Book Review


The Sinmiyangyo, a historical event in which the United States Navy encroached upon sovereign Korean territory in 1871 and fought with Joseon troops, has been written about by both Koreans and Americans many times over the past 1-1/2 centuries. However, no author, with the exception of Dr. Thomas Duvernay, has ever written about it using empirical research to back up more traditional book research. Indeed, Duvernay has woven information and data from conventional sources together with field research done in the actual battle areas, the latter of which produced well-documented original artifacts from the battles.

Duvernay first had an interest in the Sinmiyangyo back in the 1990s when he learned about it while researching another topic. From that time, he began very intensive research into it, which led him in many directions, one of which was to help repatriate the large flag, the *Sujagi*, that belonged to General Eo Jae-yeon, the commanding general of Joseon forces on Ganghwa Island in 1871 (killed in the fighting), which was captured by the Americans and then housed at the United States Naval Academy (USNA) Museum. Duvernay campaigned tirelessly for twelve years to have the flag returned to Korea. He contacted United States officials, from representatives and senators to the President of the United States, all who rejected his requests for the flag to be returned. However, in 2007, when his campaign was picked up by international news media, he was contacted by Korea’s Cultural Heritage Administration (CHA), which asked for his advice, and he suggested that they approach the USNA with the idea of a museum-to-museum long-term loan of the flag.
The CHA was successful and the *Sujagi* returned to Korea on a ten-year loan in October 2007.

At that time, Duvernay had a master’s degree in Korean studies, but soon after began a doctorate in Korean studies at Yeungnam University, graduating in 2012. While his major concentration was Korean history, his area of interest was late Joseon dynasty, and his specific subject of study was the Sinmiyangyo. While his original work on the topic, which was written as his doctoral dissertation in 2012, was very academic in style, the commercially published book was written in a more narrative style to appeal to a broader audience.

The book covers all different aspects of the American sailors’ and Marines’ experiences of the entanglement between their forces and that of the Joseon troops. Original photos from 1871, along with satellite and modern photos of the battlegrounds helps the reader understand what the conflict was like 1-1/2 centuries ago.

There is a good, logical order in how the book is laid out. The background of the work is briefly covered in the preface and introduction. Right from the beginning, in chapter 1, the reader meets the United States Asiatic Squadron (USAS) as it arrives in Korean waters. From there, it goes on to where the ships find their anchorage at Jagyak Island, and then the Americans meet officials from Seoul. The narrative details how cultural misunderstanding led to shots fired between the Koreans and Americans the next day, which then led to the main battles a bit more than a week later. The battles are described in a compelling narrative form, so that the reader becomes immersed in the story. By the end of the story, one has a mental movie of what happened so long ago. The next two chapters explain about the weapons that were used on both sides; the descriptions give enough information to understand the story without dragging it down into details. Following that, a general overview of the American officers and crew is given, along with many interesting statistics and trivia. The reader also learns about the American ships involved, along with the daily life and discipline aboard those ships. There is a chapter regarding the detailed field research that Duvernay conducted. The appendices are filled with useful information, including the entire text from the American officers’ reports, along with most photos taken during the Sinmiyangyo in 1871.
Some aspects of the Korean side of the Sinmiyangyo are covered, such as weapons used and key people involved, including a list of the Joseon officers killed. However, it is understood that the amount of material available from the Joseon side is limited. Hopefully, someday, a similar work can be done from the Joseon point of view.

This work covers the time period from when Americans enter Korean waters in the middle of May of 1871 to when they left at the beginning of July, just a few weeks later. It does not go into great detail regarding the political or diplomatic reasons for the USAS being in Korean territory, aside from some explanation in the introduction. The book concentrates on the military aspect of the event.

This book is an excellent work that fills in many missing pieces of information and also corrects some misunderstandings of previous works. It can serve as a basis for future research as it has solid information that can be—and should be—added to by other researchers. For all the great detailed information this book presents, there are many areas that should be addressed in future research, especially on the Korean side of the historical action. Questions need to be looked into, such as “Where were the Joseon forces while the Americans were marching from fortress to fortress, and what were they doing?” A detailed look into the Korean side is imperative in order to completely understand what happened.

Whether someone is a historian, researcher, or just a person interested in military or Korean history, this book will satisfy one’s interest or need in a little-known but very fascinating subject.

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