

T'aegukki, sangt'u, and mang'gon: Min Yong-hwan's Observations on Korean Emigration to the Russian Far East in Haech'on ch'ubom (1896)

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Introduction

In 1896, Min Yong-hwan traveled with a small party of Koreans, including the Protestant reformer Yun Ch'i-ho, and the Russian legation dragoman, Evgeneii Stein, to Moscow ostensibly to attend the coronation ceremony of Tsar Nicholas II as Choson's first minister plenipotentiary and envoy extraordinary to that country. While in Moscow and later St. Petersburg, however, Min held a protracted series of negotiations with both the Russian foreign minister Prince A. B. Lobanov-Rostovsky, the finance minister Sergei I. Witte, and the director of the Asian bureau Count Dmitrii A. Kapnist that eventually resulted in the secret Min-Lobanov agreement. The purpose of this agreement was to ensure Russian support for Choson in the face of increasing Japanese intervention on the peninsula in the wake of the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95). The Min-Lobanov negotiations and agreement have been relatively well documented in Korean and Western historiography. A less well-known aspect of Min's mission, however, was his failed attempt to open negotiations with the Russians concerning the repatriation of Korean immigrants in the Russian Far East and his subsequent meetings with those immigrants on his return journey to Korea via Siberia. This aspect of Min's 1896 mission to Russia provides the focus for this paper.

Background to Korean Emigration to the Russian Far East

Koreans first encountered the Russian Empire when at the request of the Manchus, the Choson administration dispatched troops to the Amur region in 1654 and 1658 to help prevent Russian incursion into the region. Over two hundred years later in 1860 Russia finally acquired the territory east of the Ussuri River and came to share a common border with Korea along a short stretch of the Tumen River. From this time onward, Koreans gradually began to filter into the Vladivostok region, initially as temporary laborers. The first permanent settlement was established in 1863 without Russian permission in the Tizinkhe region just north of Novgorod Bay by a group of thirteen Korean families from North Hamgyong Province. By 1866 this settlement had increased to one hundred families and despite its illegal nature was, in fact, supported by the local Russian authorities, which were eager to populate the vast territory that had only recently come under their control.

From this time onward there was a steady flow of Korean immigrants crossing the border, despite the fact that anyone caught doing so was liable to summary execution. The main motive for this exodus by the Korean peasantry was the desire to escape famines and the excessive burdens placed upon them by a corrupt Choson officialdom. By 1869, therefore, 1,400 Koreans had already settled in the southern Ussurisk. This number increased after the severe famine of 1869 (*Kisa hyungnyon*). Despite attempts by the military governor of the Priamur and the magistrate of Kyonghung to repatriate these settlers, the Koreans refused to leave and were eventually permitted to remain. As Ban Byoung-yool points out, the flexibility shown by the Russian authorities at this time was

based not so much on compassion for the Korean settlers as on the fact that they provided a convenient source of labor in a sparsely populated region.

In the 1880s, however, Russian policy underwent a drastic change as the government began providing various incentives such as free transportation to the Russian Far East, land grants, and tax exemption in order to encourage ethnic Russians to move to the region. In the early 1890s, the Priamur governor-general Baron A. N. Korf opposed granting Russian citizenship to any Korean settlers who had settled after 1884. He even went as far as to issue an order to all post-1884 settlers to terminate their activities in Russia within two years, after which time they would only be permitted to stay if they held passports issued by both the Russian and Choson governments.

In 1893, however, Korf died. His successor Sergei M. Dukhovskoi held radically different views of Korean immigration in the region. According to Ban, Dukhovskoi was “an advocate of liberal policies toward Korean immigrants . . .” and made the following three recommendations: “1) utilization of the Koreans for the colonization of the Ussuriski Krai; 2) welcoming them to Russian citizenship with allotments of land; 3) and Russification.” Dukhovskoi remained governor-general of the Priamur until 1898 and so was the holder of this post at the time of Min Yong-hwan’s visit to Russia, which lasted approximately five months from 18 May to 16 October, 1896.

Min Yong-hwan’s Encounters with Korean Immigrants in 1896

According to Min Yong-hwan’s diary of his mission to Russia, *Haech'on ch'ubom*, Min first met the Priamur governor-general Dukhovskoi in Moscow on 1 June 1896 during the official celebration period for Tsar Nicholas II’s coronation. Min’s account of this meeting is relatively terse and succinct: “At 2:00pm, I went to visit the governor-general of the Amur region, Dukhovskoi. We discussed the repatriation of immigrants from our country. He said that many of the immigrants were of mixed race and that they had good lives and so on.”

During his mission to Russia, Min was accompanied by Yun Ch'i-ho, and we are indebted to Yun’s diary for many of the details of the negotiations that took place between Min and Lobanov that were omitted from Min’s own official account. Unfortunately, Yun was suffering from a bad cold from 30 May until 4 June and made no diary entries during this period, so we have no additional information about the discussion that took place between Min and Dukhovskoi. It is clear enough, however, from Min’s own brief record that despite his attempt to raise the repatriation issue with Dukhovskoi, he was politely rebuffed and was in no position to press the issue in the face of Russian opposition. Min, of course, also had more urgent affairs to deal with in his negotiations with Lobanov and Witte concerning Russian protection for Choson from Japan. The last thing Min would have wanted to do, therefore, would be to allow a difference of opinion over Korean immigration to become an obstacle to successful negotiations.

In Min’s official instructions (*hunyū*) for his 1896 mission to Russia, King Kojong had stated: “if there are any important issues concerning our country, you must negotiate about them. I expect you to obtain a satisfactory compromise.” Nevertheless, it is clear that the negotiation for the repatriation of Korean immigrants was not a primary concern of the mission from the fact that Min had never initially intended to visit the Russian Far East at all. According to Yun Ch'i-ho, it had been Min’s original intention to travel around

Europe after attending the Tsar's coronation and concluding negotiations with Lobanov. The European tour, however, never materialized, probably due to the fact that both the Russians and senior members of the Choson court wanted Min to continue working as a mediator between the two parties on his return to Seoul.

Even though Min was obliged to return to Seoul with the Russian military advisor, Colonel Putiatin, however, he originally still intended to return to Korea along the so-called southern route by ship through the Suez Canal and then across the Indian Ocean. It is clear, therefore, that Min himself had no particular desire to see the situation of the Korean immigrants in the Russian Far East or to press for their repatriation. It was only after considerable opposition to the idea of traveling overland across Siberia, therefore, that the Russian assistant to the mission, Evgeneii Stein, finally persuaded Min to take this route, mainly to avoid a cholera epidemic that was raging in Egypt at the time. Stein, in fact, was also adamantly opposed to returning to Korea by sea because he himself had been violently seasick on the outward journey. From the following entry in *Haech'on ch'ubom*, we can see that Min remained unenthusiastic about returning to Korea by way of Vladivostok to the end: "We will travel by train across Siberia, and then down the Amur River to Vladivostok. . . . This journey is toward the northeast, and it must be cold on that windy, wet, snowy plain. I am already worried about this journey."

On 20 August 1896 Min departed from St. Petersburg together with his entourage, mission secretary, Kim Tung-nyon, Russian interpreter, Kim To-il, valet, Son Hui-yong, the mission's Russian assistant, Evgeneii Stein, and Colonel Putiata, a Russian military official. On 21 August, they arrived at Nizhnyi Novgorod and spent several days attending an international exposition there. It was here that Min and his fellow Koreans experienced their first balloon ride:

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 in with him and ride on the wind. We arose and drifted among the clouds in the sky. Flap, flap, we were flying as though we had been transformed into immortals.

The Korean party was suitably impressed by the size and modernity of Nizhnyi Novgorod, which compared favorably with that of Moscow and St. Petersburg. It is most probable that Min's experience of modernity in Russia helped to change his attitude toward Korean immigration in Siberia. On the other hand, as has already been mentioned, Min was in no position to make unilateral demands to the Russian authorities for the repatriation of ethnic Koreans.

On 26 August, Min and his party departed from Nizhnyi Novgorod, traveling down the Volga River on the *Pushkin*. At Samara, they transferred from the steamer onto a train and traveled on toward Omsk. The party continued by train as far as Krasnoyarsk. As the Trans-Siberian Railway had still not been completed, they had no choice but to continue their journey from Krasnoyarsk by horse drawn carriage. These carriages were probably the same as the *tarantass* described by Isabella Bird Bishop as being "one of the most uncouth of civilized vehicles?all that can be said of it is that it suits the roads, which in

that region are execrable.” Concerning his own experience of traveling in an open carriage across Siberia, Min wrote:

Since we began traveling by carriage, we have been unable to eat in towns along the way, nor could we sleep, nor were there any hotels. Each time we get out of the carriage for a while, we have tea and simple meals brought from the staging post. We also spend the night in the carriages, bumping around, rolling, and swaying so that it is difficult to close one’s eyes. This is the first time I have ever experienced a journey as difficult as this.

On 11 September, Min arrived at Irkutsk, the seat of the government-general of central Siberia. Once again Min was impressed by the level of modernity in such a remote region and wrote in his diary,

We looked around the streets and markets. Everything was orderly and splendid, and everything resembled the orderliness of St. Petersburg. The people were elegant and graceful. The sound of bustling wheels and hooves in the streets never ceased. It was truly a large and prosperous city. How could one imagine that there would be such an amazing place as this on the edge of several thousand leagues of wilderness? This constant improvement and enlightenment is surely the result of model government at both higher and lower levels. One cannot help but be envious with admiration.

It was also in Irkutsk that Min had his first encounter with Korean immigrants when he was visited by two Korean students from the Vladivostok region, who were attending the university there. According to Min, these two students were related to the mission interpreter Kim To-il, who was also from Vladivostok and had returned to Korea to work as an interpreter at the Russian legation before being appointed as a member of Min’s mission on 19 March, 1896.

Min and his entourage left Irkutsk by carriage on 13 September. Despite the arduousness of the journey, Min was still able to appreciate the scenery along the route, writing in his diary on 18 September: “At dawn, it rained and a cold wind blew strongly. Along our route, many of the birch trees have been dyed by the frost and their yellow leaves are mixed with the pine and cedars. It looks like a painting. The people traveling in this landscape make a marvelous scene.”

On arriving at the Silka River, the Korean mission once again boarded a steamer and traveled on down the Silka and then the Amur River. On 25 September, the Korean party commemorated the death of Queen Myǒngsǒng, who had been assassinated at the behest of the Japanese minister in Seoul, Miura Gorō, in the previous year. The following poignant scene is recorded in the pages of Min’s diary: “Today at dawn, we mourned together and could hardly bear our intense sorrow. In the cabin inside the ship, we hung our national flag and burnt incense and a bright candle on a desk. Wearing our envoy’s robes, we faced towards the East, bowed four times, and wept together.”

It was soon after this event that Min had his first major encounter with Korean immigrants. According to Min, the immigrants in the Amur region were originally from Vladivostok and numbered in the tens of thousands. Many had already become naturalized Russians, and many were employed as laborers in nearby gold mines. On 27 September Min was visited by a delegation of six local Korean leaders:

Pak Ki-sun from Wonsan, who was formerly a local leader (*tumin*) and still has a topknot (*sangt'u*), Kim Pong-nyul from Kyongsong, Hwang P'il-yong, and Han Man-song from Kilju, Han Myong-song from Kyonghung and Chong Un-so from Tongnae. They all immigrated over ten years ago. They said that they had not expected such a day as this and were happy to see their compatriots' sense of decorum. We were both happy and sad. I told them that if the government ordered it, all the immigrants must return and so on . . .

As might be expected from the information provided by other sources on Korean immigration to Russia, all the members of this group except for one came from towns in the northern province of Hamgyongbuk-to. This time, although Min brought up the issue of repatriation, he did not appear to emphasize it. Min was subsequently visited by a second group of Koreans from Khabarovsk, one of whom also still wore his hair in a topknot and another who wore the traditional *mang'gon* headgear. The significance of the topknot and the *mang'gon* to Min, of course, was that both were traditional symbols of national identity for Korean men and both had been abolished by the notorious "Topknot Edict" issued by the acting home minister Yu Kil-chun on 30 December 1895 during the Kabo Reforms. This edict was subsequently rescinded after the flight of King Kojong to the Russian legation and the topknots and *mang'gon* were once again permitted. Nevertheless, where they had once been mandatory, they were now a matter of individual conscience, and in the following year even Min Yong-hwan himself was to cut off his own topknot and don Western-style clothing before traveling to Great Britain as Choson's diplomatic representative to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations.

According to the immigrants' accounts of themselves, they comprised traders involved in various kinds of business who intended to return to their homeland once they had made sufficient money. Such an explanation may, of course, have simply been a way of pre-empting any effort that Min might have made to persuade them to return to their homeland.

On 2 October, Min's party paused in its journey along the Amur River near the Korean village of Samari (Blageslovennoe) and was visited by one of its residents. According to Min's account, Samari at this time comprised over 200 households, and all of its inhabitants had become naturalized Russians. Aleksandr V. Kirillov of the Priamur'e Branch of the Imperial Russian Geographic Society, who recorded that in 1890 Blageslovennoe had a population of 155 homes with 1,003 residents, corroborates this approximate figure. The fact that the inhabitants of this village enjoyed special privileges that were not granted to later immigrants probably explains why the size of the village had not greatly increased from 1890 to 1896. Although Min's account, written in classical Chinese, gives the name of this village in *han'gul* as Samari, Ross King provides the following information on the origins and etymology of the name:

The place name Samalli appears to derive from the nearby river Samara, the tributary of the Amur along which Blagoslovennoe was founded (the etymology would be something like Samar- + Sino-Korean li, 'village', but has long since been folk-etymologized as 'Saman-li', or '40,000 li', because of its great distance from other Korean settlements in the Russian Primor'e or Maritime Province).

On 3 October, Min finally arrived at Khabarovsk itself and was met on the following day by Dukhovskoi, the governor general, whom he had already met in Moscow. On the same day Min was visited by another delegation of Koreans from the village of Washyakov, whom Min "carefully admonished not to forget their country's righteousness."

In Khabarovsk the Korean mission were provided with a guided tour of various institutions, including a Cossack military academy, a girls' school, an orphanage, a home for the destitute, and an arsenal. On 6 October, Min visited an assembly hall in the Korean section of the city and addressed a group of more than 100 Korean immigrants. Min it appears had by now given up any thought of trying to persuade them to return to Korea and simply "instructed them that they should behave themselves well now that the relationship between our two countries was improving and that they were not to cause any disturbances."

From Khabarovsk Min traveled on to Vladivostok, where according to his account there were "several hundred" Korean immigrant households as well as "more than ten thousand homes scattered around the neighboring regions." Min recorded that the first major influx of Koreans into Russia had occurred in 1869 as a result of the famine of that year and that over subsequent years Koreans had continued to flow into the country and had not returned to their homeland. He also visited the Korean residents of Vladivostok and was impressed by their tradition of raising the Korean flag (*t'aegukki*) every year on King Kojong's birthday. "Their sincerity toward their country," he wrote, "is still beautiful."

While in Vladivostok Min was also visited by someone only referred to as Grazdaniev, the local auxiliary police magistrate, an ethnic Korean from Chonju, who had been adopted by a Russian family as a child. On the return voyage from Vladivostok to Inch'on, Min reflected on the situation of the Korean immigrants whom he had met on his journey across Siberia:

There are several hundred homes belonging to immigrants from our country in this port (Vladivostok), and I could not calculate the number of people traveling back and forth. Yonch'usa, Ch'uyesa, Such'ongsa, and other places are all known as Choson immigrant villages, and there are six or seven thousand homes. Over half of the people are naturalized Russians. They all wear Russian clothes, speak Russian, and the young people no longer know the customs of their home country. We cannot allow this to continue in this way. As quickly as possible we should establish a consulate and carefully decide on a treaty stipulation that if the people wish to return to their home

country, we should together help them to return. A settlement should be made where those who wish to engage in commerce may dwell. In this way, we can avoid the problem of scattered immigrants stirring up trouble. This is a very urgent business and is also what the immigrants themselves desire.

From this passage, it can be clearly seen that Min had shifted his position considerably from that of requesting compulsory repatriation at his first meeting with Dukhovskoi in Moscow on 7 June to one of acceptance and even support for the Koreans in the Russian Far East. There were probably two major reasons for this change of heart; one was the simple fact that in the face of Russian opposition the Choson government, as represented by Min, was in no position to raise any objection. A more positive reason, however, is probably that Min, like the British travel writer, Isabella Bird Bishop, who had also traveled through the Russian Far East in 1896, clearly saw that the situation of the Korean immigrants was better than that of their counterparts in Korea. In *Korea and Her Neighbours*, Bishop wrote of the Korean immigrants, with a characteristically 19th century British air of superiority and condescension:

In Korea I had learned to think of Koreans as the dregs of a race, and to regard their condition as hopeless, but in Primorsk I saw reason for considerably modifying my opinion. It must be borne in mind that these people, who have raised themselves into a prosperous farming class, and who get an excellent character for industry and good conduct alike from Russian police officials, Russian settlers, and military officers, were not exceptionally industrious and thrifty men. They were mostly starving folk who fled from famine, and their prosperity and general demeanor give me the hope that their countrymen in Korea, if they ever have an honest administration and protection for their earnings, may slowly develop into men.

On his return to Korea in October 1896, Min does not appear to have had any further direct dealings with the Korean immigrants in Russia. Nevertheless, the experience of his visit to Russia had a decided effect on him and from this time, he became increasingly identified with the movement for reform in Seoul. In 1896, this movement was spearheaded by So Chae-p'il (Philip Jaisohn) and the *Independent* newspaper (*Tongnip sinmun*) that he edited. In an interview to the *Independent*, given soon after his return from Russia, Min commented on his experiences in the West and Russia:

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 that this is not the case with the Koreans. We 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 the 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 for their country and love their Sovereigns 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.

Although Min does not specifically mention the Korean immigrant population in Russia, it is most probable that his experiences with this group were a significant factor in bringing him into the reformist camp in Seoul. It should also be noticed, however, that Min mentions America and Europe rather than Russia specifically. Although later in the same interview Min mentions his complete satisfaction with the way that he was treated in Russia, it is clear from his subsequent actions in Seoul that he harbored a deep mistrust of Russia's motives for involvement in Korea. Despite the fact that he was initially recommended by Colonel Putiatin for the post of Minister of War, Min did his best to prevent undue Russian influence in Korean affairs and began to actively pursue a policy of strengthening Choson's ties with Great Britain and the United States.

It was perhaps his basic mistrust of Russia that prevented him from giving his whole-hearted support for immigration to that country and may even have been behind his recommendation to Kojong in 1898 to "investigate into the number, etc., of the Koreans who have become naturalized under foreign governments."

In 1897, however, Min was once again sent abroad as Choson's diplomatic representative to participate in the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of Queen Victoria. Although he was initially meant to stay in Europe as a minister plenipotentiary, for various somewhat obscure reasons he abandoned his post and traveled to the United States, where he spent one year in Washington D.C. During his return journey to Korea in 1898, he appears to have visited Hawaii and probably acquired some knowledge of the situation of immigrant laborers there at that time. Consequently, Min was later to play a crucial role in encouraging the emigration of Koreans not to the Russian Far East but to the sugar plantations of Hawaii as president of the Department of Emigration (Yuminwon).

Conclusion

Min Yong-hwan was a scion of the Min clan. Although this clan has been characterized as conservative in relation to the Reform Party (Kaehwadang) under the leadership of Kim Ok-kyun and Pak Yong-hyo, nevertheless the not insignificant modernization efforts of the 1880s were all carried out under its auspices. The approach of the Min clan to reform, however, emulated the limited self-strengthening approach of Qing China that was summed up in the phrase "Eastern ways, Western machines" (*tongdo sogi*) and many of its members, although not Min Yong-hwan himself, were tainted by corruption, an almost inevitable feature of late-Choson political life. What is most interesting about Min Yong-hwan is that despite his relatively conservative *sedo* background, he was able to adapt and change. In his policy essay of 1894, composed on the eve of the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, Min put forward traditional Confucian proposals for the reform of Korea. In this essay he expressed considerable anxiety about Russia's expansionist policy in the Far East, and it appears that his experiences in Russia

in 1896 did little to allay these fears. In fact, as has already been mentioned, on his return to Seoul he very rapidly became disassociated with the pro-Russian group (Ch'illop'a) and began making efforts to strengthen Korea's relations with Great Britain and the United States.

Min's journey to the Russian Far East appears to have been the only official visit by a high-ranking Choson official and resulted in a basic policy turnaround from requesting repatriation of Korean nationals to providing ethnic Koreans in Russia with diplomatic support. It is worth noting, however, that Min was never truly enthusiastic about the idea of Korean emigration to Russia and this ambivalence may be clearly seen in the following poem that was appended to *Haech'on ch'ubom*.

There are many migrants from the famine
years.

Ten thousands who are farming, laboring,
trading, and studying

They try to speak their native tongue, but
their lips are already dull.

Our government is too weak to impose its
authority over them.

In appearance, they are haggard and wear
the topknot.

They just work to feed and clothe
themselves.

Rejoicing and weeping as one, they are kind
and polite.

All praise compassionate Heaven for
forgiving their past mistakes.

Because of his negative perception of Russia, Min was subsequently to encourage emigration to Hawaii. This policy, which also had the initial support of King Kojong, was intended to alleviate the situation of the impoverished Korean peasantry on the one hand and to strengthen economic ties with the United States on the other, in the hope that its leadership would begin to take a greater interest in Korean affairs. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and after the defeat of Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, the United States was the first of the Western powers to abandon Korea to Japanese "protection."