increasing number of Japanese officials with whom consular officials now had to deal, staff continued to be drawn from the China Consular Service. Only after the 1910 Japanese annexation of Korea did the Japan service take over entirely. The work also changed, since extra-territoriality, abolished in Japan in 1899, now ended in Korea.11