

# **A Fair Specimen of Corea/Korea: Perceptions of the Korean Delegation to the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition (1893)**

## **Preface**

The intention of this paper is to examine perceptions of the Korean presence at the World's Columbian Exposition, held in Chicago in the summer and early fall of 1893. This was Korea's first participation in an orchestrated international event that by the late 19th century was in full bloom. In the era of unprecedented European peace that prevailed since the 1815 Congress of Vienna, the World's Fair – to take one name for it – had emerged as a primary international forum, the common progenitor in many respects of today's international academic conferences, trade fairs, and athletic competitions. In an age of empire they also served as showcases of national riches and achievement. To the modern scholar the world's fairs of the 19th and early 20th centuries offer rich and varied insights into the period and its attitudes on a variety of levels.

In light of the parameters of the present conference, my aim here is to examine attitudes towards the Korean delegation, and only in a broader sense Korea or Koreans. The reason is simple because the realities are complex. It would obviously be too simple to assume that perceptions can be divided into notions of us vs. them, here meaning Americans and Koreans. Views of Korea varied according to individual and vantage point, and to take the case of one prominent visitor to the fair, the Korean exile Yun Ch'i-ho, more points of accord can be found between that Korean and Western observers regarding the Korean delegation than otherwise, making such differentiations as us and them problematic if not deceptive.

I take as my sources for this paper primary newspaper accounts, diaries, diplomatic correspondence, and other official documents.

## **Introduction**

To place into proper context Korean participation at Chicago, an examination of the historical circumstances surrounding that participation is called for. This promises to offer the modern viewer insights not only into the domestic political situation in Korea and the mounting pressure of international rivalries through the 1890s, but also into Western perceptions of and attitudes towards Korea at a time when that country was really only first becoming familiar to the West. The experience of the fairs tells us something about Korean aspirations too, as it made its painful, and ultimately tragic, transition to a modern world.

The last decade or so of the 19th century was not an auspicious one for the kingdom of Korea. Still fresh from a failed "Kapsin coup" of 1884<sup>1</sup>, the 1890s opened with Korean policy adrift and intrigue-ridden, with foreign powers the increasing and vociferous arbiters of its national will. After using its troops to suppress the Kapsin uprising China enjoyed an influence over Korean affairs unprecedented even in traditional tributary times. Great Britain occupied Korea's Kōmun Island from 1885 to 1887 to check what it viewed as menacing Russian advances on the peninsula. Japan, who had half-heartedly supported the reform-minded rebels of Kapsin, remained China's main rival on the peninsula. Setting aside the more vague threat posed by Great Britain and other Western powers, Japanese ambitions on the peninsula were faced with two formidable roadblocks – China and Russia. But through the mid-1890s it was Japanese-Chinese rivalry that dominated affairs on the peninsula. Despite Korea's nominal independence as stipulated in the 1876 Kanghwa Treaty, China maintained an

anxious desire to preserve its historical influence in Korea. From 1885 and the arrival of Yuan Shikai (1859-1916) as chief Chinese representative to Korea, China set out upon an unabashed course of establishing its hegemony, to a degree unknown in traditional times, and to this end repeatedly and effectively interfered with the functioning of the Korean legation in Tokyo, established in 1887, in the United States, established in 1888, as well as in Europe. From 1885 Chinese trade also began to make marked inroads into that of Japanese merchants. Whereas 1887 saw Japan's exports to Korea almost three times that of China, by 1892 the two countries split the Korean trade almost equally.<sup>2</sup>

Augustine Heard (1827-1905), the American minister to Korea from 1890 to 1893, summed up the contentious atmosphere on the peninsula shortly before his final departure, writing, "Discontent is rife, and there is an uneasy feeling that an outbreak of some sort cannot long be delayed."<sup>3</sup> That same year Japan increased diplomatic pressure on Korea for the payment of large indemnities for ostensible losses incurred by Korea's halt of bean exports in the autumn of 1889. As the Korean delegation was heading to the Chicago World's Fair it was confirmed that Japan would oversee the minting of a new Korean coinage, an ominous sign of things to come.

In short, the decade of the 1890s was to be characterized by mounting Korean impotence in foreign policy and by a growing sense of fear and despair for its national integrity. This trend is as noticeable in the vacillating and fear-driven policies of Korea's King Kojong, a man who despite his respectable learning and traditional upbringing in the ways of Confucian kingship was at a loss as to how to deal with the bewildering pace of modern events, as in the frenetic dispatches of the foreign diplomatic corps. The popularly led Tonghak Revolt of 1894, the uprising that triggered the Sino-Japanese War, may be understood as another reaction to this pitiable

state of national affairs. It was a revolt that came to be as much about anti-foreignism and political reform as about religious toleration. The first sign of renewed Tonghak revolt came in fact as the Korean delegation to Chicago was en route, when in March 1893 Tonghak faithful petitioned in front of the royal palace in Seoul for the termination of official persecution.

The rising voice of nationalism certainly constituted another response, as increasingly conscientious Korean intellectuals and writers began to opine publicly upon their nation's downward spiral, and for whom Kim Ok-kyun (1851-1894), living in exile in Japan following the failed Kapsin revolt, constituted a figurehead and rallying point. As the decade progressed reformist thought became more pronounced, culminating in the formation of the Independence Club in 1896 and its broad appeal for political and social reform in 1898.

The Korean presence at the two world's fairs, that of 1893 in Chicago and later in 1900 in Paris, I believe constitute two other such reactions, albeit official ones. In the midst of this prolonged crisis at century's end, the opportunity to promote its own identity and to speak in its own voice in an international environment must have seemed a rare and welcome one to a Korea and its king increasingly threatened by the tide of international rivalries that was engulfing her. In 1893 Chicago beckoned with the opportunity for Korea to introduce itself to an outside world that knew practically nothing of her, that still referred to her, almost twenty years after opening to the outside world, by such sobriquets as the "Hermit Kingdom" or "Hermit Nation", suggesting the country's timidity and passiveness, or else alluding to her only in the geopolitical sense – of a Korean "question" or a Korean "problem" to be solved rather than as a national entity and advanced culture in her own right. What's more, Korea's participation at

Chicago and Paris, despite the kingdom's precarious financial and political situation, may be seen as attempts to augment its ties to Western nations in the face of increasing Japanese, Chinese, and Russian pressure.

### **Background: the World's Fair**

As one historian of the subject has put it, the phenomenon of the world's fair in the 19th century was the manifestation of "a great historical confidence" on the part of Western imperial nations.<sup>4</sup> Since the mid-19th century, and especially since the Paris exhibition of 1889, world's fairs had become not only global showcases of national achievement, but venues for non-Western nations to present themselves to, or be presented by, their foreign audience. These two aspects were not at all contradictory. There should be no mistaking the fact that these fairs and expositions, which found their inspiration in London's Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, were Western in conception, organization, and orientation. That is, despite the active involvement of increasing numbers of non-Western nations (and colonial holdings), the fairs were more than anything a showcase of Western achievements in the arts, sciences, and industry, and the inclusion of non-Western nations and peoples evolved more as a showcase, at times blatantly entertaining in aspect, of the "other" as foil to more "civilized" Western norms, the superiority of Western mores and achievements, and even the skill of Western sciences in categorizing the world's diversity.

In the academic atmosphere of postmodernism the World's Fair has naturally become a focus of increased scholarly interest. Drawing upon the work of other scholars, I believe one can describe a few salient characteristics of the World's Fair and the ideas that inspired and animated them.

One was the "Victorian" penchant for the exotic, and more specifically for equating culture with place. This was a phenomenon that evolved particularly after the Paris Exhibition of 1867, when non-Western participants were first included on a large scale. This inclusion of non-Western representatives was predominantly entertaining in aspect and served to add to the fairs' attraction (and revenues, for they were increasingly commercial in nature) by titillating their audiences with views and tastes of the exotic and bizarre. This tendency can be discerned in the words of the American diplomat Horace Allen when he expresses his hope that the colorful native Korean outfit would "add to the attraction" of the exhibit, or else of "entertaining an exhibit for that department [the Women's Building] from this land of female seclusion".<sup>5</sup> This aspect would be even more clear, in the case of Korea, with the original plans for the Korean exhibit at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900, where a native Korean street display was planned, complete with "teahouse, open air performers and acrobats".<sup>6</sup>

The inclusion of the native display also served to add to the fair's "authenticity". By this is not meant an objective idea but rather to the extent to which it conformed to preconceived notions of what that place *was*. That is, the accuracy and totality with which it was able to "recreate" the native scenario, whether it be Cairo or Chemulpo, a Chinese temple or an Eskimo village. Though ostensibly educational in purpose, allowing the fairgoer to learn about a foreign country and its culture without the troublesome necessity of having to actually travel there, the non-Western display often in fact became purely theatrical in aspect.

Further, to differentiate both their entertaining and exotic aspects, the non-Western displays were routinely set apart from the more "serious" portions of the fair, that is the displays of Western arts and sciences. After the 1867 Paris exposition it was customary

that a certain portion of the grounds be set aside as an area of national displays, particularly of underdeveloped and colonized areas of the world that would lend the scene an air of exoticism and picaresque thrill. There the displays of non-Western nations were presented to the fairgoer as curiosities and oddities, to be gawked at, flirted with, and indulged for a short time. An emphasis was placed on their primitiveness or their gaudiness, all in contrast to the more refined and rational aspects of Western culture. The Paris Exposition of 1889 caused a sensation by its depiction, or rather recreation, of an exotic Cairo street, complete with camel riders and dilapidated buildings for effect. The "Midway Plaisance" of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 would become its primary attraction and crowd-pleaser.<sup>7</sup> Along its half-mile dusty pedestrian stretch one could find such amusing distractions as a Chinese "joss house", Persian theater, or live Eskimos, all of which contrasted sharply with the rational approach manifested by the rest of the fairgrounds, with its imposing neo-classical architecture, expansive avenues, and geometrical layout. Despite its contemporary aspersions to being the locale where one could "study humanity in all its aspects", the Plaisance was foremost a place of diversion and entertainment, and one that more than pulled its weight in making sure the fair turned a profit. One contemporary seems to sum up the period attitude towards the Midway and its attractions:

There was about the Midway Plaisance a peculiar attraction for me. It presents Asiatic and African and other forms of life native to the inhabitants of the globe. It is the world in miniature. While it is of doubtful attractiveness for morality, it certainly emphasizes the value, as well as the progress, of our civilization. There are presented on the Midway real and typical representatives of nearly all the races of the earth, living in their natural methods, practicing their home arts, and presenting their so-called native amusements. The denizens of the Midway certainly present an interesting study to the ethnologist, and give the observer an opportunity to investigate these barbarous and semi-civilized people without the unpleasant accompaniments of travel through their countries and contact with them.<sup>8</sup>

Another aspect of the fairs was their sense of cosmopolitanism, though again this was done under the ultimate assumption of Western superiority. The expositions

increasingly served as venues for international conferences on cultural and intellectual matters, bringing together scholars and officials from a wide range of backgrounds and intellectual training. World's Fairs in the nineteenth century began increasingly to celebrate diversity to an extreme. Chicago was no exception and the fair would serve as the venue for, among many others, the International Congress on Anthropology and the Conference on World Religions, where Japanese Shinto priests and Catholic bishops exhibited the unique aspects of their respective faiths.

Finally, perhaps too much emphasis has been placed lately on the intellectual-cultural-imperial aspects of the fairs and not enough on the economic. It is not too much to say that one of the primary motivations behind holding a fair, at least by the late nineteenth century when the gatherings had grown to monumental size and scope, was commercial. It was a moneymaking endeavor that to succeed required not simply the bland displays of farm machinery and agricultural products but the amusement and distraction of games and the "exotic". Further, a successful fair could not only assure lucrative revenues but reflected well upon the successful and modern nation that had pulled it off.

Having said all this regarding Western uses of the international fair, and Western conceptualizations of the non-Western participant, it would be going too far, and indeed would be playing into these very assumptions, to neglect the idea that non-Western nations too brought their own agendas to the international fair. From early on for instance Japan used the venue of the international exposition to display its refined traditional culture – and promulgate the concept of an essential “Japanenessness” – as well as to showcase its rapid modernization to the outside world. In effect, the Western fair allowed Japan to kill two birds with one stone by offering it a venue for promoting

and reinforcing its own national identity – a concept always rooted in the traditional – and to sell itself as a modern, industrial, and eventually imperial power. Japan's participation, alongside its new ally Great Britain, in the Anglo-Japanese Exposition of 1910 communicated Japan's emergence as an imperial power on par with its Western counterparts with a clarity that figures on industrial output could never accomplish.

And by further example, at a time of increasing anti-Chinese sentiment in America in the 1890s<sup>9</sup> a group of Chinese-Americans pooled funds to organize the Chinese exhibit at Chicago in 1893 (China itself having refused to participate). One obvious motivation behind this was to familiarize non-Chinese Americans with aspects of Chinese culture, and in this way (not to mention by placating fair officials who would have been desperate for a Chinese exhibit of some sort) to improve the situation of Chinese-Americans in a hostile land (or at least in Chicago). Whether or not they succeeded of course is another matter, but such are examples of ways in which participating nations or groups might use the fair to their own specific ends.

### **To Chicago**

In the story of Korea's participation at Chicago's World's Columbian Exposition there is perhaps no better starting point than with a man.

Not much has been written about Horace Newton Allen (1858-1932) - missionary, physician, writer, businessman, influence-peddler, diplomat, royal confidant – considering the tremendous influence he possessed with Korea's King Kojong (after 1897 Emperor Kwangmu), and the influential hand he had in Korean affairs in the two decades from 1884 to 1905. It would be Allen to whom King Kojong would habitually turn in moments of need and crisis vis à vis the outside world, and he would be decisive

in Korea's participation in the 1893 World's Fair at Chicago. A brief glance of the man and his career is called for.

An Ohio Presbyterian with a long and distinguished American pedigree stretching back to the founding American colonies, a young Dr. Allen first arrived in Korea in 1884 from China, where he had served for two years as a medical missionary in Nanjing and Shanghai. Allen, who has been described as temperamental and impatient, had higher hopes for his new posting. What he could not have foreseen was that he was arriving in Korea at a time of both crisis and opportunity. With approval from the Korean king, always suspicious of the infiltration of more Christian missions, Allen was appointed physician to the legation of the United States, as well as of England, Japan, and China (primarily to conceal his missionary activity), while becoming at the same time the first Presbyterian missionary in Korea. Only a few months after his arrival the perhaps ill-starred but certainly ill conceived Kapsin revolt broke out in December 1884. Allen won the lifelong confidence of King Kojong when he saved the life of Queen Min's cousin Min Yŏng-ik from life-threatening wounds inflicted by the would-be coupists. The coup attempt quickly fell apart as Chinese and Korean troops reestablished control. Thereafter Allen became a sort of unofficial advisor to the king on foreign matters. He set a personal precedent by accompanying the first Korean diplomatic delegation to the United States in 1887 on the heels of the "Treaty of American-Korean Amity" of 1882. In 1890 Allen was appointed by President Benjamin Harrison as secretary to the American legation in Seoul, at the request of the Korean king himself.<sup>10</sup> Allen would go on to serve as secretary to legation and then as minister until his resignation and return to the United States in 1905 at the time of the Japanese protectorship.<sup>11</sup>

In 1890, upon Allen's return to Korea as secretary to the American legation informal meetings between the him and King Kojong were frequent, with Allen proffering his advice on such matters as Korean-Japanese relations and railway construction, while continuing to serve as court physician. In September 1892 Allen applied for leave of absence from his duties in Seoul for the following year in order to "visit the United States on the occasion of the World's Columbian Exposition".<sup>12</sup> A few days later, in an audience with King Kojong, Allen broached his plans for leave the following year and was surprised to hear the Korean king's sudden enthusiasm for sending a Korean delegation to the planned fair in Chicago. Describing the audience in a dispatch to Washington soon afterward, it is apparent that the king's decision was sudden and unexpected.<sup>13</sup>

One key factor in Korean participation seems to be the special personal relationship between Kojong and Allen, one based upon personal trust and service going back nearly six years, years spent for Allen in the service of the Korean king and nation, both in Korea and the United States. Realizing that Allen would be traveling himself to the fair, and knowing Allen's experience leading a Korean team to the United States, helped convince Kojong to go ahead with dispatching a Korean exhibit. Korea in 1892 had virtually no presence overseas. Korean emigration to the United States would not begin until 1903 and the Korean legation to the United States remained highly fettered by Chinese interference. It is reasonable to assert that only the personal and hands-on assistance of someone like Horace Allen could make Korean participation a reality.

Another likely factor I believe relates directly to the political situation in Korea at the time. The year 1889 saw a prolonged diplomatic crisis of sorts open up between Japan

and Korea over the “bean issue”. In that year the governor of Hamgyōng province, Cho Pyōng-sik, halted the export of beans on the grounds that the combined factors of a poor harvest and Japanese over-buying threatened imminent shortage of this important Korean staple. A similar embargo on exports was affected in Hwanghae province that same year. Because the Korean governor had failed to give the one-month notice such action required under Korean-Japanese treaty provisions, and because the Japanese claimed Korean charges of over-buying were false to begin with, the Japanese soon pressed claims for the compensation of lost revenue. Despite the Korean government’s quick repeal of the ban on bean exports, they were effectively stopped until April 1890. The ensuing drama concerned indemnity demands by the Japanese, for pecuniary losses to Japanese merchants estimated to have accrued as a result of the ban, indemnities that amounted to over 200,000 yen.<sup>14</sup> Diplomatic negotiations ensued during the next two years without satisfactory result. In January 1893 the original negotiators for both sides were replaced, the Japanese minister-negotiator being succeeded by Ōishi Masami, who came to view the entire issue as a question of national honor, and who clearly, as it became apparent, lacked the tact of a diplomat. With Ōishi’s appointment Japanese pressure increased measurably, with negotiations taking a decided turn for the worse and at times deteriorating into personal insult.

Even before his arrival in Seoul in February 1893 Ōishi’s name was already known as the author of a pamphlet entitled *Nippon nō ni dai seisaka* – “The two great political aims of Japan”. It was hardly complimentary to Korea, its language in fact quite unabashedly belligerent. To quote but one portion of Ōishi’s tract,

According to my view, Korea is already fallen; she exists only because the other powers have not yet taken her...Corea is now a state almost devoid of any hope of recovery...Even American Indians and African savages have spears and rifles in their houses, they have the valour to prevent the intrusion of other tribes. In Corea it is not so. She is like a house without walls...there is no preparation in Corea to defend the

country and the people have no valour required for their national defense. They say there are five or six thousand foot soldiers in Seoul; but in reality, there are no more than one or two thousand. And these are soldiers without intelligence; without valour, not even so good as our jinricksha men...<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps it should come as little surprise then that in March 1893 Ōishi recommended to his superiors that Japanese troops occupy Inchon and Pusan.<sup>16</sup> All this motivated the French minister to Korea to report to his superiors that, “when we consider the country [Korea] in its relations to the other powers, it looks like a goat under the feet of a furious tiger.”<sup>17</sup>

Another witness to these events as they unfolded, and deteriorated, in 1892-1893 was the American minister Augustine Heard. In an article published about two years after these events, Heard openly questioned the notion that Japanese intentions in Korea were paternalistic, and argued the folly of any uninformed pro-Japanese opinion in the West. Remembering the period of Ōishi’s tenure beginning in February 1893, and his frustrated efforts (“with more energy than courtesy”) to gain the sought for indemnities, Heard writes that “Mr. Oishi would be delighted to have a pretext to interfere by force in Korea”.<sup>18</sup> Heard’s reflections illustrate the period of diplomatic crisis that began to develop in Korea after January 1893. Such Japanese insistence upon indemnities was only the latest symptom of growing Japanese commercial encroachment upon Korea, but it is not too much to speculate that this latest tempest over bean embargoes served as bitter reminder of Japanese encroachment upon national sovereignty in general, and made clear to King Kojong the necessity of shoring up friendships elsewhere.

“Great America” was one obvious place to turn, and Korea’s participation at Chicago one such way to underscore their mutual friendship, as first made manifest in the Korean-American Amity Treaty of 1882. Kojong’s official message to President Cleveland, sent along with the World’s Fair delegation, would express the Korean

king's hopes "to strengthen and increase [the] friendship and commercial relations between our two countries."<sup>19</sup>

Korea had missed several boats when it came to participation in world's fairs. Japan had been displaying its national culture and "progress" at such gatherings since Vienna in 1874, and China longer still. Indeed, for Japan the world's fair would become a preferred showcase for its industrial and social development. In 1892, however, Korea rang familiar in most Western ears mostly as a locale of intrigue in an area ripe with international rivalries, or perhaps as one of the latest frontiers of American missionary activity. As noted earlier, Korea was also still widely viewed as a "hermit nation", despite its ostensible openness to all foreign intercourse. By going to Chicago and participating in a World's Fair Korea might hope to break free from this conceptualization of itself as isolated, and in so doing assert itself as an independent nation by giving a Western audience a concept of its identity as "Korea", rather than merely a "Korean problem".

Allen immediately, if somewhat reluctantly, accepted King Kojong's charge to lead the Korean team to Chicago.<sup>20</sup> Displaying an initial enthusiasm, Kojong went about (as Allen mentioned) organizing an appropriate display and choosing representatives. To lead the Korean delegation to Chicago King Kojong chose Chŏng Kyŏng-wŏn (鄭敬源 1841-?), who despite his middle-age had only passed a special literary examination for state office (*pyŏlsi mungwa* 別試文科) in 1890, and was subsequently appointed to the Office of Special Advisers (*hongmun'gwan* 弘文館) before being named as *kyŏmsasŏ* (兼司書) - a royal tutor in the household of the crown prince. His international career would begin with a brief sojourn as secretary in the Korean consulate in Tianjin in 1891. By 1893, though still rather fresh to officialdom, he had risen through the ranks with

remarkable speed. His delegation to lead to the Chicago delegation may be interpreted as a sign of royal confidence in his abilities and loyalties, and also no doubt to his relation to the royal house.<sup>21</sup> He clearly had (or was seen to have) some reformist tendencies, perhaps strengthened by his brief sojourn in Chicago and Washington, for during the 1894 Kabo Reforms he was named to an important post on the newly established Deliberative Council (*kunguk kimuch'ŏ* 軍國機務處), which went on to spearhead an agenda of radical reform measures, and then Minister of Justice (*pŏbmuhyŏpp'an* 法務協辦) in the moderate-progressive Kim Hong-jip cabinet.<sup>22</sup>

But logistical problems plagued the Korean exhibit from the start. Allen encountered some difficulties in acquiring a decent amount of floor space in the Arts and Manufacturers Building, the hoped for inclusion of a women's exhibit was not forthcoming, and most seriously, there were problems with funding. Though Kojong assured Allen in January 1893 that the Korean team would be given \$6000 to cover expenses, with a further \$2000 to be sent on later, this doesn't seem to have been the case.<sup>23</sup> The treasury coffers were said to be empty in November 1892 and we know American workers in Korea were filing formal complaints with the American minister concerning unpaid wages.<sup>24</sup> According to diplomatic correspondence in late 1892 it took a loan on a Japanese bank at Chemulpo to keep up the expenses of the Korean mission to Washington and two more loans from a Chinese merchant association in Seoul just to keep total fiscal crisis at bay.<sup>25</sup> The American Minister Heard was somewhat dismayed to hear in March 1893 of Kojong's decision, upon reading an official description of the fair that had been translated into Chinese for his perusal, to augment the Korean delegation by one official delegate and a ten-person band. Heard wrote home, "if I had known of the intention to send them earlier I should have been

disposed, if not to discourage the project, [then] to point out the very considerable expense which would be caused by it – expense which this country is ill able to afford”.<sup>26</sup> Apparently there were no funds forthcoming for the imminent departure of the Koreans and their crates of displays. Minister Heard telegraphed on to the San Francisco Customs Office requesting a waive of customs duties for the Koreans as he himself had no authority to advance any funds, meanwhile the Korean delegation in Washington made a similar request.<sup>27</sup>

### **Initial American Impressions**

The Korea delegation eventually left Korea from Chemulpo in late March 1893 on the *S.S. China* bound for Yokohama and San Francisco. Their arrival about two weeks later was met by some curious publicity. We know mostly only of the American reaction, while the Korean voices remain virtually silent.<sup>1</sup>

According *The San Francisco Chronicle* reporter, the Koreans arrived “arrayed in the curious silken gowns of the Coreans, and they wore the strange black hats, which look more like pieces of oddly shaped and perforated stovepipe than anything else.”<sup>28</sup> Apparently, Allen’s expressed hopes concerning the curiosity the native dress would elicit were not misplaced. No sooner settled into their rooms, and no doubt exhausted by their long journey and feeling overwhelmed by their foreign surroundings, a *Chronicle* reporter arrived for an interview. The Koreans, according to the American

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<sup>1</sup> One important Korean voice was that of the head of the Korean delegation himself, Chŏng Kyŏng-wŏn. He penned a personal account describing his experiences which came to light in the late 1970s and was recently translated into modern Korean from the classical Chinese by Yi Min-sik. Because the present paper concerns primarily American observations of Korea, this travelogue is not discussed here. See Yi Min-sik, “19-segi Kkolombia pangnamgi e pich’in Chŏng Kyŏng-wŏn ūi taemi oegyo wa munhwa haldong.” In *Hangsuk sasang kwa munhwa*, vol. 3 (1999): 347-373 and continued in vol. 5 (1999): 147-173.

reporter, spoke in their “queer language” and their hotel desk was found strewn with “papers with strange hieroglyphics on them”.<sup>29</sup> In interviews with Commissioner Chŏng and the newly appointed charge d’affaires ad interim to the Korean mission in the United States, Yi Sŭng-su (李承壽), initial Korean impressions of America are gauged. Charge d’affaires Yi is careful to steer any questions away from sensitive, i.e. political, topics, reacting to the reporter’s inquiry concerning “Russian intrigues” and current conditions in Korea, by indicating “the Korean government was very strict about having its representatives talk, because so many misleading statements have been made”. Commissioner Chŏng, whom the reporter describes as representing “the Hermit Kingdom at the World’s Fair”, expressed his hope to “learn much in this country regarding great inventions and the advancement of the arts and sciences”. It was perhaps the ten-man delegation of Korean musicians that elicited the most curiosity, and they are described as a “very jolly lot of orientals... laughing and dancing much of the time”. We can see from this initial reaction to the Korean delegation that their attraction to the American reporter came mostly from their exotic air, the oddity of their speech, dress, and mannerisms. Months and even years after the Korean arrival accounts of the Korean delegation in the United States for the Chicago fair would be circulating. They would share a view of the Koreans as curious and exotic. *The New York Tribune* would run a story several months later, apparently passed down through word of mouth, entitled “The Coreans not used to Interviews”, in which an account of the Korean response to a request for an interview is described, along with the curious Korean answers, given in the “kindest words – in Oriental fashion”.<sup>30</sup> Two years after the fair a reporter for *The New York Herald*, in an even more fantastic account of the Koreans at Chicago (in which Korea is still described as the Hermit Kingdom),

described the Korean penchant for gambling and drinking as well as the unlikely trials of the Korean delegation in Chicago, which come off like elements in a picaresque novel.<sup>31</sup>

Six days after leaving San Francisco the Koreans arrived in Chicago, the long journey from Seoul to Chicago taking, at the end of the 19th century, just under 26 days. As in San Francisco, the Koreans attracted the immediate curiosity of the local press, which, notified by wire, were waiting to report on their arrival. Chicago reactions fairly mimicked those in San Francisco. The Korean musicians were again a source of attention. They were compared with the “Javanese people on the plaisance” [Midway Plaisance], and performed “strangely on tom-toms, instruments that look like either a mandolin or a guitar, and big gongs”. Commissioner Chōng, for his part, makes it strictly known that the Korean musicians are not to play for revenue but to add to the dignity of the Korean commissioners.<sup>32</sup> Throughout these interviews it is usually the Korean Charge d’affaires Yi who speaks on behalf of the entire delegation. He comments on the overall Korean delegation to Chicago, “I have heard that no Korean people will come to the Fair. It is decided that the two Commissioners and the native band shall be the representation, and these, with our exhibit, will be sufficient to show the interest we have in the big Exposition.”<sup>33</sup>

Until now a virtually unknown entity, misrepresentation and ignorance of Korea in the American press and public is not hard to find. Besides a curious explanation of the Korean flag, given in the *Chicago Daily Record* (in which the symbols of the *i-ching* displayed on the flag are given as the four compass points, etc.), one newspaper account actually described Korea as an island! This account, centered on the arrival of the Korean commissioners in Chicago, goes on to puzzle over the Koreans themselves:

It would be difficult for me, not acquainted with the various types of nationalities, to determine exactly what the Koreans are. In eyes and general appearance they somewhat resemble the Japanese; the complexion, however, is of a much more dusky hue. The dress is rather picturesque, at least so far as the most distinguished among them are concerned. It consists of a long black robe somewhat clerical in style and material and a curiously shaped black hat, which gives sufficient room for a display of an ample provision of coal black hair.<sup>34</sup>

Another description of Korea that appeared in a period guidebook to the fair goes on in rather fantastic terms to describe that country as,

...the seat of one of the most despotic governments in existence. Until very recently the reigning monarch was held in such sacred esteem that the mere mention of his name by one of the common rabble was regarded as a capital offense. Even the courtier, pampered and petted, found that to allow himself to be caught in the royal presence otherwise than prostrate until bidden to rise meant certain death.<sup>35</sup>

The Koreans had their work cut out for them.

### **The White City, May-October, 1893**

Twenty-six cases of goods accompanied the Korean delegation to Chicago. Arriving in Chicago on April 29, the Korean's display was in no way prepared, despite its relatively small size, by the time of the fair's official opening on May first. Even by late May Allen writes to the State Department requesting an unpaid 60-day extension of his leave, "...as the Exposition is not yet in good running order and the Korean officials are anxious for me to remain a little longer".<sup>36</sup> Such an extended delay seems difficult to believe, judging from the limited size of the Korean exhibit. More likely, based upon the audience that Commissioner Chōng would have with Kojong upon his return, the Koreans were a little overwhelmed by the crowds and the vast foreign metropolis, and felt a little more secure with Allen around. Most of the Korean team spoke not a word of English, Charge d'affaires Yi having already proceeded on to Washington and his official posting. For interpretation needs they were to rely primarily on a Mr. Pak Yōn-kin, who was in the United States for naval training.<sup>37</sup> S

On a side note, shortly after the fair opened Commissioner Chǒng was the curious visitor to a rancorous meeting called by the fair’s organizers to debate whether or not to keep the turnstiles open on the Sabbath. An amused Chicago newspaper carried a sketch of the dignified Chǒng in official dress gazing perplexedly over the proceedings. “No doubt”, the paper mused, “he [Chǒng] wondered at the queer, noisy, and deceitful ways of the western barbarian, for there were strange doings before his slant eyes during the session. It must have been more of a circus for H.R.C.M. Commissioner Jeung Kiung Won [Chǒng Kyǒng-wǒn] than that of Col. Buffalo William’s Wild West Show.”<sup>38</sup>

The Korean exhibit was set up in the Arts and Manufactures Building, an engineering marvel of its day, contributing perhaps more than any other structure to the architectural legacy that was “The White City” of the summer of 1893 (so nicknamed for the overwhelming sense of whiteness the fairground’s classically inspired buildings lent to the city). One visitor described it as “greater than the whole exposition at Philadelphia [in 1876]. As one period publication described it, “Here...may be noted the cruder products of countries whose manufacturing industries are yet in their infancy, such countries as Zanzibar and the Orange Free State, as Madagascar, Korea, and Siam”.<sup>39</sup> Korea, then, was clearly set aside (unlike Japan or even China) as a primitive and developing country – interestingly enough included among a group of nations many of who were already colonized.

Apparently enough of the Korean display was in place by May first, when the official opening of the fair took place in a less than encouraging atmosphere of rain and yellow mud. Newly inaugurated President Grover Cleveland presided, and after the opening speeches came the march of nations concerning which one reporter wrote how

“The foreigners of all nationalities in their distinctive costumes attracted a great deal of attention; but none more than the Indians atop the Administrative Building...and the Koreans with their long flowing robes of bright colors and queer-looking headdresses. The confusion of the popular mind with references to the distinction between Japanese, Chinese, and Koreans, etc., was amusing”.<sup>40</sup> The President and his entourage made a symbolic tour through the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building, where, upon passing the unfinished Korean exhibit, the Korean band received him with some native music.<sup>41</sup>

### **Chicago: Impressions and Reactions**

Compared to Japan and China, Korea went all but unnoticed at the fair. Enough survives however to give us a taste of the display and of the reactions, both Korean and Western, to it. The small size of the Korean exhibit meant all its products were predominantly arranged in one place, rather than dispersed around the various exhibition halls.<sup>42</sup> The Korean exhibit itself was built somewhat to resemble a traditional Korean structure, complete with colorful painting and ceramic tile roofing. Inside the open pavilion-like structure the most visible displays were perhaps of a gentleman’s dress, official military uniform, firearms, Korean musical instruments, and a tiger’s pelt.<sup>43</sup> Mostly the items consisted of daily household curios such as combs, fans, dinnerware, and smoking pipes. The official directory to the fair actually describes it as “bric-a-brac and curios”.<sup>44</sup> An account in the *Chicago Daily Record’s* guide to the fair provides a comparatively full description of the Korean exhibit. After giving a rather inaccurate explanation of the symbolism behind the Korean national flag and a rundown of the displayed items (including a cannon purportedly used in the American attack on Korea in 1870) the reporter stumbles upon a telling detail:

The young Korean in charge of the exhibit has evidently become tired of answering hundreds of times a day the same questions by different visitors. Consequently, to the

corner of a map showing Korea and the neighboring countries he has attached a paper headed "Questions Answered". Many of them are here reproduced:

- 'Korea' and 'Corea' are both correct, but the former is preferred.
- Korea is not a part of China but is independent.
- The Koreans do not speak the Chinese language and their language resembles neither the Chinese nor the Japanese.
- Korea made treaties in 1882.
- Korea has electric lights, steamships, telegraph, but no railroads.
- Koreans live in comfortable tile-roofed houses, heated by flues under the floor
- Korean civilization is ancient and high; area 100,000 sq. miles; population 16,000,000; climate like that of Chicago, country mountainous, mineral wealth underdeveloped, agricultural products, chiefly rice, beans, wheat and corn.<sup>45</sup>

What is interesting about this account is that it gives us a hint as to what foreign visitors to the Korean exhibit were most curious about, but more importantly perhaps it reveals what the Korean representatives themselves wanted most to impart about their own country – namely that it was politically independent and culturally unique.

The Chicago fair offered a wealth of subject matter for the writers of picaresque children's stories, and dozens of them indeed found inspiration among the throngs on the Midway Plaisance or the in view from the world's first Ferris Wheel. In one such book, *Elsie at the World's Fair*, the story's heroine Elsie, the matriarch of a large southern family, upon exiting the Guatemala building suddenly expresses her "particular interest in Korea just at the present". "Elsie's" description borrows heavily from the *Chicago Daily Record's* account given partially above and the author quite likely never visited the Korean booth (or that of Guatemala for that matter) but nevertheless found in its description interesting fodder. Of the Korean booth she writes,

...[it] is small but crowded with exhibits. The Korean Royal Commissioner – with the singular name of Jeung Kiung Won – has charge of it.

"That's a funny name, uncle," laughed Ned.

"And yet our names may have just as funny a sound to him," Violet said, smiling down at her little son...

They passed in and found a good many sights which interested them – banners and lanterns, a bronze table and dinner set...white and blue vases...There was a map showing Korea and adjacent countries, and attached to it was a paper headed, "Questions Answered"...

After reading the list of points already cited to the rapt family members, the youngest girl Rosie can sincerely remark upon leaving the small exhibit, "I am glad we

came...for I know a good deal more about Korea than I did before, and find it a far more interesting country than I had any idea that it was.”<sup>46</sup>

In his later newspaper article also mentioned previously, John Cockerill, who likely had connections to both Allen and de Guerville, gives us his sense of the Korean display’s poverty (though he got the details wrong), “Our seductive agents for the Fair presented the Korean King with a request from our government for an exhibit, which impressed His immature Majesty with the idea of a command. He hastily knocked together a rather inexpensive collection of Korean junk and shipped it off to Chicago”.<sup>47</sup>

The *Book of the Fair* was somewhat more positive concerning the Korea’s exhibit (if not its king):

The representation from Korea (Corea), on the contrary, is unexpectedly full and interesting and was prepared and forwarded under the direct supervision of the king himself. That despotic monarch...was filled with the worthy desire of extending his enterprises. Hence this curious exhibit of the industries of these little-known people, which includes a large number of agricultural products, cotton, silk, grass and hemp fabrics, tanned skins, paper, clothes, furniture, etc...The main interest attaching to the fabrics, which are generally of a poor quality, is in the curious mixture of cotton, hemp, silk and grass all woven together in the same piece. There is also a full set of culinary utensils and table furniture, including one of the king’s own brass dinner sets; a complete smoker’s paraphernalia; numerous court costumes, ancient armor, weapons, horse trappings, musical instruments, and a full display of native jewelry and a valuable collection of old pottery which the monarch proposes to present to some American museum.<sup>48</sup>

*The Book of the Fair*’s descriptive of Korea goes on,

...even the so-called hermit kingdom, though yet secluding herself from the influences of western civilization, has sent commissioners and an exhibit to the World’s Fair...the king entrusted twenty-five or more tons of exhibits, most of them taken from the royal palace, which illustrate the customs and industries of this strange and isolated nation, whose monarch, ministers, and people have probably more confidence in the United States than they have in any of the foreign powers.<sup>49</sup>

It is interesting that Korea is yet described, almost twenty years after its opening, as a “hermit kingdom...secluding herself from the influences of western civilization”.

This seems to be the general American image of Korea at the time. Whatever Korean intentions might have been, Korean was almost unanimously perceived in the journals

and accounts of the period as being an isolated, if peaceful, nation only now timorously venturing out. One Chicago paper even headlined an article on Korea at the fair: “Korea’s Doors Open” – this nearly twenty years after the Kanghwa Treaty!<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the prevailing attitude seems to be that Korea’s opening to the world came in 1893 not 1876.

Perhaps the most interesting and revealing reaction to the Korean display that has come down to us is that of Yun Ch’i-ho (1865-1945), at the time finishing a prolonged period of study in the United States, who passed through Chicago on his return to Japan and Korea.

The irony has been observed elsewhere that young reform-minded Koreans at the turn of the 19th century turned largely to Japan, their future colonizer, as the model of reform and progress. Ironic not only because Japan would eventual colonize Korea and deny it the very status of independent strength it was hoping to achieve by emulating her, but ironic in that Japan would justify its annexation as necessary in order to modernize a Korea that was incapable of modernizing itself. But as a fellow Asian nation with close historical ties to Korea, it was felt that Japan offered the best model for the successful adaptation of traditional Asian values to the modern industrial world. It was a confidence that would find its first tragic conclusion during the failed Kapsin revolt of December 1884, when plotters put their ultimate hopes for success in the support of Japanese troops in Korea. It was an attitude, however, that would play into eventual Japanese colonization in 1910.

Yun had received an early Western-style education in Japan when he proceed there in 1881, at the age of sixteen, in the entourage of the “Gentlemen’s Tour Group” which King Kojong dispatched to Japan, in one of his periodic spells of progressivism, to

observe and report on Japanese modernization. Yun opted to stay on in Japan to receive a more formal and Western education, returning to Korea in 1884 as interpreter for the first American minister to Korea, Lucius Foote. Though his English at this point was far from the polished Victorian prose it was to attain in his later journals, Foote felt confident enough in his young abilities to hire him. Yun was suspicious of Chinese aspirations in Korea, suspicions he soon made clear to Minister Foote, and suspicions that were founded as much upon his aversion to what he saw as China's canon of anti-progressive and regressive traditional ideas (namely Confucianism), than in that country's political machinations themselves. In 1884 the failed coup attempt by members of the "Progressive Party" (*Kaehwa tang*), with whom Yun had established links in Japan, fractured the calm of the Korean capital and monarchy, resulting in a conservative retrenchment. Though any significant connection between Yun and the Kapsin coup attempt has never been established, Yun's father, who was appointed to an important government position in the short-lived Kapsin government, was in fact tarnished by his association with the plotters. As a result, in 1884 Yun, seeing his immediate prospects spoiled by his father's involvement, opted again to go abroad, this time to Shanghai. There Yun matriculated at the American Methodist run Anglo-Chinese College, and it was there that he converted to Christianity in 1887. Finishing his studies in Shanghai, Yun was able to procure a recommendation and the necessary funding to study at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, where he undertook a two-year course in theology. From 1891 to 1893, Yun studied at Emory University in Georgia, where his studies took a more humanist bent. Nevertheless, upon completion of his period of study at Emory Yun was determined to return to Korea and establish a

Christian and “manly” church in Korea to awaken a slumbering nation.<sup>51</sup> On his journey homeward he made a point of visiting the Chicago fair.

Two basic sentiments animate Yun in the summer of 1893. One was a patriotic fervor, made perhaps more intense by homesickness and a love augmented by nostalgia and distance. The other was a strong Protestantism that manifested itself in an emphasis on self-reliance, masculinity, hard work, austerity, and a belief in progress. Yun, on his train voyage to Vancouver following his visit to the fair, feels some sympathy for the destitute Native Americans he sees along the tracks, yet at the same time can blame their miserable lot on their lack of initiative and “enterprising spirit”.<sup>52</sup> In Washington, during a visit to the Korean legation building on Iowa Circle, he feels a patriotic swelling of the heart upon entering “the lovely precincts over which my national colors waved”, while at the same time loathing the photograph of the Korean delegation, seeing in their faces “looks of supreme stupidity and beastly sensuality”.<sup>53</sup> In these early writings Yun very much equates all that is traditional about Korea with all that is backward, regressive, repressive, and even sinful. The ideals of progress and of Christian virtue have become very much melded in his young mind, sentiments indeed quite native to America at the time.

Yun was not well received by the Korean delegation at the fair, a fact that only added to his mostly negative critique of it. This perhaps had less to do with any abject stupidity and bigotry on the part of the Korean commissioners, as Yun imagined, than with the natural reluctance of government officials to deal with someone linked, however remotely, to Kapsin. Commissioner Chŏng refused to greet Yun when he visited the delegation’s apartments shortly after his arrival in Chicago in September 1893, but apparently did not object to Yun’s loitering around the Korean exhibit at the

fairgrounds. Despite his frustration with the Korean exhibit, which he calls paltry and full of the “crude and dull productions of Korean skill”, Yun is continually drawn back to its place in the Arts and Manufactures Building, where he spends several days in the course of his brief visit to Chicago. It is this dichotomy of sentiments that best illustrates Yun’s dilemma. On the one hand fiercely patriotic, he is on the other practical. While loving his homeland unconditionally, he also loathes its shortcomings. These sentiments, of unconditional patriotism and progressivism, of love and disdain, needn’t of course be contradictory, but the dilemma for Yun, and the young Korean reformers of his time is that they were, or very much seemed to be. Yun writes in one entry, “Went to the Corean Pavilion at 11 a.m. and stayed there until 5 p.m.! Why and what for? I can’t explain; only I couldn’t get away from there, miserable as the exhibit is.”<sup>54</sup> But elsewhere he explains his actions somewhat, “While I could not help blushing at the poverty of the Corean arts etc. the sight of the Corean flags had a strong attraction to me.”<sup>55</sup> On one visit he feels humiliated “not to find a Corean flag in any of the buildings from whose roofs fly the colors of almost every nation”, adding, “Ah! Yet I shall not know the depth and breadth of the degradation and shame of Corea till I get into her capital.”<sup>56</sup> Ashamed and frustrated as he might be by Korea’s lack of progress, the non-judgmental love of country remains.

Yun’s more practical side comes through in his appraisal of the other exhibits. Though he dismisses the Chinese temple and theater as “stupid”, he is highly impressed by the national pavilion of the Japanese, adding, “Well may a Japanese be proud”.<sup>57</sup> Yun also does not hold very high opinions of the Korean members of the delegation, except for the American-schooled Mr. Pak. He writes, “Mr. An, one of the Coreans having charge of the exhibit, is a fair specimen of the degraded humanity of Corea. He

is dirty, lazy, dull, filthy in mouth and in morals. Mr. Chung [Chǒng], the chief commissioner, is said to be stingy and bigotted [sic]. Mr. Pak is the best of the whole lot. He knows that Corea is in a pitiful condition.”<sup>58</sup> In a long conversation with Mr. Pak later, the two discuss “the corruption of the Korean government, the Chinese encroachment and kindred topics formed the principle burden of our conversation. He advised me not to call on any Koreans as that will remind them of the “rebellion” and of the part which I was and is supposed to have taken in it thus endangering rather than helping my future welfare”.<sup>59</sup>

Rather than see the fair as an attempt to join the world, Yun sees in it only a reminder of Korea’s miserable plight. In one extended entry, spurned on by his visit to the exposition, he writes of Korea:

It suffocates me (literally) to think, that there is a country of 80,000 sq. miles where millions of souls can not think or say or act as they please; where talents have no market; ambition, no sphere; patriotism, no play; where infernal despotism breeds and nurses generations of slaves, beggars and idiots; where men are dying in life and living in death; where moral and material putrefaction and filth are destroying thousands every year. How long will this political hell last? (I beg pardon of Hell for degrading it by comparing Corea with it.)<sup>60</sup>

In Yun we may witness the continually crushed national hopes of a younger progressive generation, in stark contrast to the official stance, which was one of more conservative and gradual change, which emphasized peaceful coexistence rather than radical change. Both were obviously concerned with Korea’s independence, and took a just pride and concern in Korea as a nation. What separated them was what separates most – varying visions of the future and how to get there.

The Chicago fair ended on October 21, 1893. But before the turnstiles stopped the Korean delegation would gain one more burst of publicity in a lavish dinner it threw on September 5, 1893 for the World’s Fair Commissioners, and in honor of King Kojong’s

birthday, at the luxurious Auditorium Hotel in downtown Chicago. It is an all but forgotten incident but one of prime importance.

To return one final time to John Cockerill, he writes that the fete was made possible by the sudden arrival of a monetary windfall sent from Korea that allowed the indulgence (which amounted to almost \$1500). As a result, according to Cockerill,

When he had satisfied the landlord he found himself pecuniarily in a condition similar to that of the historic gentleman who came down the Jericho road. He dusted about and raised money enough to secure an emigrant railway ticket to San Francisco, catching his food as catch can. From San Francisco he journeyed to lower Japan in the steerage of a Pacific Mail steamer, and from thence was helped to the south gate of Seoul by the kind contributions of relatives and sympathetic acquaintances. But he had maintained the glory of Corea abroad...and could henceforth talk of the grandeur of his experiences.<sup>61</sup>

What was this grand and important affair held in the banquet hall of Chicago's premier hotel whose guests included Mayor Harrison of Chicago (a month before his assassination) and President Thomas Palmer of the Commission for the World's Columbian Exposition, as well as Walker Fearn and the Japanese commissioner to the fair, Motoudaro and which apparently left the Korean commissioner destitute? Though of course we cannot dismiss the role that national pride and "face" may have played in hosting such an expensive affair, I believe there is a deeper significance behind it. Even the Korean charge d'affaires in Washington ventured out for the event. Newspaper accounts that have come down tell how the Korean officials were garbed in their full court dress. President Palmer offered a toast to the King of Korea with Commissioner Chŏng responding with his own tribute.<sup>62</sup> Chŏng's toast is one of the very few insights we have into the official Korean perception of their own exhibit, it went in part:

For about ten years has Korea, formerly known as the Hermit nation, been open to the world. His Majesty was greatly honored by this invitation of the President of the United States to participate in the World's Columbian Exposition. Never before has Korea taken part in any international exposition, but in response to the urgent request of America, the great friend of Korea, his Majesty has sent his first official exhibit abroad, to make complete the representations of nations. Our small and humble exhibit has its place in the Department of Manufacturers. It is simply for representation and is not

offered in comparison with the exhibits of the earth, but is honored in forming a part of those combined exhibits which make the greatest exposition the world has ever seen. We recognize at this exposition the lessons of fraternal union in language, literature, religion, science, art, and the civil institutions of different peoples; and our administration for the educational system of imparting knowledge in all departments is very great indeed. We are sure this exposition will tend to the judicial arbitration as the supreme law of international relations. We have learned many things from all the various nations from for this exposition, and we have already determined to introduce into our country many of those beneficial improvements; and we hope that you also will take back to your country pleasant impressions of Korea..<sup>63</sup>

As the Korean Charge d'affaires Yi Sŭng-su was present, and surely must have preread and approved of any official comments, the toast's words are telling. First, they reflect a Korean desire to introduce itself as an enlightened and open nation. These are no longer delegates from the "Hermit Nation" but from the country "formerly known" as such. It reflects an expressed (whether or not real) desire to learn and to change, that is to join Japan in its endeavor to modernize along Western lines. Such a progressive-sounding attitude by Commissioner Chŏng (despite testimony to the contrary by Yun Ch'i-ho), also helps explain Chŏng's later role in the Kabo Reforms, and thus the role his "Chicago experience" may have had on subsequent events in Korea – though to what extent of course must remain pure conjecture. But most interesting is the expressed hope for "judicial arbitration as the supreme law of international relations", a desire tied intimately I believe with developments in Korea, where it was soon becoming clear judicial arbitration might be necessary to save her. Indeed, this closing dinner party can be seen not simply as an expression of goodwill and gratitude to the fair's commissioners, but also, indeed largely, as a political and diplomatic salvo on the part of Korea.

Also revealing is Chŏng's explanation that Korea did not come to compete with the grandeur of its exhibit but came rather for the symbolic act of participation itself. Chicago, despite Korea's minor, indeed nearly overlooked, presence may be seen as a

genuine Korean effort to be heard amid the clamor of the fair and midst the growing international rivalries that were engulfing it back home.

### Conclusion

Commissioner Chǒng's journey back to Korea would apparently be a story in itself, if it resembled in any way the depiction John Cockerill later gave of it. However he made it home, in an audience Commissioner Chǒng subsequently held with King Kojong after his safe return to Korea, the king's curiosity about the fair is exhibited. The conversation displays the relative naiveté of Korea and its king to the outside world (though no less than American naiveté of Korea) and is worth quoting in full:

Kojong: In what ways were the American products remarkable?

Chǒng: They were most highly advanced.

Kojong: All together how many nations participated?

Chǒng: Forty-seven nations gathered. Japan sent a commission but China had only merchants who set up a shop.

Kojong: Did our country also have a stand?

Chǒng: Yes, at the fair we had built a small house in Korean style, complete with traditional tile roof.

Kojong: And how large was our exhibit?

Chǒng: I cannot say exactly, but approximately six or seven *kan*.<sup>64</sup>

Kojong: And how were our national products received?

Chǒng: As this was the first time for those of other nations to see our products, we soon encountered difficulties with the amassing sightseers, more than our managers were prepared to handle. We then used paper to label each item with its name and proper use.

Kojong: And what sorts of things were most popular?

Chǒng: They [Westerners] were particularly attached to our textiles, folding screens, inlaid mother-of-pearl, and embroidered screens. I even heard that we were awarded a prize but as the certificates were not prepared when we departed I couldn't be certain of its status. But before returning I did meet with the fair's commissioner who informed me that both our team of musicians and our products would receive commendations, which would be sent on via Secretary Allen.<sup>65</sup>

Kojong: How much were our products worth in American dollars?

Chǒng: About \$1140.<sup>66</sup>

Kojong: And did you leave the remaining items behind?

Chǒng: I left some with various schools and museums, those items not worth viewing I deposited with the State Council [Uijǒngbu].<sup>67</sup>

Here King Kojong seems more concerned with how the Koreans intermingled with the foreign observers and with the rather insignificant details of the exhibition, rather than with any larger lessons to be taken from it, notably in the realms of modernization. Commissioner Chǒng did seem to be keen on at least moderate reform, something his trip to the United States no doubt helped to reinforce. In the wake of the Sino-Japanese War Chǒng was among many reform-minded Korean officials tapped by the Japanese to spearhead the Kabo Reform effort. His sudden disappearance after the failure of Kabo, along with scores of other pro-Japanese officials, must be telling as well.

Korea's participation at Chicago must also be viewed in the wider context of its ongoing attempt to liberate itself from Chinese hegemony and Japanese pressure and to assume among other sovereign nations the proper and independent place to which it was theoretically entitled. However paltry Korean participation at Chicago may have been, it is important to keep in mind that it was the act of participation that was of primary importance. As Woody Allen put it, eighty-percent of success is just showing up. Though the memory of a Korean exhibit at Chicago has nearly faded into oblivion, I believe enough material evidence remains to reveal that Korea very much viewed its participation as an open display of independence at a time of foreign encroachment, and in this sense may be viewed in the context of Korea's growing recognition of the independence and free initiative that new international realities seemed to entitle it. Korea went to Chicago as Korea, not as China's younger brother. It is worth remembering that China did not go at all.

Intent and effect are not always congruous. Though it certainly seems to have been Korea's intent to use the fair as a display of national sovereignty and an appeal for international recognition, American reaction to Korea was on the whole a mixture of

curiosity and puzzlement. Compared to Korea, not only did Japan and China both receive wider treatment in the Chicago papers (despite the fact that China did not send an official delegation), but also that treatment was generally more self-assured and focused.<sup>68</sup> America had been dealing with Japan and China for decades, Korea was still an enigma, though resembling the Chinese and Japanese in appearance their identity still undetermined. It should be noted briefly, however, that the popular reactions to China and Japan were on the whole decidedly different in tone. Both countries received the full-page treatment in special illustrated supplements put out by such dailies as *The Chicago Tribune* and the *Daily Inter Ocean*. But while the Japanese display was praised, that of China (actually set up by private Chinese interests in the United States) was taken mostly as a convenient target for a barrage of anti-Chinese sentiments.<sup>69</sup> While Japan was almost routinely lauded in such terms as “the Light of Asia” or the “Britain of the East”, its refined traditional culture and modern industrial and political progress equally worthy of admiration, China remained predominantly a source of stasis and unfathomable mystery.<sup>70</sup> For its part, Korea remained all but invisible, which in and of itself speaks much. It was, in the growing Western enthusiasm for Japan and its modernization, and in the growth of American and Japanese rivalry in Asia and the Pacific, an invisibility that would be repeated at the Hague in 1907, or at Versailles in 1919.<sup>71</sup> It is not too much to make such comparisons.

However, one is struck by the puzzled attitudes of the surviving accounts of Korea at the fair. In some ways this is perfectly understandable. This was Korea’s first participation in such an event. And yet Korea’s isolation and status as “hermit kingdom” were almost deliberately exaggerated by western observers, as if to heighten the sense of astonishment that Koreans were participating at all. It had been almost

twenty years since Korea had opened up its doors, or had them opened. Ten years since its first diplomatic mission to the United States. With their “queer hats”, “hieroglyphic writing”, “unusual instruments”, and the comparisons between elements of the Korean delegation and displays and things found “on the plaisance”, the Koreans seem almost to have been relegated to the plaisance of the mind if they were not there in fact. They remained throughout an enigma, neither deserving the vilification reserved for the Chinese nor meriting the praise heaped upon the Japanese for their progress towards the goals of “civilized nations”. To their American audience Koreans seemed more than anything a benign curiosity.

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<sup>1</sup> An attempt by a small core of Korean reformers in the *kapsin* year (1884) to overthrow what they viewed as an overly conservative and China-oriented Korean government, and to thereby initiate modern reforms. The young coup leaders, some educated in Japan in the 1880s, unwisely placed their confidence in the armed support of Japanese soldiers. Not only was the armed aid not forthcoming by a Japan hesitant to risk military confrontation with China, but the Japanese connection to the Kapsin plotters helped to subsequently undermine the reformist cause in popular and royal eyes alike.

<sup>2</sup> Ki-baek Lee, *A New History of Korea*. Translated by Edward W. Wagner with Edward J. Shultz. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 288.

<sup>3</sup> Heard to Secretary of State (10 November 1892), in Spencer J. Palmer, ed., *Korean-American Relations: Documents Pertaining to the Far Eastern Diplomacy of the United States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), v. 2, p. 303.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Allen to Walker Fearn (26 November 1892), Allen MSS.

<sup>6</sup> Delort de Gléon to Delaunay-Belleville (25 November 1898). French National Archives (FNA), "Series F/12/4357, Corée".

<sup>7</sup> The former Midway Plaisance now makes up the backbone of the University of Chicago campus; the hot, dusty, and claustrophobic thoroughfare now a peaceful, pleasant, and expansive lawn.

<sup>8</sup> "None Can Compare with It", *New York Times* (19 June 1893), p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> This was most clearly heralded by the Geary Act (1892) halting Chinese immigration, and indeed calling for the deportation of many.

<sup>10</sup> See "Allen, Horace Newton" in *The National Cyclopedic of American Biography*, v. 28, pp. 281-282, and Fred Harvey Harrington, *God, Mammon, and the Japanese, Dr. Horace Allen and Korean-American Relations, 1884-1905* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961).

<sup>11</sup> Allen to John Hay (9 April 1904). *Despatches from United States Ministers to Korea* (DUSMK). Allen is hardly humbled by the honor, stating in his dispatch that he (Allen) "helped to establish their independence by successfully establishing their legation at Washington" and that as he was "responsible for the chief developments in such large commercial matters as railways, mines, etc. This mark of esteem is therefore not out of place."

<sup>12</sup> Allen to John W. Foster, Secretary of State (13 September 1892). DUSMK.

<sup>13</sup> Allen writes, "It seemed recently that it would be impossible – owing to many causes – to induce this government to prepare and send an exhibit to the Fair, but His Majesty on learning that I had applied to my government for leave of absence to visit the Fair began to show more interest in sending an exhibit and has now begun collecting articles which he asks me to receive, pack and ship." Allen to John W. Foster (12 October 1892). DUSMK. For a more detailed look at the sudden decision by Kojong to

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participate see my paper, “Korea in the White City: Korea at the World’s Columbian Exhibition (1893)”. *Transactions of the Korea Branch Royal Asiatic Society*. Vol. 77 (2002).

<sup>14</sup> For a thorough discussion of this “bean affair” see Han Kyo Kim, “The Demise of the Kingdom of Korea, 1882-1910” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1962), pp. 190-195.

<sup>15</sup> The contents of the inflammatory pamphlet were eagerly quoted in French diplomatic correspondence of the period. See Frandin to Ministre des Affaires Etrangères (MAE) (15 January 1893). French Ministry of Foreign Affairs Archives (MFAA), “Correspondence Commerciale, Séoul, 1893-1901”.

<sup>16</sup> Han Kyo Kim, p. 193. According to Augustine Heard and others, Ōishi later approached the Taewōngun, living in not-so-quiet obscurity in Seoul, suggesting an alliance between Japan, China, and Korea to drive out the Russians, but more to the point to undercut the authority of King Kojong and his ministers. See Young Ick Lew, “Korean-Japanese Politics behind the Kabo-Ūlmi Reform Movement, 1894 to 1896”. *Journal of Korean Studies* 3 (1981), p. 41-42.

<sup>17</sup> Frandin to MAE (15 January 1893). MFAA, “Correspondence Commerciale, Séoul, 1893-1901”.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine Heard, “China and Japan in Korea”. *The North American Review*, vol. 159, no. 454 (September 1894), p. 304.

<sup>19</sup> Grover Cleveland Papers, series 3, reel 138. As it turned out, it was due greatly to the mediation of the United States that a more serious rupture between Korea and Japan was avoided. A period article (in the midst of the Chicago fair) describes the whole diplomatic incident as a “triumph of the principles of modern diplomacy, as applied to conservative Eastern nations.” “United States as Peacemaker”. *The New York Tribune* (24 May 1893), p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> “...this is perhaps not exactly the work I was expected to do as Honorary Commissioner, I have agreed to do as he [King Kojong] asks, since otherwise the exhibit may not be sent”. Allen to Foster (12 October 1892), DUSMK.

<sup>21</sup> This would be confirmed later, soon upon his return to Korea in 1894, when he was sent south to deal with the Tonghak Uprising then rocking the Cholla Provinces.

<sup>22</sup> Chōng was one of 18 officials named to the Deliberative Council in July 1894. Like many of the other members, Chōng held his seat concurrently with another position, in his case Vice Minister of Education, in the Kabo-Ūlmi reform government. In his study on the Kabo reform era, Young Ick Lew describes the select members of the Deliberative Council as representing the “political elite of the reformed government of 1894”. See Young Ick Lew, “The Kabo Reform Movement: Korean and Japanese Reform Efforts in Korea, 1894” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1972), pp. 228-230. For a short biography of Chōng also see “Chōng Kyōng-wōn”, in *Hanguk chōngsin munhwa yōn’guwōn* [Academy of Korean Studies]. *Hanguk minjok munhwa tae paekgwā sajōn*, vol. 19 (Seoul: Samhwa inswae chusik hoesa, 1991), p. 700.

<sup>23</sup> Allen to Walker Fearn (14 January 1893), Allen MSS

<sup>24</sup> Augustine Heard to John W. Foster (25 November 1892), DUSMK.

<sup>25</sup> Frandin to MAE (24 August, 15 November 1892), MFAA, “Correspondance Commerciale Séoul, vol. 7, 1886-1892”.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine Heard to Walter Gresham (22 March 1893), DUSMK.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*; and Ye Cha Yun [Yi Ch’ae-yōn] to Walter Gresham (3 April 1893), *Despatches from the Korean Legation to the United States*.

<sup>28</sup> The whole of the San Francisco account is taken from *The San Francisco Chronicle*, April 23, 1893, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> What he undoubtedly saw was the Chinese writing still used in official Korean correspondence and record-keeping. The equation (to the average Westerner) of the odd appearance of Chinese writing, and the unfamiliar sound of its spoken language, to something “un-Christian” and practically immoral was not uncommon during this heyday of extreme anti-Chinese sentiment, notably in California. A Chicago journalist would describe Chinese musical instruments as having names “that cannot be spelled without the Chinese alphabet or pronounced by a Christian” (*The Chicago Tribune* [24 September 1893], p. 33).

<sup>30</sup> “The Coreans not used to Interviews”. *The New York Tribune* (2 June 1893), p. 7.

<sup>31</sup> “Scenes from the Hermit Kingdom”. *The New York Herald* (22 December 1895), p. 7. In the same piece John Cockerill goes on to say (though on whose authority is undetermined) that the Koreans arrived extremely strapped for money and “in imminent danger of starving until a German saloon keeper discovered that the extra trade of the thirsty drawn to his place of evenings by the wheezing of the Imperial Band justified him in providing members of the delegation with rice, red pepper and stewed weeds. And so the Coreans lived along and held their place in the great cosmopolitan event”. Cockerill was a well-known newspaper journalist and editor of his day, perhaps best known for his *discovery* of a

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young Lafcadio Hearn in 1872. At the time of this article he was serving as a special correspondent for *The New York Herald* in the Far East. He in all likelihood would have been acquainted with A.B. de Guerville, at this same time a correspondent for the *The New York Tribune* covering the Sino-Japanese War. It was no doubt to de Guerville that he was referring by “our seductive agents”, for de Guerville, as previously shown, had been acting as Special Commissioner to the fair. He gives de Guerville too much credit, however, for Allen had succeeded in securing Kojong’s promise of participation months before de Guerville’s arrival in Seoul. Cockerill would die of an apoplectic fit in a Cairo barber’s chair a few month’s after this writing.

<sup>32</sup> *The Chicago Tribune* (29 April 1893), p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *The Chicago Record’s History of the World’s Fair* (Chicago: Chicago Daily News Co., 1893), pp. 223-225; *The Daily Inter Ocean* (29 April 1893), p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> William E. Cameron, et al. *The World’s Fair, Being a Pictorial History of the Columbian Exposition...* (Chicago: Chicago Publication Lithograph Co.), p. 591.

<sup>36</sup> Allen to Walter Gresham, Secretary of State (23 May 1893), DUSMK.

<sup>37</sup> Mr. Pak was not part of the delegation formulated by Kojong but was added in America. That Mr. Pak was in the United States as a naval trainee is based upon the word of Yun Ch’i-ho. According to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis he was never a matriculated student there and I have yet to determine where and in what exact capacity he was training.

<sup>38</sup> An account of these proceedings appears in *The Chicago Times* (24 May 1893), p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair, an Historical and Descriptive presentation of the World’s Science, Art and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (New York: Bounty Books, 1894), pp. 140-141.

<sup>40</sup> *The Japan Weekly Mail* [Yokohama] (3 June 1893), p. 655. It is worth noting that besides this account of the Korean dinner (complete with full transcript of Commissioner Chŏng’s toast), no description of the Korean participation at Chicago appeared in *The Japan Weekly Mail*.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Though small exhibits of Korean agricultural products were displayed in the Agricultural Building and a *chigye* and sedan chair (strangely enough) in the Livestock Building

<sup>43</sup> Most of these items were either donated to or bought up by the Smithsonian Institution after the fair’s completion where they went on to make up the core of that museum’s Korean collection.

<sup>44</sup> Moses P. Handy, ed. *The Official Directory of the World’s Columbian Exhibition, A Reference Book* (Chicago: W.B. Conkey Company, 1893), p. 134.

<sup>45</sup> *The Chicago Record’s History of the World’s Fair* (Chicago: Chicago Daily News Co., 1893), pp. 223-225.

<sup>46</sup> Martha Finley, *Elsie at the World’s Fair* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1894), pp. 145-148.

<sup>47</sup> John A. Cockerill, “Scenes from the Hermit Kingdom”. *The New York Herald* (22 December 1895), p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> *The Book of the Fair*, p. lv.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>50</sup> “Korea’s Doors Open”. *Daily Inter Ocean Illustrated Supplement* (6 September 1893), p. 1.

<sup>51</sup> For brief overview of Yun Ch’i-ho’s life see Hyung-chan Kim, *Letters in Exile: The Life and Times of Yun Ch’i-ho* (Covington, GA: The Oxford Historical Shrine Society, Inc., 1980), pp. 4-73.

<sup>52</sup> *Yun Ch’i-ho’s Diary*, pp. 188-189 (14 October 1893).

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147 (14 August 1893).

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180 (28 September 1893).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169 (24 September 1893).

<sup>56</sup> To be fair, Yun had either misrepresented the situation or missed sight of the large Korean flag that in fact occupied a central place above the crowded floor of the Arts and Manufacturers Buildings, as a surviving photograph shows.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179 (28 September 1893).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180 (28 September 1893).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181 (1 October 1893).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182 (7 October 1893).

<sup>61</sup> “Scenes from the Hermit Kingdom”. *The New York Herald* (22 December 1895), p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> *The Chicago Tribune* (6 September 1893), p. 2.

<sup>63</sup> *The Japan Weekly Mail* (7 October 1893), pp. 406-407.

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<sup>64</sup> or about 50 square feet

<sup>65</sup> According to the fair's organizers, awards were not "competitive" but awarded to commend a displayed article's "independent and essential excellence". For this reason, there was only one category of medal and diploma. The Korean display garnered six medals and seven diplomas. World's Columbian Exposition, *Final Report of Executive Committee of Awards* (Chicago: World's Columbian Exposition, 1893), p. 4, 44.

<sup>66</sup> It was common for national exhibits to sell their wares at the end of the exposition. In one documented example, the Smithsonian paid \$10 for three Korean furs, a price much less than "we would have to pay a dealer for them", wrote a museum curator. Frederick W. True to G. Brown Goode (18 October 1893), Smithsonian Institution Archives, Accession 27829 [Korea].

<sup>67</sup> *Kojong sillok*, 30/11/09.

<sup>68</sup> A.B. de Guerville, having gone to China in hopes of convincing it to participate, was given a cold welcome. News of the Geary Act had just reached China and Li Hungchang suggested to de Guerville that rather than a delegation he send a Chinese fleet over, "to teach the American people how to respect China!" (A.B. de Guerville, "Li Hung Chang").

<sup>69</sup> See in particular the full-page article on the Chinese display in *The Chicago Tribune* (24 September 1893), entitled "Freaks of Chinese Fancy at the Fair". For a fuller treatment of the reactions afforded the Chinese and Japanese exhibits see, Robert Rydell, "The World's Columbian Exposition of 1893: Racist Underpinnings of a Utopian Artifact" in *Journal of American Culture* 1 2 (Summer 1978):253-275.

<sup>70</sup> See for example, "The Light of Asia: Japanese Civilization Will Benefit the Continent". *The Daily Inter Ocean Illustrated Supplement* (20 September 1893), p. 3.

<sup>71</sup> When Korea would make futile appeals to the "judicial arbitration"- broached at the Auditorium Hotel in 1893- for the elimination of the Japanese imposed protectorship (in the case of the Hague in 1907) and then Japanese colonization (at Versailles in 1919).