

01

Mid-Century Challenges

IB Lines of Inquiry

Inquiry Questions

Rise of Sedo (factional) politics and the weakening of the royal authority

To what extent did the rise of Sedo politics present a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

Spread of Christianity

To what extent did the spread of Christianity pose a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

Threat of Donghak Learning

To what extent did the threat of Donghak learning challenge the Korean monarchy?

Heungseon Daewongun's reforms (1864 to 1873) and isolation policy

To what extent did Daewongun's reforms address the challenges facing Korea in the mid-19th century?

Introduction

In the mid-19th century, Korea stood at a crossroads. Still governed by the long-standing Joseon Dynasty, it appeared – at least to outside observers – as a land isolated from the rapidly industrialising and imperialising world, resistant to foreign contact and entrenched in tradition. Western diplomats and imperialists referred to it as the “*Hermit Kingdom*,” a phrase that conjured images of a society cloistered in time and in need of being “opened.” This language, however, reflected more about the mindset of external powers than the reality of Korean society itself.

Far from being static or sealed off, Korea was experiencing profound internal transformations. The weakening of royal authority through *sedo jeongchi* – a political system dominated by aristocratic in-law families – had fractured the court and created deep administrative instability. At the same time, new ideologies and spiritual movements were taking root. Catholicism, introduced by Korean scholars and foreign missionaries, was gaining converts, even as the state responded with waves of violent persecution. Meanwhile, Donghak (Eastern Learning), an indigenous movement blending Confucian ethics with local beliefs and social justice ideals, emerged as a grassroots challenge to both foreign influence and domestic corruption.

Amidst these tensions, a single figure attempted to restore central control: the Heungseon Daewongun, father of the young King Gojong. As regent from 1864 to 1873, he launched a bold programme of political and fiscal reform while fiercely resisting foreign encroachment. His isolationist policies, which led to military confrontations with France and the United States, were shaped by both a deep suspicion of Western imperialism and a desire to preserve Korea's cultural and political sovereignty.

This chapter explores the period between 1840 and 1876, a time often mischaracterised as stagnant but in reality marked by ideological ferment, popular resistance, and ambitious state-led reform. Through these developments, we will see how Korea navigated the complexities of internal decay and external pressure, laying the groundwork for the dramatic transformation that would follow in the late 19th century.

Timeline

1839-1849	Sustained persecution of Catholics, culminating in the Gihae Persecution (1839), establishes a pattern of repression under the Joseon court.
1849-1863	Reign of King Cheoljong: A weak monarch manipulated by the Andong Kim clan; corruption and factionalism deepen as the monarchy loses authority.
1850s	Rural Hardship Intensifies: Peasants face rising taxation, famine, and administrative corruption, eroding confidence in the Confucian order and fueling grassroots unrest.
1853	Commodore Perry arrives in Japan, signaling the opening of East Asia to Western influence and serving as a warning to Korea.
1860	Founding of Donghak (Eastern Learning): Choe Je-u launches a spiritual-social reform movement calling for equality under "Heavenly Lord," directly challenging Confucian hierarchy.
1863	Death of King Cheoljong and Rise of the Daewongun (Yi Ha-eung): Acting as regent for his young son Gojong, the Daewongun embarks on centralizing reforms to restore royal power.
1864	Execution of Choe Je-u: The Daewongun suppresses Donghak as heresy and sedition, driving the movement underground and strengthening its anti-elite identity.
1865-1867	Reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung Palace: Symbolic revival of royal authority, orchestrated by Dowager Queen Jo [Queen Shinjeong] and implemented by Daewongun, financed by heavy taxation and corvée labour, which alienates peasants and local elites.
1866	Byeong-in Persecution: Massive crackdown on Korean Catholics and French missionaries reinforces Confucian orthodoxy and marks the height of religious repression.

1866	Battle of Ganghwa: Daewongun's forces repel the French punitive expedition, celebrated domestically as a victory defending national sovereignty. <i>General Sherman</i> Incident: Daewongun's forces destroy an American ship demanding trade, the <i>General Sherman</i> .
1868	Oppert Incident: A failed attempt by a foreign trader to desecrate the Daewongun's father's tomb deepens isolationist resolve and anti-foreign sentiment.
1873-1876	End of the Daewongun's Regency and Treaty of Ganghwa: Queen Min's faction rises, the Daewongun is dismissed, and Korea's forced treaty with Japan ends isolation—closing a turbulent era of internal reform and conservative resistance.

Key Terms

Sedo politics	A system of factional rule in the late Joseon dynasty, where powerful in-law families dominated the royal court, weakening the king's authority.
Joseon dynasty	The ruling dynasty in Korea from 1392 to 1897, known for its Confucian bureaucracy and long-lasting cultural influence.
Donghak (Eastern Learning)	A Korean religious and social movement founded in the 1860s that blended Confucianism, shamanism, and nationalism, opposing both corruption and foreign influence.
Heungseon Daewongun (hereafter referred to as the Daewongun)	A title meaning "Prince of the Great Court"; it refers to Yi Ha-eung, father of King Gojong, who ruled as regent from 1864 to 1873.
Anachronism	The act of attributing a custom, event, or idea to a time period where it does not belong—often seen as a knowledge issue in historical interpretation.

THE KOREAN PENINSULA



I. Sedo Politics and the Decline of Royal Authority (c. 1800–1860)

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the rise of Sedo politics present a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

In the early 19th century, Joseon Korea was governed not by strong monarchs, but by the powerful families into which the royal family married. This system, known as *sedo jeongchi* – translated as “in-law government” – was a defining feature of the political landscape from the late 18th century into the mid-19th century. Rather than the monarch himself exercising power, it was often his queen’s family – especially her father or brothers – who dominated court politics and administrative appointments. This period witnessed the rapid decline of royal authority and the emergence of oligarchic factional rule, led by entrenched aristocratic (yangban) clans.

The most dominant of these were the Andong Kim and Pungyang Jo clans, who alternated control over the state apparatus through strategic marriage alliances with the royal house. These families ensured their daughters married into the royal family, allowing them to place relatives in key positions throughout the court and bureaucracy. Once their power was established, they actively excluded rival families from meaningful political participation, thereby monopolising civil and military offices. The *Andong Kim* clan, in particular, exerted nearly unbroken control from the reign of King Sunjo (r. 1800-1834) through to the reign of King Cheoljong (r. 1849-1863), with figures such as Kim Jo-sun and his descendants effectively running the state behind the throne.



Portrait of King Cheoljong, 1861



King Heonjong's Wedding Ceremony, 1844

Factionalism under *sedo jeongchi* was not new to Joseon – it had long been a feature of court life – but the *sedo* system differed in its extreme consolidation of power within in-law families and its near complete marginalisation of the monarch. The balance that had once existed between scholars and officials had broken down, replaced by hereditary oligarchy. This marked a departure from earlier periods when the king could act as a final arbiter among rival Confucian factions, but it is also worth noting this is not a period of extended feudalism. By the 19th century, the king was increasingly a figurehead, and factional power was rooted in family networks rather than ideological or scholarly rivalries.



TOK Connection

In the Confucian framework of Joseon Korea, legitimate power was supposed to derive from moral virtue and scholarly learning. But in the *sedo* era, these ideals were hollowed out. The people who controlled access to knowledge—such as interpretation of the classics, exam results, and royal communication—also controlled access to power.

This raises TOK questions:

1. Is all knowledge equally valued in society? Why might some knowledge (e.g., political connections) outweigh others (e.g., classical education)?
2. Can historical knowledge ever be neutral, especially if it is recorded by elites?

OR

During the *sedo jeongchi* period, power was held not through formal legal authority but through control of networks, appointments, and access to the king. The dominant clans acted as gatekeepers of both political information and institutional memory, shaping decision-making and ensuring continuity of their power.

1. How does this challenge the idea that "knowledge is power"? In this case, was power more about restricting knowledge and access rather than disseminating it?
2. To what extent did Confucian ideology, which emphasizes rule by the morally upright and learned elite, mask the reality of corruption and nepotism?
3. How important is it to understand the context in which knowledge is created?

Consequences for Governance

The political domination of a small number of clans had serious consequences for governance. One of the most damaging effects was the widespread sale of offices (*maegwan*), where official posts were purchased rather than earned through the traditional *gwageo* (civil service exam) system. This undermined the meritocratic ideals of Confucian governance and allowed unqualified individuals to occupy critical roles within the bureaucracy. Provincial governors, military officers, and magistrates could buy their positions, then used them to extract wealth through corruption, heavy taxation, and local exploitation.

These abuses fed into broader administrative inefficiencies. Taxation, which relied on accurate land surveys and household records, became erratic and exploitative. Many yangban evaded taxes entirely, forcing greater burdens on commoners. As the central government failed to ensure fair distribution of tax responsibilities or protect its subjects from abusive officials, public trust in the state diminished sharply. Peasant unrest and banditry increased in the countryside, and the state lacked both the will and the means to respond effectively.

The weakness of the monarchy during this period exacerbated these trends. With real power held by in-law clans, kings such as Sunjo and Cheoljong were unable to discipline corrupt officials or enact significant reform. Cheoljong, in particular, was selected for the throne because he was perceived as a powerless figurehead. He was a distant relative from the royal line with little education or political experience, chosen by the Andong Kim clan to ensure their continued dominance. The erosion of royal powers was not only symbolic but also structural – key decisions were made in royal councils dominated by the in-laws, while the king was increasingly sidelined.

These conditions generated growing cynicism toward the Confucian ideals of just rule and virtuous government. The social contract at the heart of Joseon political ideology – that the state would protect the people in exchange for their loyalty and labor – was breaking down. Disillusionment with officialdom laid fertile ground for the spread of heterodox ideologies, such as Catholicism and later Donghak, both of which challenged the authority of the state and the legitimacy of its Confucian moral order.

Attempts at Central Control

Despite the dominance of the in-law factions, there were attempts – though mostly short lived and unsuccessful – by some monarchs to reassert central authority. King Jeongjo (r. 1776-1800), the last truly powerful Joseon monarch before the onset of *sedo jeongchi*, made significant efforts to reform the bureaucracy and curb the influence of factional politics. He established the Kyujanggak royal library as an institution for scholarly reform and recruited talented officials from outside the main factions, including individuals from seo (secondary status) families. Jeongjo also attempted to centralise military command and improve governance in the provinces.

However, Jeongjo's death in 1800 marked the end of these reform efforts. His successor, Sunjo, was only 10 years old at his accession, leaving the door open for Kim Jo-sun, his maternal grandfather, to dominate court politics. The trend continued with Cheoljong, whose reign was essentially controlled by the Andong Kim faction. Unlike Jeongjo, these kings lacked the political leverage or personal capability to challenge the existing power structure.

Indeed, what reformist movements did occur were often undone by entrenched clan interests. Even when public sentiment and elite reformers demanded change, the lack of an independent monarch with sufficient political base made it impossible to implement structural reforms. In many cases, attempts at central control were reactive rather than proactive – meant to suppress unrest or consolidate clan power rather than to fundamentally improve governance.

Internal Politics and Korea's Response to External Threats

Korea's response to the mounting external threats of the mid-19th century was not simply reactive; it was deeply shaped by internal political dynamics and long-standing ideological commitments. Within the royal court – firmly dominated by the Andong Kim clan – foreign affairs were interpreted through a distinctively Korean neo-Confucian lens, rooted in the kingdom's self-conception as the last bastion of moral governance and ritual orthodoxy. Korea's tributary relationship with Qing China was not only a diplomatic framework but a pillar of Joseon's own legitimacy. For many within the ruling elite, Qing weakness in the face of Western aggression during the Opium Wars (1839-42) was less a call for reform than a cautionary tale: foreign engagement was seen as corrosive to Confucian values, social hierarchy, and the moral order on which Joseon society was built.

Rather than opening the door to external influence, Korean leaders actively reaffirmed their ideological and political isolation. Western imperialism – especially British incursions into China – was framed in Korean discourse not as a geopolitical reality to confront but as a civilisational threat to resist. The fear was not merely of military invasion but of cultural contamination, moral decay, and the potential breakdown of Korea's carefully maintained social order. In this context, the maintenance of strict isolationism became not a failure to modernise, but a conscious expression of national sovereignty, internal stability, and elite control.

Within Korea's ruling class, divergent perspectives began to appear as Qing authority declined. A handful of court officials quietly questioned the wisdom of continued isolation, especially in light of Russia's growing presence in the northeast. These figures – often marginalised or lacking clan backing – proposed limited diplomatic engagement with Russia as a means of protecting Korea's northern frontier. However, these proposals were repeatedly suppressed by the dominant Andong Kim faction, who feared that any shift in foreign policy might invite not only foreign demands but domestic political rebalancing. In this way, foreign affairs remained inseparable from internal court politics: foreign contact was viewed not as a matter of statecraft, but as a potential destabiliser of the existing domestic power structure.

For Korea's ruling elite, the transformation of Japan, a neighbour who was also historically isolated, into a state succumbing to Western influence following the arrival of the United States in 1853, served as a stark warning. Unlike some Japanese leaders, Korean officials did not see the West as a source of opportunity or technological progress. Instead, Japan's example reinforced a growing sense that isolation was a shield – however fragile – against internal upheaval and foreign domination. Joseon's position became paradoxical: increasingly surrounded by states undergoing forced transformation, Korea remained committed to defending its autonomy by refusing to change.

Amidst this atmosphere of mounting uncertainty, Yi Ha-eung – the Daewongun – emerged in the 1860s as a powerful regent seeking to restore royal authority. Though briefly open to pragmatic diplomacy with certain European powers such as France, his primary objective was not engagement but internal consolidation. His early overtures were calculated, aimed at strengthening his position rather than opening the kingdom. Ultimately, he aligned with Korea's dominant conservative consensus: that sovereignty could best be preserved through cultural purification, restoration of Confucian discipline, suppression of heterodox beliefs, and military self-reliance. (There will be more on this later in the chapter.)

The Daewongun's hostility to foreign intrusion was most vividly displayed during the 1868 Oppert Incident, when the German trader Ernst Oppert, with the covert support of French missionaries, attempted to desecrate the Daewongun's father's tomb in an effort to blackmail the court into opening Korea to outside influence. The raid was clumsy and ultimately failed, but it deeply shocked Korean society. For the Daewongun, this was not just an affront to security but a sacrilegious violation of filial piety and Confucian order itself. His response was uncompromising; he intensified crackdowns on Catholicism, denounced Westerners as cultural vandals, and doubled down on isolationist policies. In Korean eyes, the incident epitomised the moral corruption of the outside world and justified the conviction that isolation was not weakness but virtue.



Perspectives

During the regency of Daewongun (1864–1873), numerous monuments were erected across Korea. Constructed in 1871, these monuments were intended to discourage contact with foreigners and were placed at more than 200 major transport hubs. Each bore an inscription in Chinese characters that read: “The Western barbarians have invaded. To refuse to fight is to advocate peace. To advocate peace is to betray the country.” Beneath this, in smaller characters, appeared a final admonition: “Let this serve as a warning to our descendants for the next ten thousand years.”

Discussion Prompt

In 1870s Korea, the anti-Christian steles conveyed a powerful political message. How might peasants, officials, Confucian elites, Christian converts, and foreign missionaries have interpreted this message differently? To what extent do these varying interpretations reveal the broader tensions within Korean society during the Daewongun's regency?

Yet even in this climate of retrenchment, not all Korean thinkers agreed with the Daewongun's uncompromising line. Pak Gyu-su, a respected official and scholar, argued in the 1860s that Korea could not indefinitely shield itself from the global transformations underway. Drawing on earlier *silhak* (practical learning) tradition, he suggested that limited engagement – particularly in trade and diplomacy – might strengthen Korea's defenses rather than weaken them. In his famous "Treatise on Avoiding Barbarian Ships," Pak warned that Western military and commercial power posed a direct threat to Korea's security and urged the court to learn from China's humiliations. While he remained committed to Confucian governance, Pak's proposals revealed a distinctly Korean reformist vision: cautious adaptation in order to preserve sovereignty. His voice was a minority one, sidelined by the dominant Andong Kim faction and eclipsed by the Daewongun's ascendancy, but it foreshadowed the debates that would erupt in the 1870s and 1880s.

The Daewongun's strategy did not simply reject reform – it reasserted a Korean-centred vision of order, one in which stability, hierarchy, and ritual propriety were paramount. From this perspective, foreign threats were not challenges to be adapted to, but temptations to be rejected. In choosing retrenchment over reform, the Daewongun acted not out of ignorance, but out of a deliberate conviction that Korea's strength lay in preserving its own civilisational integrity. Yet this inward turn, while ideologically coherent, left the state increasingly unprepared to confront the accelerating imperialism of the late 19th century.

II. Spread of Christianity

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the spread of Christianity pose a challenge to the Korean monarchy?

Catholicism as an Internal and External Threat

The spread of Christianity in Korea, particularly Catholicism, emerged as one of the most potent ideological and political challenges to the monarchy in the mid-19th century. Unlike many other regions, Christianity did not first arrive via European missionaries but through scholarly contact with Catholic texts from Qing China. In the late 18th century, Korean scholars such as Yi Seung-hun – a pivotal early convert – played a foundational role in the faith's initial spread. Yi, along with other members of the *Silhak* (Practical Learning) movement, had encountered Western scientific and religious writings through diplomatic and scholarly exchanges with Beijing and brought Catholic ideas back to Korea. By the early 19th century, however, foreign missionaries – especially from the French *Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris* – began arriving clandestinely through China, providing institutional support and religious leadership. As missionary activity expanded, Catholicism posed an increasingly visible challenge to the Joseon monarchy – not only as a foreign faith, but as a direct ideological affront to the Neo-Confucian political and cultural orders.

Catholicism and Court Responses, 1830s-1860s

The court's response to Catholicism was uneven, and it fluctuated based on internal political alignments and broader concerns about foreign influence. Even before the 1830s, Catholics had already faced periodic repression, with early converts – including prominent scholars and laypeople – persecuted for their beliefs. Between 1834 and 1849, there was a more sustained and systematic ban on Catholicism, during which its adherents were subjected to severe persecution. The most notorious of these crackdowns occurred in 1839 during the *Gihae Persecution*, when dozens of Korean Catholics and several French missionaries were executed. To the Joseon monarchy, Catholicism appeared deeply subversive: its rejection of ancestral rites, its emphasis on salvation, and its loyalty to a foreign Pope all directly undermined Confucian principles of filial piety and political hierarchy.

A brief period of toleration emerged under King Cheoljong (1849-1863), who reversed these persecutions. Whether driven by political calculation or genuine openness, his reign witnessed the near doubling of Korea's Catholic population, from approximately 11,000 to around 20,000. Foreign missionaries operated more freely, and Korean converts grew bolder in practicing and spreading their faith. This toleration, however, did not reflect a broad-based acceptance within the court. Rather, it was a fragile detente, subject to reversal based on internal power dynamics and shifting external threats.

Foreign Invasions and the Politics of Religion

The destruction of Beijing by Anglo-French forces during the Second Opium War in 1860 reverberated deeply in Korea. For the Korean court, the humiliation of Qing China – long regarded as the centre of regional order – raised alarm questions about Korea's own vulnerability. If the Qing could be subdued by Western powers, what chance did Joseon have? Within the elite, debate emerged over how best to avoid a similar catastrophe. Some officials argued that tolerating Catholic communities in Korea might soften Western hostility, using religion as a buffer against intervention. Others, however, viewed Catholicism as a dangerous threat to Confucian orthodoxy and social order. As a result, Korea's Catholic population – both foreign missionaries and Korean converts – became enmeshed in larger struggles over how to confront the new world of Western imperial pressure and shifting power in East Asia.

In this volatile context, the rise of the Daewongun (Yi Ha-eung) to the regency in the 1860s brought initial signs of pragmatism. He appeared amenable to maintaining relations with French missionaries, seeing them as a potential counterweight to Russian advances on Korea's northern border. For a brief period, the presence of Catholic missionaries was tolerated, particularly because France could be useful as a geopolitical buffer. However, this could be seen as a tactical move rather than a sign of ideological shift.

Other factions within the court, notably those led by Dowager Queen Jo [Queen Shinjeong], remained vehemently opposed to Catholicism. They regarded it as a dangerous and foreign-influenced cult that undermined state legitimacy. Their fears were seemingly confirmed in early 1866, when two Korean Catholic converts bypassed official channels and approached the Daewongun directly – an extraordinary breach of court protocol. On 9 January, 1866, the court issued orders for their arrest on charges of treason, marking a dramatic reversal in policy.



Source Activity One

ATL: Thinking Skills

Source A:

From W.E. Griffis, *Corea: The Hermit Kingdom* (1911)

"The year 1866 is phenomenal in Korean history. It seemed as if the governments and outlaws alike, of many nations, had conspired to pierce or breach the walls of isolation at many points. Russians, Frenchmen, Englishmen, Americans, Germans, authorized and unauthorized, landed to trade, rob, kill, or, what was equally obnoxious to the regent and his court, to make treaties.

In January the Russians, in a war-vessel, again appeared in Broughton's Bay, and demanded the right of trade. At the same time they stated that some Russian troops were to pass the frontier of Ham-kiung to enforce the demand. The usual stereotyped response was made, that Corea was a vassal of China, and could not treat with any other nation without permission of that Power, and that a special ambassador charged with the matter would be immediately despatched to Peking, etc."

Source B:

From Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game* (2013)

"The notion of 'opening' Korea was in standard use by diplomats and historians during the nineteenth century. Scholars, travelers, and observers of this period referred to Korea as the 'hermit kingdom' in need of being 'opened.' Such terms are rarely used in academic circles today, as they are considered both ahistorical and anachronistic. Ahistorical in the sense that Korea's political culture and economy were opened in all sorts of ways before the 1860s, and anachronistic in the sense that the portrayal of Korea as being in the waiting room of history to be acted upon by the Great Powers is simply not accurate."

Questions:

1. What assumptions or values are embedded in **Excerpt A**?
2. How does **Excerpt B** challenge the narrative in **Excerpt A**?
3. What does this tell us about how historical knowledge is constructed?

Can history ever be written without bias? Why or why not?

TOK connection: Can two contradictory historical accounts both be considered valid? Why or why not?

Suppression and Retaliation: The 1866 Persecutions and The French Expedition

The 1866 Korean Catholic Persecution, known in Korea as the Byeong-in Persecution, was a large-scale campaign of religious suppression carried out by the Joseon government, lasting approximately four years. It specifically targeted Catholics, including over 8,000 laypeople as well as numerous French missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society. This persecution arose from both religious and political concerns: the Korean regent, Heungseon Daewongun, viewed Christianity as a subversive influence that threatened the Confucian social order, particularly in the context of increasing Western presence in East Asia.

Initially, the Daewongun had exhibited a degree of tolerance toward Catholics, but this soon gave way to a severe crackdown. By the end of March 1866, nine of the twelve French missionaries operating in Korea had been hunted down, tortured, and executed. The systematic targeting of foreign clergy was not only a religious purge but also a political statement: the Joseon state sought to assert its sovereignty and resist foreign encroachment, even at the risk of provoking international retaliation.

Paper 1 Practice

Inquiry Question: How did fears of Western imperialism influence the Daewongun's persecution of Christians in Korea?

Source A:

Context: 1866: *The French Come to Korea*, edited by Brother Anthony of Taizé, compiles primary documents related to the 1866 French expedition, including French naval reports, missionary letters, and Korean records. The collection provides insight into the political, religious, and diplomatic tensions between Korea and Western powers, particularly highlighting the complex interactions between French missionaries, the Korean state, and neighboring China.

Content: The 1860s saw rising conflicts between French Catholic missionaries and Chinese authorities. Attacks on missionaries occurred for multiple reasons: following the 1860 treaty, bishops, priests, and sisters had established missions across China in ways that often provoked local hostility. While many attacks were of popular origin rather than official policy, disputes also arose over land and church property. French diplomats grew frustrated with China's refusal to settle such matters, leading to the belief that "gunboat diplomacy" was necessary—not only to enforce treaties but also to intimidate anti-Christian populations. As China's provinces were largely inaccessible, France sought to deliver a "lesson" nearby, in Korea, which could serve as a warning to Chinese anti-Christian mobs. Henri de Bellonet later explained that Roze's expedition was intended less to punish Korea and more to demonstrate French power to potential enemies of the Church in the region.

Source B:

Context: Claude Charles Dallet (1829–1878) was a French missionary of the Paris Foreign Missions Society who served in India and later compiled missionary reports in Korea, publishing *Histoire de l'Eglise de Corée* in 1874. His writings reflect the perspective of European missionaries in East Asia and provide insight into the Korean court's reaction to Christianity.

Content: At the time, the Korean court, largely hostile to Christianity, resolved to abolish it completely. The regent and officials, emboldened by the absence of Russian forces and reports of European deaths in China, saw an opportunity to enforce persecution. A letter from the Korean embassy in Beijing in December 1865 reporting European executions across China intensified fears. The four chief ministers condemned the regent's leniency toward bishops, urging the execution of all Christians. Although the regent warned of possible French or British reprisals, his ministers cited previous European killings, such as Bishop Imbert and Fathers Maubant and Chastan in 1839, without retaliation. Ultimately, the regent signed death warrants for all European bishops and priests and decreed strict enforcement of anti-Christian laws, marking a turning point that led directly to the mass persecution in early 1866.

Source C:

Context: Michael J. Seth, a professor of history at James Madison University, specializes in Korean and East Asian history. His works, including *Korea at War* (2023) and *North Korea: A History* (2018), aim to provide broad surveys situating Korean developments in regional and global contexts. Seth's perspective emphasizes state-society interactions and foreign influence, making his account useful for understanding the Catholic Persecution of 1866 and the French punitive expedition, although his work is oriented toward informing students and general readers rather than presenting new archival discoveries.

Content: Initially, the Daewongun tolerated the Christian community. However, foreign crises in East Asia fueled fears that Christianity, as a Western ideology, could destabilize Korea. Officials linked Catholic missionary activity to potential French aggression, prompting the regent to launch major persecution in 1866. In March, nine French priests illegally in Korea were ordered to leave; six were executed, while three escaped. Forty Korean converts were also killed. Warnings from the Qing government did little to deter the regent, whose fears were reinforced by the U.S.S. General Sherman incident, in which a U.S. ship attempted to force trade, attacked civilians, and was subsequently destroyed. Further persecutions resulted in thousands of deaths. In October, France sent a punitive expedition, capturing a fort on Kanghwa Island but eventually retreating. Tensions persisted, as seen in 1868 when German merchant Ernest Oppert desecrated the Daewongun's father's grave in an unsuccessful bid to negotiate trade concessions. Seth frames these events as the outcome of domestic anti-Christian sentiment, perceived foreign threats, and the interplay of state and society in Korea during the mid-19th century.

Questions:

1. Explain how the content of both Source A and Source B can be relevant to addressing the inquiry question. (6 marks)
2. Analyze how context influences how Source C can be used to address the inquiry question. (6 marks)
3. Examine how the perspectives presented in all the sources can be used to address the inquiry question. (12 marks)

That retaliation came swiftly. Outraged by the execution of its nationals, France launched a punitive expedition later that year under the command of Rear Admiral Pierre-Gustave Roze. French forces captured parts of Ganghwa Island and demanded accountability from the Korean monarchy. At the same time, French diplomatic representatives in Beijing, including Henri de Bellonet, increased pressure on Korea, framing the incident as requiring a firm response.

Despite the French offensive, Korean forces successfully resisted. In the Battle of Ganghwa (1866), the French were repelled, an outcome celebrated domestically as a major victory. Following this confrontation, the Korean government intensified its persecution of Catholics, framing it as both a religious and patriotic duty. Catholicism was increasingly associated not only with theological dissent but also with treason, foreign collaboration, and disloyalty to the state. This period, therefore, represents a complex intersection of religion, politics, and nationalism in mid-19th century Korea, lasting from 1866 and continuing in various forms for several years thereafter.

Why was Catholicism seen as particularly dangerous?

1. **Doctrinal conflict with Confucianism:** Catholic rejection of ancestral rites and loyalty to the Pope was seen as undermining core tenets of the Confucian social and political order.
2. **Subversion of hierarchies:** Catholicism's message of universal salvation and equality before God threatened Korea's rigid class structure and hierarchy.
3. **Encouragement of Foreign Intrusion:** Missionaries were often perceived as advance agents of imperialism. The pattern seen in China — missionary presence followed by gunboat diplomacy — only heightened Korean suspicions.
4. **Fear of Rebellion:** Korean converts were often accused of forming secret networks and were sometimes believed to be planning insurrections. While this was largely unfounded, it played into official paranoia.

While the number of Catholics remained relatively small compared to the broader population, their perceived threat was magnified by the geopolitical environment of the 1860s. The Daewongun's shift from pragmatism to brutal suppression reflected the pressures of maintaining sovereignty in a region increasingly dominated by Western imperial powers.



TOK Connection

Optional Theme: Knowledge and religion, Knowledge and politics

Knowledge Question: How does the perception of “foreign knowledge” influence whether it is accepted or rejected by a society?

Discussion Prompts

1. Was Catholicism rejected in Korea primarily because of its beliefs or because of its associations with foreign powers?
2. Can a belief system be judged independently of its political implications?
3. What role do authority figures (e.g., the monarchy, court officials) play in shaping whether certain knowledge is accepted or persecuted?

Paper 3 Practice

'The spread of Christianity posed the most serious ideological challenge to the Joseon state between 1840 and 1876. To what extent do you agree with this assessment?

"To what extent" questions ask you to:

- Evaluate the significance of a given factor or claim.
- Consider **other relevant factors** or perspectives.
- Make a **judgment** based on historical evidence.

Step-by-step planning:

1. Unpack the Question:

- a. Identify the **main claim** (e.g. Christianity was the most significant threat).
- b. Identify **key terms** (e.g. challenge, ideology, Joseon state, 1840–1876).
- c. Ask yourself: *What is the argument? What are the possible counterarguments?*

2. Brainstorm Factors:

- a. Make a list of causes, consequences, or competing influences.
 - ii. Donghak (Eastern Learning)
 - iii. Rise of Western secular ideas (e.g., Enlightenment-influenced diplomacy)
 - iv. Corruption and weakening of Confucian bureaucracy
 - v. Internal reformist ideas
 - vi. **What other factors can you add to this list?**
- b. Categorize them into **supporting** and **challenging** the claim.

3. Create a Judgment:

- a. Decide your argument: Do you **fully agree**, **partially agree**, or **disagree**?
- b. Your essay should lead toward this judgment, not just list information.

Possible paragraph themes

Argument	Evidence	Evaluation
Christianity as a major threat	• Perceived as heretical and anti-Confucian • Associated with foreign powers • Active persecution in 1839, 1846, and 1866 • Spread among <i>yangban</i> and commoners alike	Major cause of internal repression and xenophobic policy (Daewongun). Directly linked to Western intervention (French campaign 1866).
Donghak as ideological challenge	• Founded by Choe Je-u (1860s) • Synthesis of Confucianism, Buddhism, and indigenous spirituality • Advocated social equality	Appealed to lower classes but was less organised/threatening during this period; greater impact post-1890s.
Corruption and Confucian hypocrisy	• Growing factionalism and inefficiency • Moral disillusionment with Confucian elite	Undermined confidence in the system but didn't offer an alternative ideology.
Western secular/modern ideas	• Diplomatic missions from the U.S. and France • Pressure to open ports • Technological superiority	Still mostly resisted by isolationist policy; less ideological, more geopolitical.

4. Write a strong introduction:

A good introduction should:

- a. **Set the context:** Situate Joseon Korea (1840–1876) in terms of politics, ideology, and foreign influence.
 - i. Example: “In the mid-19th century, the Joseon state remained a Confucian monarchy, largely isolationist and resistant to foreign influence.”

b. State your thesis: Answer the question directly.

- i. Example: "Christianity posed a serious ideological challenge, but it was not the only challenge facing the Joseon state during this period."

c. Outline the essay structure: Mention the key factors you will analyse.

- i. Example: "This essay will evaluate the impact of Christianity, as well as the challenges posed by Donghak, Cofucian corruption, and Western ideas, to determine the extent of Christianity's influence."

5. Student Writing Instructions:

- Write 3–5 lines.
- Include context + thesis + factors.
- Use evaluative phrases like: *this essay argues that...*, *it can be argued that...*, *while significant....*

You may find the following useful to include in your essays:

Purpose	Examples/Phrases
Introduce argument	This essay argues that.../It can be argued that.../The spread of Christianity represented...
Show causation	Led to/resulted in/contributed to/triggered/provoked
Compare/contrast	In contrast/whereas/alternatively/on the other hand/however
Weigh significance	Was more significant than/less influential than/to a greater extent/ultimately
Evaluate/qualify	although/while/nonetheless/it could be argued/this suggests that
Link evidence to argument	This demonstrates that/this illustrates/as evidenced by/which shows that
Conclude/summarise judgement	In conclusion/therefore/overall/thus/the evidence suggests that

III. Donghak Learning and its Challenge to the Joseon Monarchy, c. 1850-1876

Inquiry Question

To what extent did the threat of Donghak learning challenge the Korean monarchy?

Origins and Ideological Foundations

Donghak (Eastern Learning) emerged in the 1860s as an indigenous response to social injustice, foreign influence, and the perceived failures of the Joseon state. Founded by **Choe Je-u** (also known by his pen name Su-un), the movement fused spiritual ideas with a radical critique of the existing order. Central to Donghak thought was the concept of Sicheonju (Heavenly Lord), a divine presence inherent in all people, which Choe claimed had been revealed to him through mystical experience.

The Joseon Dynasty's legitimacy rested on Neo-Confucianism, which emphasised a hierarchical, ordered society governed by moral virtue. Yet by the 1850s, the ruling yangban aristocracy had become widely viewed as corrupt, self-serving, and morally bankrupt. Positions of power were often inherited or purchased rather than earned, and Confucian ideals of benevolence had decayed into nepotism, bribery, and apathy.

Peasants and commoners saw Confucian officials failing to uphold their responsibilities. Corrupt magistrates and tax collectors imposed arbitrary levies, demanded illegal tribute, and sold government offices, all in direct violation of Confucian ethics. In this context, Donghak's call for moral reform and egalitarian spiritual awakening offered a compelling alternative rooted in lived reality.

How was Korea's rural population affected by the economic instability?

Korea's rural population bore the brunt of economic instability:

- **Land tenure and taxation:** Most peasants worked land they did not own. They were burdened by high land rents, often owed to absentee landlords, and frequently fell into debt. Despite laws meant to regulate taxation, many were forced to pay multiple times: to the state, to local officials, and to private landowners.
- **Mismanagement of relief systems:** Famine and drought were frequent, but grain relief systems had collapsed due to embezzlement. During famines, food was hoarded by officials and sold at inflated prices, further deepening peasant misery.
- **Military service and labour exploitation:** The poor were conscripted for military corvée labour or public construction projects, often without fair compensation. In contrast, the *yangban* used their influence to avoid service.

Social Alienation and the Crisis of Faith in the State

This period also saw increasing disillusionment with the monarchy itself, especially under the shadow rule of royal in-laws (see above: Sedo politics) and ineffective kings. The concept of the king as “father to the people” was hollow when the state appeared indifferent or hostile to common suffering.

Donghak reframed the spiritual world: rather than relying on ritualistic Neo-Confucian hierarchy, it taught that all humans were equal under Sicheonju. This doctrine dissolved distinctions between the elite and commoners, empowering the disenfranchised with a sense of dignity and cosmic justice. It echoed earlier Korean traditions, promising a moral transformation of society and divine punishment of corrupt elites.

The Daewongun, ruling as regent for his son King Gojong, perceived Donghak as a domestic threat. In 1864, he ordered the execution of Choe Je-u, charging him with heresy and sedition. Yet the movement did not die. Instead, it went underground, with followers organising secret meetings and transmitting Choe’s teachings orally and through clandestine writings such as *Yongdam Yusa*.

After Choe Je-u’s execution, Choe Si-hyeong (Haewol) took leadership. Under his guidance, the movement became increasingly structured, forming networks of *poe* (cells or gatherings) across the southern provinces. These groups were not only spiritual communities but also proto-political organisations, laying the groundwork for future collective action.

By the 1870s, Donghak had evolved beyond a spiritual message. It had become a grassroots movement for justice, combining spiritual renewal with political protest, calls for land reform, and demands for fair governance. It is no surprise that secret societies began to form under the Donghak banner, eventually laying the groundwork for open rebellion in the 1890s.

Although Donghak opposed Christianity and Western imperialism, it also rejected Qing China’s dominance, advocating for Korea’s independence and spiritual sovereignty. Its ideology reflected xenophobic nationalism, which gained popularity among Koreans who believed that the Joseon court was failing to defend Korea’s autonomy. This positioned Donghak as a multi-directional resistance movement: it rejected Western intrusion, Chinese suzerainty, and the Joseon elite’s complicity with both.



Conceptual Connections: Perspectives

Historiography of Donghak

Historians have offered a range of interpretations of Donghak, reflecting different priorities, methods, and historical contexts. Understanding these debates helps students evaluate arguments from diverse perspectives:

James Palais sees Donghak as part of a larger *crisis of Confucian legitimacy*, describing it as a “moral response to systemic collapse.” His focus is on intellectual and moral dimensions, highlighting how societal values shaped responses to systemic pressures.

Kim Yong-seop emphasises *economic factors*, portraying Donghak as a class-based movement reacting to material exploitation rather than religious zeal. This interpretation prioritises social and economic structures over ideology.

Choi Jang-jip views Donghak as a *proto-nationalist movement*, rejecting both Chinese and Western interference. His analysis aligns with 1960s Korean nationalist historiography, which often framed 19th-century developments as precursors to modern Korean nationalism, emphasising indigenous agency.

These differing perspectives show that historical interpretations are shaped by the questions historians ask, their theoretical frameworks, and the context in which they write.

Questions for students to consider:

- How do the priorities and contexts of each historian shape their interpretation of Donghak?
- What evidence do each of these historians use, and how might their focus on moral, economic, or nationalist factors limit or strengthen their arguments?
- If you were constructing your own interpretation of Donghak, which perspective(s) would you prioritise, and why?



TOK Connection

In the Confucian framework of Joseon Korea, legitimate power was supposed to derive from moral virtue and scholarly learning. But in the *sedo* era, these ideals were hollowed out. The people who controlled access to knowledge—such as interpretation of the classics, exam results, and royal communication—also controlled access to power.

This raises TOK questions:

1. Is all knowledge equally valued in society? Why might some knowledge (e.g., political connections) outweigh others (e.g., classical education)?
2. Can historical knowledge ever be neutral, especially if it is recorded by elites?

OR

During the *sedo jeongchi* period, power was held not through formal legal authority but through control of networks, appointments, and access to the king. The dominant clans acted as gatekeepers of both political information and institutional memory, shaping decision-making and ensuring continuity of their power.

1. How does this challenge the idea that "knowledge is power"? In this case, was power more about restricting knowledge and access rather than disseminating it?
2. To what extent did Confucian ideology, which emphasizes rule by the morally upright and learned elite, mask the reality of corruption and nepotism?
3. How important is it to understand the context in which knowledge is created?

IV. Daewongun's Reforms (1864 to 1873) and Isolation Policy

Inquiry Question

To what extent did Daewongun's reforms address the challenges facing Korea in the mid-19th century?

As we have seen, Korea faced a deepening political, social, and external crisis in the 1860s. Internally, the Joseon state was plagued by corruption, aristocratic dominance, and weakening central authority. Externally, Western imperialism loomed large, and Korea's military and diplomatic isolation left it increasingly vulnerable. As France expanded into Indochina, Britain colonized India, and the United States ventured into the Pacific, Korea's leadership was forced to respond. The traumatic experiences of China during the Opium Wars (1839-1842, 1856-1860) and Japan's forced opening by Commodore Perry's Black Ships loomed large in the Korean consciousness.

When Heungseon Daewongun (Yi Ha-eung) assumed de facto rule during his son Gojong's minority, he launched an ambitious programme of reforms aimed at restoring the strength and dignity of the monarchy. His policies addressed some of Korea's most urgent problems – but they also sowed new divisions and left the state ill-prepared for the challenges of the modern era.

Reforms to Restore Royal Power and Stability

One of Daewongun's first priorities was to reduce the power of the entrenched yangban aristocracy, which had long dominated Joseon's politics through sedo (factional) alliances. Influential families such as the Andong Kim and the Pungyang Jo had manipulated court appointments and policy for decades, often prioritizing their clan's interests over those of the state. Daewongun purged many of these powerful figures and sought to restore meritocracy in the bureaucracy. Officials were appointed based on Confucian civil service examinations rather than lineage, which weakened the grip of traditional power brokers but also created lasting enmity among the elite.

To reinforce the legitimacy of the monarchy and in cooperation with Dowager Queen Jo [Queen Shinjeong], Daewongun undertook the ambitious reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung Palace (1865–1867), which had been destroyed during the Imjin Wars of 1592. The palace symbolized a revival of royal authority, but the project came at great cost. It was funded through heavy taxation and the forced labor of peasants, contributing to widespread resentment. Daewongun's tax reforms included the abolition of the hopoje (military cloth tax), a deeply unpopular levy on commoners. He also sought to revise the corrupt grain loan system (Daedong Law), which had long burdened rural populations.

Recognizing the growing threat from Western powers, Daewongun also attempted limited military reforms. He reorganized command structures and modernized fortifications, especially around strategic locations such as Seoul and Ganghwa Island. These efforts were defensive rather than transformative, as Korea still lagged far behind Western nations and Japan in terms of military modernization.

Socio-Economic Reforms and Military Readiness

Aware of growing economic unrest, the Daewongun attempted to tackle some of the systemic issues facing rural Korea. He abolished the military cloth tax (*hopoje*), a highly unpopular levy often misused by corrupt officials. He also revised the grain loan system to prevent the hoarding and embezzlement that had long plagued famine relief efforts. These reforms improved state oversight and addressed some popular grievances, though they did not fundamentally alter Korea's deeply unequal landholding system.

The Daewongun also reorganised and strengthened the military, recognising the growing threat posed by Western powers and regional rivals. New fortresses were constructed around Seoul and major ports, and efforts were made to modernise key defensive positions. Yet these military reforms remained relatively modest and were not accompanied by broader technological or institutional modernisation.



Source Activity Two

ATL: Thinking Skills

Gyeongbokgung Palace: Power, Memory, and Tension

Rising above the bustling streets of Seoul, Gyeongbokgung Palace was more than an architectural masterpiece; it was a statement of royal authority. Built on a grand scale and carefully arranged along a central axis, the palace conveyed order, hierarchy, and the enduring power of the Joseon monarch. During the mid-19th century, however, its grandeur existed alongside profound social tension. Peasants endured famine, heavy taxation, and widespread corruption, eroding confidence in the Confucian order that the palace symbolized. For ordinary Koreans, the imposing gates and elevated throne hall might have inspired awe—but also highlighted the distance between the king's court and their own daily struggles.



Gyeongbokgung Palace, Seoul

At the same time, the Daewongun's reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung in the 1860s was a deliberate political act: by restoring the palace, he sought to reaffirm central authority in a time of internal instability and growing foreign pressure. The palace served as a visible claim to sovereignty and cultural identity, yet its meaning was contested. For officials, it projected continuity and order; for peasants, it could symbolize inequality and exclusion; for foreign observers, it reinforced the "Hermit Kingdom" image of a society resistant to contact.

Over the following decades, the palace's role shifted repeatedly. Colonial destruction and neglect during the 20th century stripped it of much of its political authority, while modern reconstruction projects transformed it into a space of collective memory and national heritage, a symbol not just of monarchy, but of Korea's resilience and evolving identity. Gyeongbokgung thus embodies the tensions of 19th-century Korea: the desire for stability and sovereignty, the realities of social inequality, and the complex ways power, culture, and memory intertwine in the built environment.

Questions:

1. Think about the peasants living under heavy taxation and famine. How might the grandeur of the palace have felt to them?
2. Why might the Daewongun have invested in rebuilding Gyeongbokgung at a time of social unrest and foreign pressure?

The Isolationist Policy: Preservation through Exclusion

Daewongun's reforms were accompanied by a staunch isolationist policy designed to preserve Korea's Confucian identity and political autonomy. He enforced a strict Neo-Confucian orthodoxy, banning foreign books, missionaries, and technology. Diplomatic overtures from Western nations were flatly rejected. Daewongun believed that engagement with foreign powers would lead to Korea's cultural and political ruin, as seen in neighboring countries.

This policy reached its apex in 1866, when Daewongun ordered a large-scale persecution of Catholics. Seen as a threat to Confucian social order due to their rejection of ancestral rites and loyalty to foreign powers, an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 Korean Catholics were executed. Among them were nine French missionaries. The crackdown provoked the French military expedition of 1866, which attacked Ganghwa Island but failed to compel Korea to open.

That same year, the *General Sherman* incident occurred. The American merchant ship, seeking trade, sailed up the Taedong River near Pyeongyang. When the crew refused to leave and reportedly attacked civilians and took a Korean official hostage, local authorities and civilians burned the ship and killed all on board. Daewongun celebrated the destruction of the *General Sherman* as a victory against Western imperialism. However, the event led to the 1871 U.S. expedition, Shinmiyangyo, which again failed to secure concessions from Korea.

Korea's strict closed-door policy contrasted sharply with Japan's embrace of modernization after 1853. Whereas Japan used Western trade and technology to rapidly develop its military and economy, Korea stagnated. Korea's foreign investment, technological advancements, and diplomatic leverage were all affected by isolationist policies. Internally, Daewongun's policies alienated progressive officials, especially Queen Min and her supporters, who saw modernization as essential for survival. The eventual rise of her faction in 1873 marked the end of Daewongun's regency and a shift in court politics.

How did the Shinmiyangyo reinforce Korea's isolationist policy while shaping future intervention in Korea?

The Shinmiyangyo ("Western disturbance of the Sinmi year") was a brief but significant conflict in 1871, when the United States sent a naval expedition to Korea. Officially, the mission aimed to secure a trade treaty and investigate the fate of the *General Sherman*, the American ship destroyed in Korea in 1866.

When Korean officials refused negotiations and fired warning shots as the Americans advanced up the Han River, U.S. forces launched a military assault on Ganghwa Island. Over several days of fighting, U.S. troops captured key fortresses, killing hundreds of Korean defenders. Despite their superior firepower, the Americans withdrew after failing to secure a treaty.

For Koreans, the incident reinforced the policy of isolation (*soeguk jeongchaek*), confirming suspicions of Western aggression. For the United States, the clash was remembered as a demonstration of naval power but largely forgotten compared to later imperial adventures.

Significance: Shinmiyangyo symbolised Korea's early resistance to Western intrusion. It also foreshadowed Ganghwa's later role in 1876, when Japanese gunboats forced the Treaty of Ganghwa, ending Korea's isolationist policy.

Consequences and Legacy

Daewongun's legacy is complex. On the one hand, his reforms temporarily strengthened the monarchy and limited the power of corrupt elites. On the other, his isolationist stance contributed to Korea's long-term vulnerability. The lack of modernization, growing dissatisfaction among peasants, and political infighting at court weakened Korea as foreign threats mounted. The forced reconstruction of Gyeongbokgung and associated tax burdens added to rural unrest, laying the groundwork for the rise of popular religious and political movements such as Donghak, which would erupt in rebellion by 1894.



Source Activity Three

ATL: Thinking and Communication Skills



The Map of the Great East (Daedongyeojido), completed in 1861 by the Korean geographer and cartographer Kim Jeong-ho, is one of the most remarkable achievements in Korean cartography. It is a massive woodblock-printed map, originally produced in multiple folding panels, depicting the entire Korean peninsula in extraordinary detail.

How it was made: Kim Jeong-ho reportedly travelled extensively throughout Korea, personally surveying landscapes, coastlines, and mountain ranges, then engraving the information onto woodblocks for printing.

Why it was important: The map was not simply a geographical tool; it was a statement of Korea's territorial integrity and cultural pride at a time of growing foreign pressure. It reflects an advanced understanding of scale, proportion, and local geography, as well as a desire to consolidate knowledge of the land for administrative, educational, and national purposes.

What it tells us about Korean identity in the 1860s:

1. **National Consciousness:** the detailed depiction of Korea's borders underscored the peninsula's unity and sovereignty.
2. **Scholar-official culture:** the map reflects the Joseon elite's tradition of scholarship and commitment to Confucian governance, where geographical knowledge was tied to good administration.
3. **Technological skill:** the sophisticated woodblock printing process shows both craftsmanship and Korea's own technological capabilities — important in an era when Western powers were claiming technological superiority.
4. **Defensive mindset:** its precision would have been useful for defence and internal control, reflecting Joseon's concerns about security in a rapidly changing East Asia.

Classroom Activity

Using a high-resolution image (or sections) of the *Daedongyeojido*, students should spend 3-5 minutes identifying the following features:

- Physical geography (mountains, rivers, coastlines)
- Settlements and place names
- Borders or boundary markers
- Routes (roads, paths, waterways)

In pairs: Discuss the following questions:

1. What does the map suggest about how Koreans saw their land in the 1860s?
2. How might the emphasis on certain features (e.g. mountains, rivers) reflect Korean cultural values or strategic concerns?
3. Why might producing such a detailed map be important at a time of foreign encroachment?

Connection: As a whole class, connect your observations to broader 19th century contexts:

- The rise of Donghak and Korean intellectual self-strengthening
- The influence of the Daewongun, who valued national sovereignty and defence
- Growing awareness of external threats (Western imperialism, Japanese expansion)

Extension/Paper 2 link:

Compare the *Daedongyeojido* to maps produced by other states under authoritarian leaders (e.g. Bismarck's Germany, Meiji Japan) to see how cartography can serve as a political tool.

Conclusion: The Shifting Foundations of the Joseon Order

By the late nineteenth century, the political and social foundations of the Joseon dynasty were under mounting strain. Sedo politics had reduced kingship to a contested symbol, while powerful in-law families dictated policy and patronage. New ideas, from Catholic missionaries and indigenous *Donghak* thinkers alike, introduced challenges to the dominance of Confucian orthodoxy. The Heungseon Daewongun briefly reasserted royal power through reform and isolation, but his departure from office left Korea without a clear path forward.

The dynasty was thus neither timeless nor immobile – it was already in motion, pulled in different directions by court factions, social change, and external pressure. These tensions would become impossible to contain once Korea was drawn more directly into the geopolitical rivalries of the region. Chapter 2 explores this next phase: Korea's uneasy opening to foreign powers, the competing strategies of King Gojong and Queen Myeongseong, and the reformist and conservative responses that culminated in crises like the Imo Incident and the Gapsin Coup.

Paper 3 Practice

Themes: Sedo politics • Christianity • Donghak • Daewongun's reforms (1864–1873)

It is likely that Paper 3 questions for this chapter will focus on the internal challenges to royal authority in the mid-19th century and the attempts of the Heungseon Daewongun to respond to them. Consider drafting essay plans for the following prompts, written in the style of IB Paper 3 questions.

1. "The rise of Sedo politics fatally weakened the authority of the Korean monarchy." To what extent do you agree with this argument?
2. To what extent did the spread of Christianity pose a challenge to the Korean monarchy?
3. "Donghak Learning represented a direct and dangerous threat to the Korean monarchy in the 1860s." To what extent do you agree with this statement?
4. How effectively did the Heungseon Daewongun's reforms address the political, social, and ideological challenges facing Korea in the mid-19th century?
5. "The Korean monarchy in the mid-19th century was more threatened by internal forces than by external ones." To what extent do you agree with this argument?
6. To what extent did the Daewongun's isolation policy strengthen the monarchy?

Korean War: Connections to the Cold War in Asia (Regional Study 11)

Instability, Ideological Crisis, and Foreign Pressure in Korea (1840-1875): Laying the Foundations for Division

Between 1840 and 1875, Korea entered a period of profound internal strain, ideological challenge, and mounting external pressure. While the Korean War would not erupt until 1950, many of the underlying fractures that made such a conflict possible – external threats and intrusions, social division, political illegitimacy, and deep ideological polarisation – can be traced back to these decades. This was not a time of foreign domination, but one of dangerous stagnation, in which Korean leaders struggled to hold a fragmented society together in the face of both internal decay and a rapidly changing world beyond their borders.

At the centre of Korea's political malaise was the system of **sedo jeongchi** (in-law government), which saw real power concentrated in aristocratic clans like the Andong Kim, who ruled by manipulating royal succession and monopolising state appointments. The monarchy became increasingly symbolic, unable to check corruption or address local grievances. Officials frequently purchased their posts, leading to misrule in the provinces, especially in the countryside where heavy taxation, exploitation, and disregard for the law drove deep resentment. The state, once guided by Confucian ideals of moral leadership and public duty, had become a tool of self-enrichment for the elite.

This vacuum of legitimacy opened space for ideological alternatives. One challenge to the Confucian state was the rise of Donghak learning in the 1860s – a distinctly Korean religious and political movement that fused spirituality with a direct critique of social injustice and corrupt officialdom. Though labelled heretical and brutally suppressed, Donghak's appeal reflected a growing rejection of the existing order by Korea's rural population, especially in the southern provinces. It signalled that the social contract between state and people had fractured, and that an alternative Korea – morally grounded and socially just – was imaginable.

Externally, Korea's elite faced mounting pressure from Western and neighbouring powers. Catholicism, which had begun spreading in the late 18th century, gained momentum among commoners seeking spiritual equality and moral clarity. The Opium Wars and the subsequent decline of Qing China, long seen as Korea's civilisational model, unsettled the court. Rather than reform, dominant factions doubled down on isolation, seeing foreign contact as a threat to Confucian order and elite control. The arrival of Western ships, Russia's encroachment in the northeast, and the forced opening of Japan in 1853 all raised alarms – but instead of adapting, the court viewed these events as justification to close ranks. Korea's response to foreign pressure thus became deeply internal matter, driven less by strategy than by fear of losing ideological and political control.

The brief regency of Yi Ha-eung, the Daewongun, from 1863, attempted to restore royal power and Confucian authority. His reforms — tax restructuring, suppression of heterodox beliefs, reconstruction of palaces, and persecution of Catholics — sought to rebuild a stable and sovereign Korea. But his rule, too, was shaped by contradictions of the time: isolation at all costs, resistance to reform, and reliance on repression rather than renewal. His vision of Korea as morally pure and sovereign proved unsustainable in an imperialist world — and deepened the divide between state and people.

By the mid-1870s, Korea remained formally independent and ideologically rigid, but socially fractured and politically brittle. The crises of this period were not resolved — they were merely deferred. The discontent, distrust, and competing visions of Korea's future that emerged in these decades would later resurface in more explosive form. In this sense, the roots of Korea's 20th-century divisions lie not only in colonialism or the Cold War, but in the internal instability and contested legitimacy of the 19th century itself.

Paper 2 Practice

Authoritarian Rule

See below for ideas of ways you might use the material in this chapter to address questions for the Paper 2 **Thematic study 3: Authoritarian rule (from 1750 CE onwards)**.

The rule of the Daewongun in mid-19th century Joseon Korea (c. 1864-1873) provides a valuable case study of how authoritarian leaders use **legal reform, violence, propaganda, and popular support** to **consolidate and maintain power**. By examining his suppression of internal dissent — especially **Catholicism, Donghak learning**, and the role of regional elites — students can draw meaningful comparisons with other authoritarian rulers across different regions and time periods, such as Mao Zedong, Fidel Castro, or Mussolini.

In the context of Joseon Korea's long-standing dynastic tradition, the regency of Yi Ha-eung, the Daewongun, from 1864 to 1873, marked a sharp and deliberate attempt to restore centralised, authoritarian rule after decades of sedo factionalism. As regent for his young son, King Gojong, the Daewongun exercised near-absolute power. His rule, though brief, was characterised by a systematic effort to **reassert royal authority** through a mixture of **legal reform, coercive force, ideological purification, and appeals to public sentiment**, demonstrating the means by which he maintained authoritarian rule. His repression of Catholicism, emerging reformist ideologies like Donghak, and broader dissent among different factions of society reveals the mechanics of authoritarian rule in Korea during a period of internal fragility and external threat.

1. Legal and Administrative Control: Centralising Power

The Daewongun's first move was to dismantle the entrenched sedo jeongchi (in-law politics) system. For decades, powerful aristocratic clans such as the Andong Kim had controlled the court by placing child kings on the throne and ruling as regents. The Daewongun reversed this by removing these families from key posts and recentralising the appointment of officials. He prohibited the sale of government offices – a common corrupt practice – and attempted to revive the civil service examination system as a meritocratic institution. While not entirely successful in eliminating corruption, these legal changes were part of a broader effort to monopolise state power in the hands of the royal house.

He also imposed legal restrictions on regional power-holders, curtailed aristocratic tax privileges, and attempted to strengthen the authority of local magistrates under central control. These efforts to purify the bureaucracy reinforced authoritarian rule by weakening rivals and creating an appearance of moral reform – restoring, in theory, a Confucian state of order.

2. Use of Force: Religious Persecution and Social Control

While administrative reform helped consolidate power, the Daewongun relied more heavily on violence and repression to silence ideological and religious dissent. His use of force was most visible in his aggressive persecution of Korean Catholics, whom he viewed not only as heretics but as agents of foreign corruption and disloyalty. Catholicism had been spreading since the late 18th century, and by the 1860s it had a small but significant following, particularly among marginalised peasants and women. Catholic doctrine, which taught spiritual equality, loyalty to Rome, and rejection of ancestral rites, directly challenged both the Confucian moral order and the political sovereignty of the Joseon court.

In 1866, the Daewongun orchestrated the Great Persecution, during which approximately 8,000-10,000 Korean Catholics were executed. Foreign missionaries, including French priests, were captured and killed. This was followed by the burning of churches, seizure of property, and the deployment of government troops to suppress Christian communities in the provinces. These actions were justified as defensive measures against foreign intrusion, but they also served as a clear message to domestic dissenters; loyalty to the throne was non-negotiable, and heterodox beliefs would be punished without compromise.

Similarly, the Daewongun began surveilling and restricting the activities of Donghak followers. Although the Donghak Rebellion would not erupt until 1894, its founder, Choe Je-u, was executed in 1864, only months into the Daewongun's rule. The decision to eliminate Choe – whose teachings blended Confucian ethics, Buddhist cosmology, and nationalist ideas – reflected deep anxiety about the social disruption posed by grassroots religious political movements. The swift use of legal charges (heresy, sedition) and public execution was designed to prevent Donghak from gaining traction and to signal the state's readiness to act against future threats.

3. Propaganda and Ideological Purification

Beyond law and violence, the Daewongun worked to control the ideological environment of Korea. He viewed Confucianism not just as a moral code but as the ideological foundation of political legitimacy. To that end, he undertook a campaign of Confucian revival and anti-Western propaganda. The most symbolic project was the reconstruction of Gyeongbok Palace, the main royal palace in Seoul, which had been in ruins since the Imjin War (1592–98). The rebuilding effort – financed through new taxes and contributions from yangban elites – was meant to visibly reassert royal prestige and present the Joseon dynasty as the rightful, unshaken centre of Korean civilisation.

The Daewongun also ordered the burning of seowon (private Confucian academies), which had become strongholds of local aristocratic power and were often tied to corruption and tax exemption. By destroying over 600 seowon, he eliminated ideological rivals under the guise of Confucian purification. In effect, he was using Confucianism selectively, as a tool of legitimisation and a weapon against other elites.

At the same time, the regime promoted anti-foreign sentiment through slogans, proclamations, and government edicts. Christianity, foreign trade, and Western science were denounced as morally corrupting, socially destabilising, and culturally alien. Propaganda reinforced the idea that Joseon Korea must remain a “small but righteous country,” morally superior to Western and neighbouring powers, and therefore justified in closing itself off from the outside world.

4. Popular Support and Nationalism from Above

Unlike earlier regents who ruled primarily through court factions, the Daewongun sought to cultivate support among the common people. His rhetoric emphasised defence of the nation, protection of Confucian values, and resistance to foreign domination. In this sense, he attempted to generate a form of “top-down nationalism,” appealing to popular anxieties about Western imperialism and the breakdown of moral order.

His handling of foreign incursions – including the French Campaign against Korea (1866) and the American expedition (1871) – positioned him as a protector of Korean sovereignty, even when militarily outmatched. Though Korea’s isolationist stance ultimately left it vulnerable in the long term, in the short term it strengthened the Daewongun’s popular image as a leader who resisted foreign aggression and defended traditional values.

This combination of anti-elite reform, anti-foreign propaganda, and Confucian revival allowed him to frame authoritarianism as virtuous governance. Although peasants continued to suffer under heavy taxation and famine, many viewed the Daewongun more favourably than the corrupt yangban families he displaced. Authoritarianism under the Daewongun was thus maintained not only through repression but through the crafting of a populist-authoritarian image.

Conclusion

The Daewongun's regency exemplifies how authoritarian rule in mid-19th century Korea was actively maintained through a multi-pronged strategy: legal reform to centralise state power, violent suppression of ideological threats, Confucian propaganda to monopolise moral legitimacy, and the selective cultivation of popular nationalism. His authoritarianism was not merely inherited – it was constructed and reinforced at every level of state and society. Yet his rigidity also sowed seeds of future resistance. By silencing reformist voices and rejecting foreign engagement, the Daewongun ensured the state's temporary stability – but at the cost of long-term vulnerability.

Other Paper 2 Connections

You may want to explore parallels with these other authoritarian states, who offer a range of useful comparisons and contrasts to Korea under the Daewongun:

- **Qing Dynasty — White Lotus Rebellion Crackdown** (China, 1796–1804): Used legal repression and mass violence against a heterodox religious movement seen as a threat to imperial authority—similar to Daewongun's targeting of Catholics and Donghak.
- **Nicholas I's Autocracy** (Russia, 1825–1855): Centralised bureaucratic control and enforced ideological conformity through censorship and police surveillance under the slogan "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality."
- **Spanish Colonial Rule and the Gomburza Execution** (Philippines, 1872): Suppressed reformist priests and restricted religious activity to maintain colonial dominance, paralleling Joseon's repression of foreign-linked religious groups.
- **Porfirio Díaz's Military-Backed Regime** (Mexico, 1876–1911): Centralised authority by weakening regional elites and used the rural police (rurales) to crush dissent and enforce order.
- **Fidel Castro's Early Revolutionary Government** (Cuba, 1959–1965): Eliminated rival power bases, controlled the press, and repressed religious organisations while promoting nationalist, anti-imperialist propaganda.

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