American Media Coverage of the Assassination of Durham White Stevens

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ABSTRACT
On March 23, 1908 Chang In-hwan assassinated Durham White Stevens in San Francisco. Chang, a Korean nationalist, blamed Stevens, a pro-Japanese advisor to the Korean government, for the increasing Japanese presence in Korea. The Stevens assassination set off a firestorm of news coverage that examined the Korean independence movement, exposed Stevens' activities in Korea, and reignited debates surrounding Asian immigration to the United States. This article analyzes 19 major newspapers throughout the United States to reveal American public sentiments toward the Korean nationalist movement. Specifically, the tone and bias found in most newspaper articles exemplified the hostile social climate Korean-American faced community in California.

Keywords: Korean independence movement, Korean-Americans, Chang In-hwan, Chun Myöng-un, Durham White Stevens

Introduction
The assassination of Durham White Stevens by Korean Chang In-hwan on March 23, 1908 was front page news in most major American daily newspapers. Chang hoped the assassination of Stevens would silence a man that Korean nationalists considered a pro-Japanese propagandist and enabler for Japanese imperialism in Korea. Chang also thought his actions would bring attention to the exploitation and suffering of the Korean people under Japan. While successful in silencing Stevens, Chang set in motion press coverage that overwhelmingly criticized and undermined his larger nationalistic goals. This paper examines the media coverage of Stevens' assassination and finds that a majority of the media coverage was critical of Chang and the Korean nationalists. Numerous newspapers linked the assassination to anarchism, anti-Asian immigration, and perceived social problems in Korea. This article argues that the biased media coverage of Stevens' assassination epitomizes the harsh social climate the early Korean-American community confronted in California and the United States.

This essay draws on articles from 19 newspapers throughout the United States. Newspapers are a public record that reflect and reinforce the dominant social constructs of the society they inform. As part of the public sphere, newspapers reflect and guide public opinion, thereby making them useful vehicles to gauge the social atmosphere of a society. There were two important variables that tainted the
newspaper coverage of the assassination: first, Stevens was popular within American social circles, and second, a strong anti-Asian sentiment throughout the United States. Media coverage of Stevens’ assassination is presented in four sections: the first summarizes Japan’s subjugation of Korea, which grounds the incident in its historical events; the second provides a history of Durham White Stevens within the context of Japanese-Korean relations; the third reviews newspaper coverage that was critical of Korean nationalists; and the fourth summarizes sympathetic and neutral coverage.

**International Context of the Assassination**

Chang In-Hwan lived in Korea during a time of uncertain domestic turmoil as well as intense international rivalry over his nation’s fate. He was born on March 30, 1875, one year before Japan opened Korea to modern international relations. In 1882 Korea signed the Treaty of Amity and Commerce with the United States which was followed by other unequal treaties. The Korean government, under King Kojong, was plagued by internal and foreign demands for reform. Kojong struggled to find an adequate solution that would maintain Korean sovereignty. However, conservative factions, internal rebellions, and Japanese machinations doomed Kojong’s reform attempts to make Korea an active, functional member of the global community. Japanese leaders feared that Korea’s uncertain internal situation would encourage a European nation to colonize Korea. In this atmosphere Japan took a proactive approach to integrate Korea into its political sphere of influence.¹ Japan's influence in Korea grew as a result of its victories in the Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895) and Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). In 1905 the Japanese government, with approval of the United States, established a protectorate over Korea. Within the next several years, the Japanese Resident-general, Itō Hirobumi, forced Kojong to abdicate in favor of his less-capable son, abolished the Korean army, and facilitated Japan’s economic domination of the Korean peninsula.

The Korean population’s response to the protectorate treaty included armed resistance. Thousands of üibyong[Righteous Army] soldiers, often with little more than spears, took up arms against Japan’s political control over in Korea. These hodgepodge units were swiftly and ruthlessly suppressed by the Japanese military. During the suppression of the üibyong, Japanese soldiers killed many innocent people—including family members of many Koreans in the United States.²

The Korean government briefly allowed emigrants to work and settle overseas. American advisors in Korea convinced the King to allow Koreans to go abroad and work. Kojong assented because immigration would integrate Korea into the international community as well as alleviate rural distress. From 1903 to 1905 approximately 7,400 Koreans left for Hawaii and the continental United States. Of this number, nearly a thousand settled in California.³ Through church ties, Chang

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¹ Duus 1995:Introduction and 131-133.