THE KOREAN RECORD ON CAPTAIN BASIL HALL’S VOYAGE OF DISCOVERY TO THE WEST COAST OF KOREA

Basil Hall’s visit to the west coast of Korea in 1816 has been made well known by that most interesting and revealing book “An Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea and to the Great Loo-Choo Island” written by the Captain himself and published in London in 1818. I understand that Hall issued a popular edition of the same book in 1840 and that to this he added an account of his interview with Napoleon at St. Helena. This later volume is rarer than the earlier edition and I have not had the good fortune to examine it We are curious as to what Napoleon may have said about the peninsula kingdom and her people beyond the brief remark quoted by John McLeod in his story of the same voyage.

Students of history have long searched for some Korean records on this memorable visit The recent release and publication of the Chronicles of the Yi Dynasty have made available a vast store of historical information on many questions for which historians have hitherto searched in vain. It is gratifying to discover that the Korean officials paid considerable attention to these foreign visitors and made careful reports and records concerning them. The Chronicles disclose hitherto unknown facts about Wettervree, Hamel, Gutzlaff, Basil Hall and others. We are now especially concerned with Basil Hall and the reports on his voyage to the west coast of Korea. The Korean record gives not only the Korean point of view but supplies facts which balance the narrative given by the visitors. The Korean record alone can show us the exact spot where the “Alceste” and the “Lyra’’ anchored, locate for us “Basil’s Bay” and satisfy our curiosity as to the identity of the venerable gentleman in the large hat and his ‘‘secretary” who are pictured in Captain Hall’s book. Translated, the record found in the Chronicles (李朝實錄) is as follows : [page 16]

‘‘On the 19th day of the seventh moon (the Sixteenth Year of Soonjo (純祖) (Seventh Moon and Day of Pyengin) the King held an audience with courtiers. Yi Chai Hong, (李載弘), the Naval Commander of Choong Chung Province, (忠淸水使) sent a written dispatch concerning the two strange-looking vessels which had been sighted drifting on the sea off Kal-kot (葛串)on Ma Ryang Chin (馬梁鎮). Cho Tai Pok (趙大福) the captain of the Ma Ryang Chin Coastal Guard (馬梁鎭僉使), and Yi Seung Ryul (李升烈), the local officer of the Pi Yin Magistracy (庞仁縣監), sent a joint communication as follows :

“The strange looking ships which were sighted drifting off the coast were so large that they could not be towed into the bay, though we employed a large number of boats and men for this purpose. At daybreak of the 14th the Captain and the Magistrate went to the smaller one of the two ships and made inquiries by writing in Chinese. The men expressed ignorance of these characters by shaking their heads. We inquired again by writing in the Korean letters but they waived their hands to show that they were ignorant of these also. We waived and shouted at each other in this manner for some time but failed to communicate intelligibly with them. Finally one of the crew took a pen and wrote something for us. Their letters, however, bore some resemblance to seal-characters but were not seal-characters and looked a little like Korean letters but were not these either. We could not understand what they wrote.

“There were a number of rooms both on the left and right sides of the ship and on both the upper and lower deck. On the ship they had many books. They took out two of these and gave one to the Captain and one to the Magistrate. When we opened the books we found that the letters were neither Chinese nor Korean and we could not understand them. We therefore returned the books but they refused to take them and slipped one each into our [page 17] sleeves. When these books were passed and handled among us we found a document written in Chinese. It seemed to be an official document or communication from their country. We therefore brought that with us.

“All the crew bad their hair cut and wore head covers made of fur or cord. The shape of their hats was like that of an inverted brazier. As to their garments, the upper parts were made of black velvet with buttons on the right side of the front of the coat Many of the crew wore white trousers the shape of which was like that of Korean leggings, as they were just wide enough to encircle the limbs. They wore white socks which covered their feet Their shoes were made of black leather and shaped like the “round-toe-shoes” worn by the nobility of the country, but their shoes were laced with shoe-strings. Some of them wore long swords, some short knives, some powder-flasks, and some telescopes. All the rooms were occupied by the crew. Though we could not ascertain the exact number there were certainly at least 80 or 90 persons on board the ship.

“We went on board the large ship and made inquiries. The crew, their clothing and the things they carried were the same as on the small vessel. Their writing was neither Chinese nor Korean and they kept shaking their heads in sign that they could not understand our questions. Some of the crew sat down, some stood up, and some walked to and fro on the deck. There was so much hustle and bustle and movement that it was very difficult to count their number, but the crew was several times the size of that on the small ship. The number of books and the quantity of other furnishings and equipment was also much greater than on the other ship. Both ships, however, were the same in

their general shape and make-up. Strange looking, indeed！ There were several decks and rooms on every deck and every room was filled with strange looking vessels, valuable utensils and metal and wooden goods. There were so many [page 18] strange looking things that it was impossible to ennumerate them all. As far as we could discover there was only one woman on board. She covered her head with a white cloth and wore a red skirt. There were blacksmith’s forges in both of these ships. They made cannon-balls and arrowheads on board. When the Captain left the ship one of the men gave him a book so we have three volumes in all, including the two received from the small ship.

“As soon as the north-west wind started to blow, both the ships suddenly fired cannon and sailed to the south-west to the outer sea off the Island of Yento (煙島). The Captain and the Magistrate gave orders to our boats to follow them. The ships flew so swiftly that our men could not catch up with them so merely watched them as they sailed away. As we watched the leading ship was soon out of sight and the one astern was also fading into the horizon. Soon after this the sun set and as day deepened into darkness we could watch them no longer. We submit this, the result of our investigation of these ships, and also forward the document in Chinese which we found in the smaller vessel.”

The document referred to reads as follows :

Naval Officers of His Majesty the King of England :

BE IT KNOWN to all authorities to whom these may come that :

During the first part of last June five of our ships conveyed the Embassy of the King of England to China. These ships at first anchored at the entrance to the Pai Lien Ho (白逮河) river near Tientsin. The Embassy has now gone to Peking to have audience with the Emperor of China. The sea off Tientsin is quite shallow and should there be a strong wind our ships could not escape being wrecked. It was therefore impossible for them to remain at anchor there. These ships are therefore ordered to proceed to Canton and await there the arrival of the Embassy at Canton and thence to convey the Embassy back to England. [page 19]

These ships are now passing here on their way to Canton. We request all authorities of the ports where our ships may touch to sell them provisions and to allow them to draw drinking water. In testimony thereof the seal of the Embassy is herewith affixed. Thirty-first Year of the Reign of Chiaching (嘉慶). (1816).