

A Late Chosŏn Encounter with Western Technology, Commerce and Industry: The Korean Diplomatic Missions to Russia and Great Britain in 1896 and 1897.

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Previous studies of Min Yŏnghwan's missions to Russia in 1896 and Great Britain in 1897 have mainly focused on the diplomatic aspect of the missions, especially Min Yŏnghwan's negotiations with the Tsarist Russian government for protection for Korea from Japan in St Petersburg in 1896 and his efforts to attract British interest in maintaining Korean independence and sovereignty in London in the following year.¹ The purpose of this paper, however, is to examine the impact of the direct experience of Western technology, commerce and industry on Min Yŏnghwan and to assess how this experience may have affected his outlook on modernization and reform in his own country.

The Korean Mission to Russia in 1896

Min Yŏnghwan's mission to Russia was arranged by the Russian chargé d'affaires in Seoul, Karl Waeber, and the Korean contingent that accompanied Min, namely, Yun Ch'ihŏ, Kim Tŭngnyŏng, Kim Toil and Son Hŭiyŏng, were also accompanied by the Russian legation dragoman, Evgeneii Stein. The Korean party's encounter with late nineteenth century modernity began as soon as it departed from Inch'ŏn, from where it was taken to Shanghai by the Russian naval vessel *Gremiashchii*,² about which Min wrote in his travel diary *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm* (Sea, sky, autumn voyage):

We went up on deck and looked all around the warship. Everything was in good order and looked magnificent even though this is only a second-class warship. Our party is able to take passage on this ship due to arrangements made by Minister Waeber.³ Incidentally, it is a special privilege and courtesy to be conveyed by this warship, which has been prepared exclusively for us.⁴

Min Yŏnghwan and his party were originally planning to travel along the so-called southern route to Moscow via the Suez Canal and Odessa, but because of a lack of planning, they were unable to book their passage and were forced to travel eastwards across the Pacific on board the *Empress of China*.⁵ Min Yŏnghwan was clearly impressed by his first encounter with this state-of-the art passenger liner and wrote in his diary, "We had already heard of the grandeur of this ship and of its fame on the sea, but when we saw it, it was even better than we had heard."⁶

The *Empress of China* traveled from Shanghai to Nagasaki and then to Yokohama before embarking on the main leg of its journey across the Pacific to Vancouver. Min and his entourage made a brief stopover in Japan and, unlike some of his forerunners who had made negative assessments of Japan's emulation of the West, Min was clearly impressed by the way the Japanese had embraced modernization and recorded the following positive assessment in his diary:

¹ See Ko Pyŏngik, "Nohwang taegwansik e ūi sahaenggwa Han-No kyosŏp" (The Russo-Korean negotiations on the occasion of the coronation of Nicholas II in 1896). *Yŏksa hakpo* (Korean Historical Review) 28 (1965): pp. 41–69 and Michael Finch, *Min Yŏng-hwan: A Political Biography* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), chaps. 3 and 4.

² A Russian gunboat based at Vladivostok from 1895.

³ Karl Ivanovich Waeber was the Russian consul general and chargé d'affaires in Seoul (1885–1896).

⁴ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 71. All page references to Min's travel diaries *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm* and *Sagusokch'o* refer to the versions compiled in Min Yŏnghwan, *Min Ch'ungjŏnggong yugo* [The posthumous works of Min Yŏnghwan] (Seoul: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, 1971).

⁵ The *Empress of China* was launched in 1891 and was operated by the Canadian Pacific Line, a part of the Canadian Pacific Railroad Co.

⁶ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 74.

We arrived at Yokohama again and anchored there. The beauty of the mountains and rivers, the solid construction of the harbor front, the height of the buildings, the orderliness of the main roads, and the incessant twinkling of the gas and electric lamps suddenly enlighten one's mental outlook.

In Tokyo, moreover, everything is set up in an exquisite way, more and more refined and improving every day. This enlightenment is the result of the diligent study of Western methods by all the Japanese people not because they have borrowed the assistance of others.⁷

The journey across the Pacific was an uneventful one despite one major storm that caused the inexperienced Korean party some concern. During the voyage Min also observed inoculations for smallpox being carried out by the ship's doctor as well as the practice of donations being collected for an orphanage. On 28 April the party arrived safely at the port of Victoria and on the following day finally arrived at Vancouver. Here Min and his colleagues stayed at the Hotel Vancouver and had their first experience with an elevator:

The hotel's name is also Vancouver.⁸ It has five stories and is large and spacious. As climbing the stairs is considered inconvenient, there is one room on the ground floor which goes up and down according to one's wish by means of electricity. This is a good idea. It goes to every floor in the hotel.⁹

From Vancouver Min traveled across Canada by steam train, which he described in his diary as "a very comfortable ship."¹⁰ On 6 May the Korean mission finally left Canadian territory and arrived in New York, where they stayed in the ten-story Waldorf Hotel. As evidence of the continued Russian support for Korea's first diplomatic mission to Russia, the Russian consul-general, Olnarovsky,¹¹ paid a visit and made all the arrangements for their onward journey.

While in New York Min and his colleagues did a fair amount of sightseeing around the city, including Central Park, but Min was most impressed by his visit to an "electricity exposition." Although the Edison Company had first installed an electric lighting system in Kyŏngbok Palace more than ten years earlier in 1885, Min's surprise at the extensive and varied use of electric power in the West can be clearly seen in the following passage from his diary:

. . . we went to an electricity exposition. Not only were there telegraphs and lights but a thousand different everyday things all powered by electricity. It is difficult to record everything. There was also a strange thing there. Five hundred leagues away there is a huge waterfall.¹² Its sound is extremely loud. This noise of water tumbling and crashing is conveyed along a cable by electricity so that we could hear it. It was frightening. We could also hear the sound of music in this way, and it was no different from real music. . . . Everything was so unusual that I could barely understand it. They say that there are now

⁷ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 76.

⁸ Hotel Vancouver was the first Canadian Pacific hotel in Vancouver and was originally situated on the southwest corner of Granville and Georgia Streets.

⁹ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 78. Min's enthusiastic account of his first experience with an elevator is in marked contrast to an account of the experience in 1888 of the first Korean minister to the United States, Pak Chŏngyang, as recounted by Horace N. Allen: "Arriving from our ship we entered the elevator at the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. It was quite a little room with divans along the sides. Some of the Koreans had comfortably seated themselves, while others were standing about seeming to wonder why we were all put into so small a room, when the operator pulled his rope and we began to shoot skyward. With horrified exclamations, as one man they seized me, exclaiming about earthquakes in the greatest alarm. After that when stopping at hotels, they insisted on having rooms low enough so they might dispense with the use of elevators." Horace N. Allen, *Things Korean: A Collection of Anecdotes Missionary and Diplomatic* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908. Reprinted Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, Kyung-In Publishing Co., 1975), p. 162.

¹⁰ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 78.

¹¹ Yun Ch'ihŏ gives the Russian consul-general's name as "Silorovesky" in his diary. See Yun Ch'ihŏ, *Yun Ch'ihŏ ilgi* [The diary of Yun Ch'ihŏ] 6 vols. (Seoul: Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe, 1973–1976), vol. 4, p. 175.

¹² Min is presumably referring to Niagara Falls here.

people conducting research into how to power ships and carriages by electricity.¹³

On 9 May Min departed from New York on the British liner, the *Lucania*,¹⁴ heading for Liverpool. This ship was much larger than the *Empress of China*, and Min described walking about on its deck as being like walking on the streets of New York.¹⁵ The journey to Liverpool via Queenstown on the south coast of Ireland was uneventful, and although Min was impressed by the sights and sounds of Liverpool, which was the largest port in the world at that time, the more experienced Yun Ch'ihŏ was less than impressed by the waiting room in its main train station, which he described as being “a poor affair.”¹⁶ London, however, was considered even more impressive than New York, and Min was particularly impressed by the orderliness of the city despite its large population. He put this down to its strict laws and, perhaps in deference to his own monarch, he did not fail to mention the benevolent influence of the “empress”, Queen Victoria.¹⁷ To Min's regret, however, he had no time to take in all the sights of the city, and he and his party were soon traveling on towards Moscow via Flushing in Holland, Berlin and Warsaw. Min was particularly impressed by Germany, however, about which he wrote in his diary:

This country's wealth and strength increase every day. No other country can compete with the excellence of its schools or the strength of its army. Its expertise in medicine and music is also the best in the world. Even though the students of any other nation have already graduated, only after receiving further education in this country are they free to practice their skills anywhere in the world.¹⁸

From Warsaw Min and his entourage traveled to Moscow accompanied by the Russian naval attaché Paskov, who remained with them for the remainder of their stay in Moscow. Once they arrived at their destination on 20 May, the whole party stayed at 42 Pavarskaya Street in Troofnikovskiy¹⁹ at the Russian government's expense and was subsequently joined by an official from the Ministry of Foreign affairs, Planson, who also remained with the party for the remainder of its stay in Russia. Over the next few days Min and his entourage participated in the various celebrations for the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II, which took place on 26 May, with Min having his first audience with the Russian tsar and tsarina on 22 May. Min's activities during his stay in the Old Russian capital were largely diplomatic, although he did have a chance to take a photograph together with the rest of his delegation and their Russian assistants, about which he wrote in his diary:

I went to a photography studio together with Yun Ch'ihŏ, Kim Tŭngnyŏn, Kim Toil, and Son Hŭiyŏng. The Russians Stein, accompanying officer Paskov, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs official Planson also came with us, and we took a photograph together. It is truly an unexpected and amazing destiny which has brought us together into a happy gathering like this from countries separated by 50,000 leagues.²⁰

This photograph appears to be the one that is now in the possession of the library of the University of St. Petersburg.

Min Yŏnghwan's real encounter with Russian modernity did not begin, therefore, until after the completion of the coronation ceremonies, when he and his party departed from Moscow on 8 June and took up residence in St. Petersburg in the family apartment of their Russian assistant Evgenii Stein, No. 4 Kabinyesky Street. Although the primary purpose of the Korean party's residence in St. Petersburg was to

¹³ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 80.

¹⁴ This ship was the Liverpool registered R.M.S. (Royal Mail Ship) *Lucania* (1893–1909) owned by the Cunard Line. At the time of Min's voyage the *Lucania* held both the eastbound and westbound trans-Atlantic speed records.

¹⁵ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 81.

¹⁶ *Yun Ch'ihŏ ilgi*, p. 176.

¹⁷ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 82.

¹⁸ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 82. As the Russian assistant Evgenii Stein appears from his surname to have been of German extraction, he may well have been Min's source of information about Germany.

¹⁹ In his diary Yun Ch'ihŏ gives the address as “the House of Mr. Holmsky, Troofnikovskiy Lane, Pavarskaya Street, No 42, Moscow.” See *Yun Ch'ihŏ ilgi*, vol. 4, p. 206.

²⁰ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 87.

continue negotiations with the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Prince Aleksei B. Lobanov-Rostovsky, and the director of the Asiatic Bureau, Count Dmitrii Kapnist, as well as with the finance minister Sergei I. Witte, concerning Russian assistance and protection for Korea against the incursions of Japan that had occurred as a result of its victory in the Sino-Japanese War in the previous year, it was in St. Petersburg that Min Yŏnghwan and his colleagues began to investigate Russian modernization efforts in earnest.

Not surprisingly, one of the first sights that the Korean party visited in St. Petersburg was the bronze statue of Peter the Great (1672–1725) astride a horse on the banks of the River Neva. It was natural that an enlightened despot who had brought Russia at least partially into the modern world should have attracted the interest of a monarchist such as Min Yŏnghwan, just as he had attracted the interest of the Meiji leadership in Japan. On the same day as the party visited the statue, Min recorded the following short eulogistic biography of the former tsar in his diary:

According to the Western calendar, Peter the Great was born in 1672. At the age of twenty-five he ascended the throne. At that time Russia was still not developed, and there were rebellions throughout the country. Nevertheless, he devised a plan to make his country strong and wealthy. Wearing ordinary clothes, he traveled to all the countries in Europe and researched into every subject. He secretly gained employment in a ship-building yard, introducing himself as a carpenter. He diligently studied shipbuilding and all the methods of sailing ships. He entered Britain and studied there and discussed politics and then returned.

Leaving St. Peter's Castle, he brought the land under cultivation and built a new palace and cannon emplacements. Finally, he built his capital. This is the northern capital which controls the northwest region. In the following year Russia was defeated by Sweden, but Peter was courageous and did not grieve over the fact. In fact, he said that even though Sweden had won this time, because of this practical lesson, he would beat it next time. Four years later there was another war, and Peter won a great victory, obtaining Finland and Ingria. On his triumphal return he said to his countrymen, "Twenty years ago we also were uncivilized people. Since then we have been able to make ourselves strong like this because we reformed our government."

At the age of fifty-three he became ill and collapsed. Out of respect and admiration his countrymen made this statue as a memorial and named this capital St. Petersburg after him. It was a glorious era.²¹

Subsequently, Min's party visited a zoo and botanical gardens, where they encountered a heated greenhouse for the first time. They had their photographs taken and their portraits painted for Tsar Nicholas II's collection, and even rode on a nineteenth-century version of a roller coaster. On a visit to Tsarskoe Selo, one of the tsar's summer retreats, they were beguiled by a trained elephant that could play on a harp with its trunk. Min noted laconically in his diary that "this is also a way of making a profit."²² They also visited a cinema and saw their first moving picture, which Min described as follows:

We went into one building which was completely dark. Suddenly, on the front wall we could see a bright light and illuminated images. At one point there were people riding on galloping horses and then men and women acting together, drinking wine or dancing. A thousand forms and ten thousand images were moving just as in life. The people watching could not help but be amazed. They say that this method uses electricity and lenses to illuminate and move the pictures, but I could not understand the intricate details of how it worked.²³

Min described the Russian script and the mixed nationalities and languages in Russia, which had arisen as a result of its military expansion. The party visited the house in which Peter the Great had lived during the construction of St. Petersburg and marveled at its humble dimensions. Perhaps with King Kojong and his reputedly extravagant lifestyle in mind, Min commented pointedly, "With this economical

²¹ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, pp. 93–94.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

and frugal lifestyle, he left behind a good example for posterity.”²⁴ Indeed the example set by Peter the Great seems to have impressed Min Yŏnghwan so much that he also wrote a poem about his experience of visiting Peter’s humble cottage which he appended to the end of his diary:

We went to see Peter’s old house. There was barely space to stand inside. The house was very low and small. The roof tiles were all made of bark. He was generous for the benefit of his country, but thrifty for his own accommodation. This was truly the frugality of an illustrious ruler.

Giving up imperial honor for his founding work,
He lived happily together with the common people.
By creative reform he made his nation supreme.
He was famous for inviting technicians to support his plans.
The fierce tiger was once no more than a forest beast.
The dragon was originally a fish in the water.
In one lifetime of diligence and thrift, virtuous Peter
Invested his heart in his country, neglecting this poor cottage.²⁵

Tsar Nicholas II’s habit of traveling around his numerous summer palaces rather than remaining at the capital seems to have surprised Min, as travel outside the royal palace by the king was frowned upon by the Neo-Confucian officials of the Chosŏn court. Nevertheless, Min noted that the business of government in Russia was delegated to numerous departments and that the affairs of state were all punctually dealt with. He described this method of government with an elegant Chinese phrase, “the emperor lets fall his robes and the empire is governed.”²⁶ Just how aware Min and his colleagues were of the real state of Russia is not clear from Min’s comments in his diary, which contains scarcely a critical word about the country from which Kojong was desperately seeking protection from Japan. Even Yun Ch’iho’s franker account of events in St. Petersburg provides a description of a Russia that was both enlightened and progressive. It is also likely that the monarchic system of Russia and other major European nations was a more acceptable model for Min Yŏnghwan and his colleagues than the presidential system of the United States.

Among the commercial enterprises that Min visited and described in detail in *Haech’ŏnch’ubŏm* were a beer factory set up by a German with a monthly production of five million bottles, a cotton mill owned by an Englishman, Harry Howard, and a dye works owned by another German, Karle. In addition the Korean party visited numerous government-owned enterprises such as factories for candle-making, porcelain, and glassware, an agricultural implements exposition, a paper mill, the national paper and coin mints, a stone-carving factory, a munitions factory that produced 40,000 bullets per day, a field artillery factory, a naval shipbuilder’s yard and the naval arsenal. In fact the visit to so many factories dedicated to the manufacture of modern weaponry evoked a rare personal comment from Min, when he wrote in his diary after the visit to the naval arsenal:

In the last few days we have seen military and naval weapons being produced incessantly. Every nation in the world is doing the same thing. Where will all these weapons be used? If Heaven wishes for the security and peace of living beings, then one day all these weapons must be melted down and made into agricultural implements.²⁷

As well as such visits to private and government manufacturers, *Haech’ŏnch’ubŏm* provides detailed accounts of visits made by Min and his entourage to a forestry college, a penitentiary, the water-pumping and filtration plant that supplied the whole of St. Petersburg, the gun batteries in Kronstadt, a modern army

²⁴ *Haech’ŏnch’ubŏm*, p. 96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139–140.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 105–106. There is an intriguing Biblical echo in this passage, which most probably originated from a comment made by either Yun Ch’iho, a Christian convert, or one of the Russian assistants to the mission. Although it should also be noted that Min’s paternal aunt, the wife of the Taewŏn’gun and mother of King Kojong was alleged to have had Christian sympathies despite her husband’s wholesale persecution of Roman Catholics in Korea.

barracks, the observatory at Kolpino, the Winter Palace, and the vast St. Isaac's Cathedral. Min also made various purchases of books, seeds, a windmill, and even a whole set of instruments for a military band at the cost of 3,000 rubles, to the great disgust of Yun Ch'ihŏ, who wrote in his diary: "No wonder he doesn't like me. Because I never try to hide my disgust whenever "His Excellency" (E.E. and M.P.)²⁸ wastes public money on things that are unnecessary, nay, even useless."²⁹

In addition Min also made observations in his diary on topics as diverse as Greek Orthodoxy, the origins of the Western alphabets, Russia's reference libraries, Russian marriage and funeral customs, military conscription, the Russian government's annual budget, the arctic conditions of its northern territories, the construction of pavements from wood in St. Petersburg, the custom of spraying water to prevent dust on the capital's streets, the stringent licensing of ships' captains and the shipping regulations of the departments of trade in the West, the St. Petersburg constabulary, the compulsory education system, the institutions set up for the poor and disabled, and the diligence of even the poorest Russians, of whom Min wrote:

Russian poor people all take goods and sell them on the streets. All of them are docile and do their best to earn a living from their jobs. A few have bowed heads and mournful faces and go about barefooted in rags and beg for food by going from house to house. There are also some who play small musical instruments to get money. They play a tune and then wait for the people who have listened to them to give some money, whether a lot or a little. So we can see the wealth of this country and the honesty of the common people.³⁰

Although Min had originally intended to return to Korea via the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean, the Russian assistant Stein persuaded him to travel via Siberia because of the heat and cholera epidemics along the southern route and also because Stein himself was prone to severe bouts of seasickness and appears not to have relished the prospect of another long sea voyage. On 18 August, Yun Ch'ihŏ, who had experienced considerable difficulty working with his superior Min Yŏnghwan, left for Paris to continue his study of French, while Min and the rest of his entourage set off for Moscow on the following day. From Moscow they traveled in the company of the Japanese envoy Nishi Tokujirō to the exhibition center at Nizhniy Novgorod.

As guests of the Russian government the Korean mission was housed and guided around the exhibition at the former's expense. The main purpose of this exhibition was to display the agricultural and manufactured products of Russia. The Koreans, therefore, encountered an extensive range of goods including the inevitable military hardware, of which they had already seen so much in St. Petersburg.

It was at this exhibition that Min first witnessed a man at work underwater in a diving suit, which he described as follows:

There was also a reservoir of water with a depth of perhaps over 100 feet. One sailor was ordered to put on a seamless leather suit and a copper helmet with a window in the front of it, which was inset with glass to let in the light. An electric cable was wound around his waist. The sailor jumped into the lake, examined the bed of the reservoir in detail and communicated about it. After a while he came out and took off his diving suit. There was not a drop of water on him. It was truly a good method of going about underwater.³¹

It was also here that Min took his first balloon ride, an experience that seemed to have made a great impression on him:

We went to one place where there was a balloon with a basket made of bamboo. It could seat four people, and the balloon was inflated above it. It was tethered with a rope. The person in charge had prepared everything and invited us to get on with him and ride on the wind. We

²⁸ Yun is referring to Min's official title, "envoy extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary." It is clear from reading Yun's diary that Yun felt that he was more qualified to be leading the diplomatic mission than his superior.

²⁹ *Yun Ch'ihŏ ilgi*, vol. 4, p. 274.

³⁰ *Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm*, p. 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

soared up and floated among the clouds in the sky. Flap, flap, we were flying as though we had been transformed into immortals! There was a machine and line which enabled us to come down when we wished. I doubted what was happening. I felt I had become a flying immortal in a dream, sleeping on my pillow.³²

Subsequently Min and his entourage crossed Siberia by train, riverboat, and horse-drawn carriage to Vladivostok, where they once again boarded the *Gremiaschii* and returned to Seoul via Inch'ŏn. On 21 October Min finally arrived back in Seoul where he had an audience with King Kojong at the Russian legation, where the king was still residing after fleeing from Kyŏngbok Palace. At this audience Kojong asked Min and the members of his entourage about their mission. According to the *Kojong sillok*, Kojong was particularly interested in Russia's military and educational systems. Min praised them and concluded, "Although we cannot adopt the laws of the West, which has different customs from us, we have to follow its example in military affairs, education and politics."³³

Soon after his return from Russia, Min was interviewed by the *Independent* and gave a very favorable impression to his interviewer, who in all likelihood was the founder of the newspaper and key figure in the attempted coup of 1884 (Kapsin chŏngbyŏn), Sŏ Chaep'il (Philip Jaisohn). The interview, which appeared in the newspaper in English on 10 November 1896, provides us with an invaluable firsthand account of how Min's experiences in the West had affected his outlook and why he was subsequently to become increasingly identified with the Independence Club and the broader movement for reform and modernization in Seoul. The following is an excerpt from this interview in which Min not only expresses his admiration for Western modernization but also makes some telling comments about the problems in his own country:

Mr. Min has become a new man altogether, judging from his conversation with the interviewer. His trip through America and his four-month sojourn in Europe have given him an entirely new idea of the world. He says "Before I went abroad, I had heard of the wonderful things of Europe and America through those who have travelled in these places, but I will be frank with you, and tell you that I did not believe all that they told me. Now after I have seen them for myself, I rather think that these travellers did not tell me half of the wonders that are existing in these countries. I firmly believe that energy and science can accomplish many things which unscientific men have never dreamed."

"What impressed you more than anything else?"

"Many wonderful things impressed me deeply, but one or two customs made a forcible impression on me. First I never saw more than half a dozen men during my trip through America and Europe who appeared to have no ambition to work for their bread and butter. Everybody seemed to be anxious to get employment and earn his living honestly. I am sorry to say it is not the case with the Koreans. We all like to live at the expense of others. I think this is what has made Korea so poor; and the people have a less independent spirit than the Americans and Europeans. Another thing which made me admire the foreigners is that even the men who occupy the lowest position in the community seem to have pride in their country and love their Sovereign and their fellow countrymen. Most of them can read and write and understand arithmetic so that they are able to make an account of themselves in business."

"Then so you fully realize the necessity of introducing reforms in your Government?"

"Not only the necessity of introducing them, but I am willing to do all I can for the accomplishment of them."³⁴

The Korean Mission to Great Britain in 1897

In the following year, 1897, Min was once again appointed as Chosŏn's diplomatic representative. This time Min's contingent included his cousin Min Sangho, his younger brother Min Yŏngch'an, as well as a

³² Ibid., p. 117.

³³ *Chosŏn wangjo sillok*, *Kojong p'yŏn*, (21 October, 1896).

³⁴ *Independent* (Seoul), 10 November, 1896.

French language interpreter, Kim Chohyŏn, a Russian language interpreter, Kim Pyŏngok, and a Russian assistant Paul von Rauthenfelt (No Tŭngbi). Their mission was to attend the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria and then take up residence in St. Petersburg as the minister plenipotentiary to all Chosŏn's treaty partners in Europe, namely, Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. As it turned out Min abandoned his mission at the end of the jubilee celebrations and went into self-imposed exile in the United States for about one year, only returning to Korea after receiving a pardon from King Kojong.

The journey to Great Britain via the southern route through the Suez Canal, Odessa, St. Petersburg and Berlin and his experiences in Great Britain are recorded in his personal travel diary, *Sagu sokch'o* (Additional notes of an envoy to Europe). Once again, in addition to his diplomatic activities, which appear to have been mainly an attempt to gain the attention and support of the British government for Korean sovereignty and independence, Min also took the opportunity to investigate the material culture of Great Britain.

After a relatively uneventful journey, which included a stopover in St. Petersburg to convey King Kojong's thanks to Tsar Nicholas II for the protection Russia had provided him by granting him asylum in the Russian legation, Min arrived at the British capital on 5 June, 1897. Unlike the previous year, when all their needs had been taken care of by the Russian government, Min's party was initially left to fend for itself, a sign of the relative lack of interest in Korea on the part of the British government. Despite having to foot the bill himself, however, Min was very impressed by the luxuriousness of the Cecil Hotel, situated between the Strand and Victoria Embankment, which was to be their temporary residence.³⁵ The hotel was a luxurious building of eight stories and, according to Min, was where princes and envoys stayed on their visits to London. As in the previous year he was most impressed by the hotel elevator, but even more surprising was the presence of telephone kiosks in the hotel and the discovery that "in the whole of the London region there are telephone lines that connect several million houses inside the city."³⁶ Min marveled at the convenience of the hotel's bank, telegraph office, and printed stationery, while the luxurious dining hall, smoking room, and reading room and their electric lighting caused him to write, "It is just like entering the Flower Pearl Palace."³⁷

The Korean mission was eventually housed at the expense of the British government at Kensington Mansions, De Vere Gardens in Kensington. Major Alfred Cavendish, who had visited Korea and even written a book about his experiences there, *Korea and the Sacred White Mountain*, was also assigned to the mission to assist its members during their stay in London. Min had several audiences with Queen Victoria along with the other foreign delegates, but unlike in the previous year when he had been able to discuss Korea's situation in detail with the tsar and his ministers, these audiences were purely formal occasions, during which nothing more than polite words of greeting were exchanged, as is suggested by the following account of an audience with the British monarch:

I advanced in my turn and presented the credential letter. The empress received it in turn. I then presented the personal letter. The empress then asked if his majesty the sovereign of our country was safe and well. I replied that he was and then in my turn retired.³⁸

After the conclusion of the Diamond Jubilee event on 22 June, Min visited various parks and museums in London and then on 26 June, he attended the naval review at Spithead, where he boarded a steamship along with the other foreign envoys and cruised among the massive flotilla of warships, witnessing their devastating firepower. He recorded his impressions of the review in his diary entry for the day:

I received an invitation from the Foreign Office to attend a naval review. After lunch I took a train together with both secretaries and traveled twenty minutes to the estuary mouth. On the surface of the sea to the left and right, we saw warships packed together and stretching out over one hundred leagues. All were large iron ships. I counted more than 180 of them

³⁵ The Cecil Hotel was built in 1886 near Charing Cross Station in central London with an entrance on the Strand and a frontage facing the River Thames. It was purchased by the oil company Shell in 1930 and was remodeled with an Art Deco riverside frontage. Its address is now Shell Mex House, 80 Strand, London, WC2.

³⁶ *Sagusokch'o*, p. 175.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

altogether. On board the ships soldiers moved about urgently. Some wore red and some wore black. They carried weapons and stood in ranks as though they were on the point of the outbreak of war.

The heir-apparent and all the ministerial officials met together with the ambassadors of each nation. We boarded a steamship and sailed leisurely across the surface of the sea. All the soldiers on the ships fired ceremonial cannons. Their crashing sound and the shuddering of the sea billows was truly an awesome sight.³⁹

Min Yŏnghwan appears to have had a much less full itinerary in London than he had had in St. Petersburg in the previous year, most probably because of the British Foreign Office's lack of interest in the Korean mission. It is clear from foreign office records that the Korean party was not particularly welcome at the Jubilee, and there had even been some attempts to put them off coming altogether by the British financial advisor, John McLeavy Brown, and the British consul-general in Seoul, John Jordan, who both saw the mission as a needless expense for the cash-strapped Korean government. Most of the sights that the Korean party visited during their stay in London were purely private visits to places that any contemporary Korean tourist might go such as the British Museum, the British Library, the Natural History Museum, Tower Bridge and Windsor Castle. The one exception was a visit to a munitions factory at the invitation of its owner, about which Min wrote at length in his diary:

It is a usual Western custom that when gentlemen or merchants first arrive in a country, all the company and factory owners visit them with their cards and invite them to inspect their manufactured goods. Also, when I first arrived, many factory owners sent their invitation cards. I had no time to reply to all of them. Today a torpedo factory owner Majoigŏrobudŏ visited and earnestly invited us.

At 2:00 P.M. we took a train and went to that factory. We saw a new style of torpedo. Its length was one *chang* and two *chŏk*. It weighed 1,650 pounds. Its warhead used 250 pounds of smokeless, yellow cotton thread gunpowder. By using air pressure in the middle and a propeller in its tail, it could travel 30 nautical leagues per hour. Its manufacturing cost was 400 pounds in British gold, and its selling price about 500 pounds. In addition, I saw a new style of rapid firing gun with a caliber of six *ch'on*. It used 100 pound shells.

I asked about the manufacturing method of smokeless, yellow cotton thread gunpowder. They said that it requires cotton, gunpowder, and nitric acid. It is manufactured into a thin, coarse cord like a lute string. This method was invented by some British person in 1875 and perfected in 1888.⁴⁰ It costs approximately two shillings per pound weight (twenty shillings make one pound), which is three times more than black gunpowder. On the other hand, it is extremely powerful. One portion matches four portions of black gunpowder. Also, there is no need to worry about water, damp, rain or heat, steam, fire, and candles. As a test three tons were stored in a house and burned. It did no more than slightly blacken the walls, destroy a few tiles, and that was all. The doors and windows were not damaged. In this way danger can be avoided.

I also saw the place where they manufacture all kinds of cannon shells. First they take one rather thick piece of copper weighing one *ch'u*. They then make it into a hollow shape. In another place it is hammered to deepen the concave section. In another place it is hammered more than twenty times to make it into a long tube. Although the sizes are different, the manufacturing method is the same. The thick copper plate is made thin in this way until it is like "bamboo paper". At each stage of manufacture the shells are sorted so that they do not become mixed up.

The guns use an internal trigger mechanism, which is extremely convenient. The bullets are all connected together like a row of pipes. When the finger presses the trigger, the cartridges load automatically. The noise of firing is continuous like fire-crackers.

³⁹ *Sagusokch'o*, p. 182.

⁴⁰ Gun cotton was, in fact, invented by a Frenchman Vielle and perfected by Nobel. Britain, however, refused to recognize Nobel's patent and manufactured various types of gun cotton and called it cordite.

In addition, a copper tube containing water is used to protect the barrel from overheating. Beneath the gun there is a plate which enables it to be rotated to the left and the right. Above there is a gun-sight, which can be adjusted according to the distance. The furthest range is three and a half leagues, but in order to accurately see the people one is firing at, it is necessary to shoot at half that range. The gun can fire 800 bullets per minute. It is fired sitting down so that even an old man can use it. It is a truly useful machine.⁴¹

After the final ball for foreign envoys at Buckingham Palace, in contravention of his official instructions to take up residence in St. Petersburg as Chosŏn's minister plenipotentiary to its treaty partners in Europe, Min and his entourage departed from London on 17 July on their way to the United States, where Min was to remain in self-imposed exile for over a year. Concerning the reasons for Min's abandonment of his mission, in brief, Min appears to have balked at instructions from Seoul to conduct secret negotiations with France and Germany for military assistance, while holding the post of minister plenipotentiary to Russia.

Conclusion

In the space of two short years of official diplomatic activity and one year of unofficial residence in Washington in the United States between 1896 and 1898, Min Yŏnghwan gained considerable exposure to the material culture of the West. In his first mission to Russia, which had the unequivocal backing of the Russian government and was much better funded by the Chosŏn court, Min was able to participate in extensive fact-finding expeditions to numerous factories and institutions in order to gain firsthand experience of the state of Western technology and social systems. On the 1896 mission he had sufficient funds to purchase books, seeds, agricultural machinery, and, as has already been mentioned, even a complete set of musical instruments for a military band. The most obvious benefit from this mission, however, was the fact that on his return to Korea, he was in a better position to understand the progressive reformers in the Independence Club and provide them with a degree of support from within the court.

Min's second mission to Great Britain, however, appears to have been rather under-funded and definitely lacked the support of the British foreign office, which had telegraphed Sir Claude MacDonald concerning the "Corean Mission" to inform him "that there were great difficulties about entertainment and accommodation, and asking whether it were possible to discourage the idea without giving offense."⁴² Although Min and his entourage were eventually provided with accommodation and an assistant at the expense of the British government, and Min was able to fully participate in the Diamond Jubilee program along with all the other foreign envoys, there was none of the substantial negotiations for military protection and other assistance that had taken place in Russia in the previous year, and the Korean mission departed immediately after the official Jubilee celebrations came to an end.

The only suggestion that Min's visit may have made an impact on British policy toward Korea may be found in a speech given to Parliament by George N. Curzon, the British undersecretary for foreign affairs, on 19 July 1897, just two days after the departure of Min and his entourage from London. In this speech, which was also reported in the *Times*, Curzon insisted that the British government would maintain Korean independence, neither allowing it to be absorbed by any of its neighbors, nor permitting it to be used by any other power for gaining control of the eastern seas.⁴³ This time, however, there appears to have been no purchases of Western technology or books as had happened in the previous year.

When Min finally returned to Korea in 1898, after spending more than a year in the United States, he continued to hold important posts in the government and sought to mediate between those working for Korea's reform and modernization on the one hand and the court officialdom on the other. In the final phase of his career from 1898 until his death in 1905, Min played an important role in Korean domestic politics as one of the main proponents of reform during the short-lived Taehan Empire (1897–1910) and as the highest-ranking Korean official to stand in opposition to the protectorate treaty forced on Korea by Japan on 17 November 1905.

⁴¹ *Sagusokch'o*, p. 188–189.

⁴² MacDonald to Jordan, 3 May 1897, PRO, FO 228 (Foreign Office Embassy and Consular Archives, China, Vol. 1, 1834–1930) no. 1259.

⁴³ *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser., vol. 51 (1897), pp. 437–438; *Times* (London), 20 July 1897, p. 6, col. f.