**Opening the Hermit Kingdom**

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Wilson Strand looks at the many attempts to open Korea to Western trade in the 19th century.

In the middle of the nineteenth century Korea, the Hermit Kingdom, was isolated from the rest of the world and unknown. Today the same title is sometimes used to refer to North Korea, similarly reclusive.

The Choson or Yi dynasty, based at its capital in Seoul, had ruled Korea since 1392, despite a devastating invasion by the Japanese (1592-98) and another by the Manchus (1627-36) which resulted in the country remaining closely associated with China, culturally and politically, into the late-nineteenth century. The relationship with China confirmed the dominance of a Confucian ideology, and contacts with foreigners, and foreign [travel](http://www.historytoday.com/wilson-strand/opening-hermit-kingdom), were strictly forbidden.

In the mid-nineteenth century the West was interested in opening the Far East to trade. In 1842 China succumbed; in 1854 the American Commodore Perry, having impressed a reluctant Japan with his military might and technical advance, opened that kingdom – previously as unwelcoming to Westerners as Korea – to foreign commerce.  It took more than twenty more years – and several attempts by various foreign powers – for Korea to be ‘opened’ in the same way; and while the French and Americans tried military force, by the end of the century it was the Japanese who succeeded in opening the peninsula.

British merchant ships tried as early as 1832 and 1833 to trade with Korea, but with no success. Following accords with China which gave Russia a common border with Korea, Russia in 1864 and 1865 had sent in messages requesting trading rights, with no results. The Korean people themselves did not seem unfriendly to foreigners, just the government. In 1855 seamen from a shipwrecked American whaler, the *Surprise* , were shipwrecked off the northwest coast, and the Koreans treated the sailors kindly, giving them medicine and food before escorting them to China. There the Chinese put them in prison with criminals and starved them.

At first France seemed the most likely Western state to establish a presence in Korea. Catholic priests entered Korea from China in 1836 and soon had a native following. Three years later, however, the government began to arrest and execute the foreigners and their Korean followers. Christianity was seen as undermining the principles of Confucianism.

The Christians, however, thrived under persecution. Kim Taegon, son of a Korean Christian executed in 1839 – a statue beside the Catholic Museum in Seoul today honours his memory – was ordained in Macao and brought more French priests into Korea. Kim was martyred the following year, but by the 1860s there were an estimated 20,000 Christians in Korea, including the nurse and mother of the new King Kojong and friends of the regent.

The centre of opposition to foreigners was the regent, or Taewongun. In 1864 Kojong (r.1864-97) had become king at the age of twelve, and his father Yi Ha-ung (1820-98) became the Taewongun (‘Lord of the Great Court’). After some hesitation, the Taewongun stood strongly against contact of any kind with the West. Western sources since have regarded him as a stubborn tyrant hostile to outside influences while Koreans tend to see him as a strong leader who protected the nation from imperialist conquest.

After coming of age in 1873, Kojong was a weak leader as king but married the niece of the Taewongun’s wife, part of a powerful aristocratic family. Queen Min later became the centre of resistance both to the Taewongun and to Japanese encroachment. In 1895 the Japanese murdered her in her own palace. She is today considered one of Korea’s great heroines and martyrs, celebrated recently in a musical well known in Korea and America.

The first significant attempt to open Korea was by the Americans, though at the time the Koreans actually thought they were British. It failed, became something of an international incident, and established an ominous precedent for how Koreans should regard foreigners. In July, 1866, the *General Sherman* arrived in Korea in hopes of starting trade with the Hermit Kingdom. Its officers were American but it was sailing for Meadows Co., an English firm in China, flying the British flag and had an Anglican missionary on board.

The ship started up the Taedong River in an attempt to reach Pyongyang. Unusually heavy spring rains allowed it to get farther up the river than normal. Korean officials boarded the ship to inform it that this was not allowed but were taken hostage; the *General Sherman* then fired its artillery as a warning to anyone else trying to impede its progress. Koreans on the river banks, aware that the officials had not returned, shot arrows and threw stones in protest. The ship fired into the crowd, killing some of them.

Unable to proceed further up the shallow river, and aware of the no-longer-friendly crowd on shore, the captain decided to leave. However, the ship ran aground and became a victim of the wrath of the Koreans, who boarded her, rescued their officials, set the ship on fire and killed all on board.

The Taewongun concluded from this episode that foreigners were violent, and should be kept out. A stone monument today in North Korea shows where the General *Sherman* was burned by the Korean people and reportedly states that the great-grandfather of Kim Il-Sung, no less, led the attackers.

The French then attempted military force on a larger scale. The French minister in China had urged his government to retaliate immediately for the Korean execution of its priests and to rescue the remaining priests. The French squadron in Asia was busy in Indochina at this time  but seven ships in July 1866 were despatched under Admiral Ross, who sent Kojong a bold message to the effect that he was no longer king because he had persecuted French Christians. The Taewongun replied, stating that he had not knowingly executed any French citizens, only foreigners found in the company of Korean traitors. He claimed he did not know even from what country the foreigners had come.

In October 1866 the French squadron steamed to Kanghwa Island at the mouth of the Han River, which led to the capital, Seoul, but soon discovered that the river was too shallow. Ross decided instead to blockade the entrance to the river and to conquer Kanghwa Island, already fortified by Korean forts. General Yi Yong-hui tried to frighten the foreigners by threatening them with ‘a great army of ten million’. However, he was unable to find the transports needed to cross to the island and reinforce the Korean garrisons there with the 5,000 soldiers he really had.

The French commander replied with two demands: the Korean government must punish those responsible for the persecution of the Catholics, and must send an envoy to negotiate a trade treaty. He then began the conquest of Kangwha Island. The Korean soldiers stationed there were too few to stop the first French attacks, but the Korean commander managed to transport his troops to Kangwha under cover of night and station them inside the fortress of Mt Chongjok, still to be seen at the south end of the island. When the French attacked the next morning, they were surprised by a larger force than expected and forced back to their ships. Ross now questioned his mission. Further loss of life, if he continued to take the island, now seemed inevitable and pointless. No reply had come from the Taewongun. A trading treaty was not feasible. He decided to leave while his campaign could still be seen as successful militarily. Diplomatically, though, he had failed.

Watching the short-haired, long-nosed barbarians depart, the Koreans likewise claimed victory. They had driven the foreigners away. The Taewongun bragged of his success in resisting the French to the governments of both China and Japan, but he nevertheless improved his coastal defences. He also persecuted the Christians all the more. Christianity, he decided, was a foreign disease that needed to be stamped out before his people, cultural descendants of the Buddha and Confucius, were contaminated.

The police, military and government officials were ordered to arrest all Christians and promised promotions if they arrested more than twenty. The Taewongun reportedly prescribed death by strangulation for relatives of Christians, to the sixth degree. More than 8,000 persons were arrested between 1866 and 1870, but strangulation proved too slow. A guillotine was consequently developed that could behead twenty-five persons at a time.

A Hamburg merchant in Shanghai was the next to try trading with Korea. He had already visited the kingdom in April and August of 1866, before the *General Sherman* incident. Ernst Oppert (1832-1903) had no military force, and represented no nation. Hamburg, which already traded with seventeen ports in Asia, was then an independent city, not part of Bismarck’s growing state. Oppert was a businessman interested in establishing trade with Korea, sailing for an English firm, Jardine Matheson & Co., one of the leading commercial houses in Shanghai. He had arrived in Shanghai the year the US opened Japan (which he once referred to as the ‘England of Asia’) to trade. After being unable to get a reply from the Taewongun during his first two brief trips to Korea in which he claimed he was seeking to ‘open up commercial and friendly relations’, Oppert was bankrupt. Aged thirty-six in 1868, he decided to try once more, despite the recent *General Sherman* incident and the French attempt a few years earlier.

In Shanghai he met Feron, one of the last French priests in Korea, who had escaped just before the arrival of the French fleet. The priest convinced Oppert that it was only the Taewongun, a harsh tyrant, who was hostile to Christianity, and that the Korean people would welcome Christianity. Feron suggested a plan for opening Korea that involved little risk. Oppert was at first doubtful but decided it was worth trying.

Feron said the unguarded tomb of the father of the Taewongun lay in the countryside not far from the coast. The priest’s plan was to seize the remains and hold them until the Taewongun agreed to open Korean seaports to trade, at which time the remains would be returned. Oppert realised the plan was unorthodox, and kept it secret,  but believed, so he wrote later, that ‘Great ends require great means’. He felt that the means would be forgotten once he was successful.

He set out under a German flag on his third expedition in May 1868. His ship was chartered from Siemssen & Co., a Hamburg firm in Shanghai as his sponsor, with a ship agreement to reward the firm with a small percentage of the value of any goods brought back. He carried on board a smaller boat, secured by J. C. Godeffroy & Sohn in Shanghai, able to cruise up a shallow river. Along with Feron, who accompanied him, was Frederick Henry Barry Jenkins, the translator for the American consulate, who was put in charge of finances. The American had also made Oppert a loan from which he hoped for a profitable return.

They landed at what was then Asan Bay on the west coast south-west of Seoul and hiked inland for six hours, longer than they expected, before they found the tomb. Feron had also misled Oppert as to the tomb. The raiding party had taken with them only the simplest of tools; but as they dug into the mound over the sarcophagus they were soon stopped by the heavy stonework. Soldiers under the command of Honsu Yang soon arrived, killing two Filipino members of the crew and wounding a German. Oppert retreated to his ship, but still tried to negotiate a treaty before returning to China. The tomb in what is now Taedok County, Chungnam Province, today shows no damage. An inscription in front mistakenly attributes the financing of the expedition completely to Jenkins.

Oppert’s failure quickly mushroomed into an international scandal. A rival of Oppert’s supporters complained to the German government that Oppert’s ‘pirates’ had misused the German flag, and got the German consul in Shanghai dismissed. The Prussian Senate decided that Oppert should be tried in court. The Spanish government, on behalf of the Filipinos in the crew, demanded compensation. A Hamburg court found Oppert guilty of misusing the German flag, declaring that his ends – opening Korea to trade and Christianity – did not justify his means: he spent three months in prison. Jenkins too was tried by the American consulate in China but was acquitted: the court decided that a crime had been attempted but none was actually  committed.

Oppert’s third expedition has been ridiculed ever since. But if he had been successful, would his opening of Korea be praised in retrospect? Today, the West is presently greatly upset by North Korea’s admitted possession of nuclear weapons. No country wants to force North Korea to give up its weapons; but if a group of adventurers were to seize the bones of Kim Il-Sung, the present ruler’s revered father, and persuade his son Kim Jong-il to give up his nuclear weapons before returning the remains, and thereby succeed in dissolving the international tension, would the world still ridicule them?

Meanwhile, the *General Sherman* had not been forgotten, and it became the pretext for the next attempt to open Korea to trade. The British firm that had financed the voyage enlisted the American consul in Beijing to find out what had happened to their investment. The American government had heard rumours that some of the crew were still held captive. However, the Taewongun chose not to explain the fate of the American ship, and instead repeated his determination to continue to repel all foreigners, exclaiming that Western trade and religion would never be allowed in Korea.

In January, 1867, Robert Shufeldt, the American commander of the warship Wachusett, was sent to Korea,  where he made inquiries and was told that all on board the *General Sherman* had been killed. US Secretary of State William Seward now directed the American consul-general in Shanghai to seek redress for the outrage against the *General Sherman* . He urged the French to join America in an expedition to punish Korea, but Emperor Napoleon III was not interested. The American consul-general in China was George Seward, nephew of the Secretary of State, who reported that he felt the time was ripe to force Korea to open to the West. The *General Sherman* affair could be used as a wedge. ‘A considerable show of force,’ as in Japan, would be necessary.

The next American president, Ulysses S. Grant, elected in 1868, directed Rear-Admiral John Rodgers to provide that show of force if peaceful means were not sufficient. Rodgers, like Grant a Civil War Union general, put his fleet at the disposal of Frederick Low, the American minister to Beijing. A diplomatic message asking for China’s support declared that the American expedition was entirely peaceful, but it didn’t look peaceful. It consisted of five ships, armed with 85 guns and manned by 1,230 sailors and marines.

The reply to a similar message sent to Korea arrived only after the Americans had left for Korea. It declared that there was no need for the Americans to come since Korea was a poor nation with nothing to trade. It would continue to befriend foreign sailors in distress but would destroy any foreign ships that threatened its rulers or were violent.

The American arrival was more peaceful than it looked. The Koreans gave a friendly welcome to the Americans, who presented gifts to local officials, informing them that Low himself would meet only with Koreans of appropriately high rank. Then Low decided to explore the strait between Kanghwa Island and the Han River, informing the local officials that he was doing so.

The Korean soldiers stationed in the forts along the strait, however, were perhaps not properly informed. They fired at the American ships, which fired back. Low and Rodgers then demanded an apology for this ‘unprovoked and wanton attack’. A Korean reply, in the name of the commander involved, humbly protested that he was merely doing his duty to protect the entrance to the Han River, which was but an hour from the capital. Fresh provisions were sent to the American ships to pacify them. Low, however, decided that there was no hope of obtaining a trade treaty, as the Taewongun was still determined to resist all contact with foreigners, but that he would avenge the insult to the American flag. He demanded that a high official be sent within three or four days to negotiate a treaty, but the very next day he attacked Fort Choji at the north end of Kanghwa Island, presumably in hopes of forcing the Taewongun to negotiate. The soldiers fled and the fort was destroyed. The next day Fort Tokchin was similarly attacked and destroyed.

The Koreans decided to make a stand at Fort Kwangsong. Its military elite, a hundred ‘tiger hunters’, were sent to bolster its defence, but the defenders were still greatly outnumbered and outgunned. The Americans were equipped with modern Remington breech-loading carbines and howitzers while the breech-loading cannons of the Koreans were set to fire in only one fixed direction and were of little use. Korean swords were of such soft metal that they bent at the first blow. The Koreans fought bravely but the fort was conquered and levelled. Only three Americans died, though more fainted from the high heat and humidity. The next day the victorious Americans took souvenir photographs of each other.

The ‘Korean-American War of 1871’ (or ‘the American Disturbance’ as it was known in Korea) was over. The Americans repaired their ships and left  on July 3rd. There was nothing else they could do. No Korean officials had been sent to negotiate. Diplomatically, as Low admitted, the expedition had made the Koreans more distrustful than ever of foreigners. From the Korean point of view, ‘thieves and spies’ had destroyed their forts but, once again, the defenders had been victorious over the foreigners who had been forced to leave.

The Taewongun erected monuments throughout Korea commemorating the victory and praising the dead and wounded as national heroes. Any Koreans who advocated a treaty with foreigners, declared the Taewongun and the young King separately, would be treated as traitors. A few years ago one of the Taewongun’s steles could still be seen on the grounds of the recently restored Kyongbok Palace in Seoul.

Japan was next to try its luck. In 1868 the new Meiji government had encouraged the adoption of Western ways. Then in 1873 the twenty-one-year-old King Kojong, eager to rule in his own right, forced the Taewongun out of power and sought friendship with Japan. Followers of Queen Min, however, many of whom were in high positions in government, opposed this.

Moriyama Kei, Japan’s new foreign minister, had tried peacefully to negotiate with Korea in 1870 and 1872, but without success. But in February 1876 the Japanese raided Pusan on the southern tip of the Korean peninsula and provoked a fortress on Kanghwa Island until fired upon. With this as a pretext, the Japanese soldiers overran the forts and terrorised people in the countryside. Japanese officials, supported by a warship with 400 soldiers, then finally pressured Korea to sign a treaty, on the very island that had witnessed fighting with the French and Americans. The Kanghwa Treaty recognised Korean independence but opened Korea to trade with Japan on terms that were clearly preferential to Japan. Pusan, the seaport closest to Japan, was opened immediately. Wonsan and Inchon were opened soon after. Japan was exempted from custom duties, given extraterritoriality rights, allowed to use Japanese money and permitted a Japanese consul in Seoul. Thus, Korea’s long isolation came to an end with a Japanese monopoly, albeit brief, on trade with Korea. Within Korea, this would lead in turn to the rise of the Progressives who, admiring the more modern Japanese, sought to reform their traditional Confucian state.  Others, though, turned back towards China. While the King and Queen agreed on the need for reform,  Kojong himself supported the Japanese while the Queen preferred China and thought Japanese influence dangerous. This division would lead to increasing Japanese influence in the kingdom and, eventually, the Japanese murder of the Queen in October 1895.

Before that, the Americans tried to capitalise on the Japanese success in opening the Hermit Kingdom by again sending Commodore Shufeldt in 1880, to negotiate, without military support, with the Koreans. With patience and understanding, he skilfully negotiated through both China and Japan – somewhat as the US is presently trying to do – and in 1882 he finally signed the Korean-American Treaty of Friendship and Trade in Inchon, giving the United States the right to trade in the same ports in Korea as the Japanese as well as diplomatic representation.

Similar treaties with six other Western states soon followed. The British minister to Japan, Harry Parkes, quickly sent Admiral Willes to Korea to negotiate. Despite arguments over the custom duties the Koreans wanted and the opium trade they didn’t, a treaty was signed in November 1883. Parkes and his daughter, together with the wife of the American consul, were then entertained by the royal family inside Kyongbok Palace, the first foreigners to be so received. The daughter noted that Queen Min was ‘a spirited, courageous little woman’ who ‘rules the King’.

The introduction of Western technology and ideas that followed these treaties led to increasing discord within Korea, a revival in the influence of the exclusionist Taewongun, and a belated attempt by the Chinese to secure their own position in Korea. The kingdom now became involved in the growing tension between China and Japan. During the Sino-Japanese conflict of 1894-95, the Japanese moved into Korea and forced reforms on the Korean government. In defiance, the King sought the protection of the Russians and in 1897 proclaimed himself emperor of a new Taehan (Korean) Empire, independent of both China and Japan. The country was again overrun by the Japanese in 1904-05 during the Russo-Japanese war, and annexed in 1910, remaining a province of Japan until the end of the Second World War.

Wilson Strand taught history at universities in Korea until his retirement in 2002.

Further reading:

* William Elliot Griffis, *Corea, the Hermit Nation* (1882)
* Key-hiuk Kim, *Opening of Korea: A Confucian Response to the Western Impact* (1999)
* Andrew Nahm, *A History of the Korean People* (1880)
* Ernst Oppert, *A Forbidden Land: Voyages to the Korea* (1880)