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**On The Centenary of America’s First Treaty with Korea**

by Harold F. Cook

May 22, 1982 marked the 100th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Peace, Amity, Commerce and Navigation between the United States of America and the kingdom of Korea. The centenary provides an appropriate occasion to look back on this first treaty between Korea and a Western nation and to review the principal events which led to its signing. The peculiarity of this treaty is that it was composed not on Korean soil by Korean and American negotiators but in China, and in almost total secrecy, by a senior Chinese official, his assistants, and an American naval officer. This brief paper is an attempt to tell the story.

BACKGROUND

Early American interest in Korea stemmed from a desire to expand American trade in East Asia. Edmund Roberts, a special representative of the United States, returned from his explorations in this area in May, 1834, to report to the secretary of state that one advantage in opening trade with Japan was the possibility that it could lead to trade with Korea. Eleven years later, in February 1845, Congressman Zodoc Pratt introduced in the House of Representatives a resolution calling for a mission to both countries to open them to trade. The resolution, however, failed to pass.

American attention was again directed toward Korea after the Civil War. In June 1866 an American trading schooner, the “Surprise,” en-route from Chefoo to the Ryukyus, was wrecked off the western coast of present day north Korea. Captain McCaslin and his crew were supplied by the local authorities with necessary comforts and were transported on horseback to the northwestern frontier where they were delivered to some Chinese officials.

In August of the same year another American trading schooner, the “General Sherman,” sailed from Chefoo and entered the mouth of the Taedong River with a cargo of cotton goods, glass, tin plates, and other [page 12] items likely to prove saleable in Korea. Three Americans were on board: Messrs. W. B. Preston (the owner), Page (the captain), and Wilson (the chief mate). The magistrate of the area dispatched a letter to the captain of the vessel asking why he had come. When the answer came that the vessel intended to enter into trade with the Koreans, the magistrate replied that this was impossible and asked the captain to go away.

Nevertheless the “General Sherman” continued to proceed up the Taedong River. Heavy summer rains had raised the water level, and the vessel was able to reach a point upstream just below P’yongyang, the capital of present-day north Korea. When the river suddenly fell, however, the ship became grounded on a sandbar. Further negotiations were unsuccessful, and the crew of the “General Sherman” began to fire at the Koreans along the shore and in small boats nearby. The Koreans in turn prepared rafts loaded with brushwood, set them afire, and floated them down the river toward the “General Sherman.” The vessel was soon in flames, and all aboard, attempting to escape, jumped into the water. Some drowned; the rest were killed on shore. There were no survivors.

In January of the following year, i.e., 1867, Commander Robert W. Shufeldt in the U.S. S. “Wachusett” sailed along the Korean coast in the vicinity of the mouth of the Taedong River and dispatched a letter to the king of Korea asking for an explanation of the incident. No reply was forthcoming. Shufeldt departed, but the seed of future events had been planted. In the Commander’s own words: “I conceived the idea and considered it possible to make a treaty with this Hermit Nation without the exhibition of force.”

In the spring of 1868 Commander John C. Febiger in the U.S.S. “Shenandoah” sailed up the Taedong in response to a rumor that some of the crew of the “General Sherman” were still alive and being held prisoners. Febiger was unable to confirm the rumor but did receive a reply to Shufeldt’s letter of a year earlier which gave a version of the “General Sherman” incident favorable to the Koreans.

In the summer of the same year the American secretary of state authorized his nephew, the consul general at Shanghai, to proceed to Korea to negotiate a commercial treaty. For one or more reasons, however, no action was taken.

In April 1870 Frederick F. Low, the American minister to China, was instructed by the secretary of state to go to Korea and to negotiate a com-mercial treaty as well as a shipwreck convention. It was over a year later, nevertheless, in May 1871 before Low reached the mouth of the Han river just below Kanghwa island. With him were Rear Admiral John Rodgers, a fleet of five steamships, and a complement of 1,200 men.

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The Koreans refused to negotiate and after several days fired on a surveying party which had proceeded up the Han river. The Americans made short work of silencing the shore batteries and landed troops on Kanghwa who attacked the fortifications and routed the garrison. Minister Low could get the Koreans neither to negotiate nor to apologize, however, and the Americans finally were forced to withdraw.

In February 1876 Japan succeeded in signing a treaty with Korea and in opening that country to trade. The tactics used by the Japanese were not unlike those employed by American Navy Commodore Matthew C. Perry in opening Japan a little over two decades earlier. Japan’s accomplishment in Korea stimulated the interest of the United States and other Western nations to follow suit.

In April 1878 Senator Aaron A. Sargent, chairman of the Senate com-mittee on naval affairs, introduced a joint resolution authorizing the president to appoint a commission to negotiate a treaty with Korea “with the aid of the friendly offices of Japan.” The resolution was referred to the Senate committee on foreign affairs from which it never emerged.

PRELIMINARIES

There seems to have been some connection, nevertheless, between the Sargent resolution and a decision by the navy department to send Sargent’s personal friend, the aforementioned Robert W. Shufeldt, by then promoted to the rank of commodore, on an important commercial and diplomatic mission to several countries including Korea. Shufeldt sailed from Hampton Roads on the U.S.S. “Ticonderoga” in December 1878. After visits to unfrequented parts of Africa and the Persian gulf, he reached Nagasaki on April 15,1880. In part Shufeldt was instructed by the secretary of the navy to visit “some port of the Corea with the endeavor to reopen by peaceful measures negotiations with that government” and, in all events, to pursue “a moderate and conciliatory course.” John A. Bingham, the American minister at Tokyo, was directed by the secretary of state to solicit Japan’s good offices to facilitate Shufeldt’s mission. Lost in the bureaucracy or the mail, these original instructions never reached Bingham.

Commodore Shufeldt, in passing, was a man of gigantic frame and strong physique who had come to be regarded as one of the most eminent diplomatists of the navy and who possessed the confidence of his government to an unusual degree. Born in Red Hook, Dutchess county, New York, in 1822, he entered the navy at the age of 17 and was commissioned in 1845 [page 14] after cruises in the Brazil and Home squadrons and a year’s study at the Philadelphia naval school. After various tours of duty he left the navy nine years later in 1854 with the rank of lieutenant and entered the merchant marine, commanding vessels which sailed between New York and England and later between New York and New Orleans.

In 1860 an article of Shufeldt’s on the slave trade between Cuba and the west coast of Africa drew the attention of the government to him and led to his appointment as consul general at Havana. In 1862 the secretary of state sent him on a confidential mission to Mexico at the time of the French invasion. In 1863 he rejoined the navy with the rank of commander and served on blockade duty throughout the remainder of the Civil War. He then spent a tour with the navy’s squadron on the China station which, as previously indicated, brought him to the west coast of Korea in early 1867 and to a personal decision to someday successfully negotiate a treaty between the United States and Korea.

Shufeldt was promoted to captain in 1869. He commanded the expedition which surveyed the Isthmus of Tehuantepec canal route, served a tour in the Mediterranean and another at the Brooklyn navy yard, and then became chief of the naval bureau of equipment and recruiting from 1875 to 1878 with promotion to the rank of commodore. In the latter year he published a book entitled “The Relation of the Navy to the Commerce of the United States.”

At Nagasaki in April 1880 Commodore Shufeldt received word from Minister Bingham in Tokyo that the Japanese government had declined to commend his mission to the favorable consideration of Korea. In a letter to Bingham, Foreign Minister Inoue Kaoru had explained matters this way:

(A) very few years have elapsed since the conclusion of the Treaty of Friendship between Japan and Corea, and the time has not as yet arrived for putting into full execution the stipulations of the said Treaty; furthermore, the Corean Government not being familiar with foreign intercourse, appears still disinclined to open the country to Foreigners. I beg therefore to say that if the introduction of the Commodore to the Corean officials should be granted according to Your Excellency’s request, I fear that it might give rise to some complications whereby the execution of our Treaty with that country might be somewhat prevented. I greatly regret therefore that I am at present unable to comply with Your Excellency’s wishes.

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Although Japan and Korea had signed their first treaty in February 1876, at the time of Inoue’s writing Pusan was still the only open port. Wonsan was scheduled to be opened in three months, and the two countries could reach no agreement on the opening of a third port. The Japanese minister had yet to present his credentials to the Korean king and to secure permission to reside permanently at Seoul. In this context Inoue’s reply does not seem unreasonable.

The Japanese foreign minister, nevertheless, did provide Shufeldt with nine charts of the Korean coasts and a letter of introduction to the Japanese consul at Pusan which Shufeldt, accompanied by the American consul at Nagasaki, carried to that port in early May and which stated, in part:

I instruct you that, upon arrival of Commodore Shufeldt at your port you will in no way interfere with his mission, but, having [in mind] the treaty of friendship existing between the U.S. and Japan, you will give him every possible assistance that he may require at your hands during his stay in your port.

Efforts to forward a letter to the king through the Korean authorities at Pusan were unsuccessful, and Shufeldt went directly to Tokyo to confer with Bingham and Inoue. This resulted in a second letter of introduction, this time from Inoue to the Korean minister of rites at Seoul. Although not designated by name, the latter individual was Yun Cha-sung, known personally to Inoue inasmuch as both had been signatories to the Japan- Korea treaty of a little more than four years earlier. Inoue’s letter was dispatched from Yokohama to Seoul at the end of May, via the Japanese minister to Korea, with Shufeldt’s letter to the Korean king. Shufeldt agreed to wait 60 days at Nagasaki for a reply. In part Inoue’s letter stated:

The general state of the world is now greatly different from that of olden times, and we know from our own experience the impossibility of rejecting foreign intercourse, and China also has the same experience.

The best plan, which I recommend you for the interest of your country, is to comply with the request of the United States Government in a friendly sentiment, treating them with sincere benevolence and being guided in intercourse with them by the principle of right and justice. This is the only means of guarding against contempt from abroad, and of securing the right of independency of your country.

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By mid-August, and after waiting longer than 60 days, Commodore Shufeldt learned that Yun had returned unopened his letter to the king because it was “improperly addressed” and because: “It is well known to the world that our foreign relations are only with Japan. . .and that other foreign nations are not only situated far from us, but there has never been any intercourse with them.” Yun’s reply was carried to Japan by Kim Hong-jip on a mission to Tokyo unrelated to Shufeldt and his treaty over-tures. Kim passed through Nagasaki during the first days of August but did not meet Shufeldt, nor did the latter know of Kim’s visit.

In the meantime, however, Shufeldt had become acquainted with the Chinese consul at Nagasaki who wrote on his behalf to Li Hung-chang, China’s greatest statesman of this period and governor general of the Pro-vince of Chihli (modern day Hopei). Under date of July 23 Li wrote to Shufeldt, asking him to come to his summer residence at Tientsin “to talk over matters.”

The opening of Korea, the country which ranked first among China’s tributaries, had created a whole series of crises for the Ch’ing court, cutting away as it did the foundation stone of the tribute system and coming at a time when China was beset with problems on every side. Imperialist rivalry, nibbling at the periphery of the Chinese world, increased throughout the third quarter of the 19th century. Moreover, as the competition for colonies developed, it became apparent that the Celestial Empire had uncertain or unstable frontiers. Maps were unreliable, historical claims conflicted, and the limits of Ch’ing authority came increasingly into dispute.

To the uncertainties of terrain were added the vagueness and timidity of Peking’s claims to suzerainty over tributary states. The tribute system was a defensive more than an imperialistic institution, based less on definitive treaty law than on Confucian ethics, less on tangible military domination than on cultural supremacy. When called upon either to take responsibility for disorders in tributary areas and to recompense aggrieved foreigners, or else to renounce suzerain jurisdiction, China’s first impulse was to avoia responsibility so as to escape payment of indemnities. Thus, by the time period under consideration, the Ryukyu Islands, Formosa, Vietnam, areas of Central Asia, and Korea gradually had become fair game for foreign colonial expansion.

By 1880 the main threat to China’s interests and to Korea seemed to come from Russia and, to a lesser extent, from Japan. The former was also the power most feared by Great Britain. In this year Sino-Russian hostilities threatened to break out afresh over the Ili region in Chinese Turkestan. Peking massed troops along her northwestern frontier while the Russians[page 17] mobilized forces in Central Asia and ships in Far Eastern waters. At the same time China’s relations with Korea were removed from the control of the board of rites, which traditionally had handled tribute relations, and placed under the foreign office (tsungli yamen) and, more specifically, Li Hung-chang.

Li hoped to protect Korea against Russian or Japanese absorption by bringing her into treaty relations with all the trading powers, whose commerce would create vested interests in Korea’s independence. In a sense this was the ancient strategy of “using barbarians to control barbarians.” Li also hoped, through Chinese intervention in Korea’s domestic affairs, to foster a program of reform and “self-strengthening” concurrent with China’s own development of military and naval power. This policy, while recognizing that Korea’s seclusion was finished and that modernization must be pursued, envisioned a Korea modernized under China’s tutelage.

It was at this juncture, then, and against this background that Li Hung-chang invited Commodore Shufeldt to come to Tientsin. The two met August 26, 1880 and talked for three hours. Shufeldt’s report clearly shows that an American treaty with Korea was not the only topic on the agenda:

After a prolonged discussion, in which the strategic position of the peninsula of Corea with reference to Russia, China and Japan was pointed out, His Excellency told me that I might say to my government that he would use his influence with the government of Corea to accede to the friendly request made by me in behalf of the government of the United States to open negotiations with a view to such a treaty as before mentioned....

His Excellency then said he had invited me to Tientsin with the view of getting the opinion of a naval officer in whom he had confidence on the result of a war between China and Russia, so far as naval operations on the seacoast of the former were concerned. He begged me to reflect on my answers, because he desired my opinion to have full force and effect not only with himself but in the counsels of the nation. I replied by saying substantially.... [that] the result could only be one of disaster to China.... His Excellency seemed much impressed and assured me that war would not occur between these two countries if China could possibly avert it.... In conclusion he expressed the hope that when peace was assured my government would permit me to assist China in[page 18] the organization of its navy. This, of course, is a matter to some extent personal in its nature, but if consummated would add very much to American influence in China, and probably end in the construction of ships for that government in American ship yards.

NEGOTIATIONS

Shufeldt returned to the United States in November 1880 with two personal goals in mind: to open Korea to the Western world and to organize the Chinese navy. He urged his government to send him back to China for the purpose of achieving both objectives. The secretary of state entered heartily into Shufeldt’s plans and, with the concurrence of the secretary of the navy, arranged for his assignment as an attache at the American legation in Peking. The whole matter was handled in a confidential fashion. Even the American minister to China, James B. Angell, was not notified of the true nature of Shufeldt’s appointment until the commodore informed him of it in Peking.

With the official title of attache to the American legation, therefore, and with his daughter as his secretary, Shufeldt reached China in the latter part of June 1881. On July 1 he again talked with Li Hung-chang at Tientsin. Li told him that he had had a recent conversation about a prospective treaty with a Korean official at Tientsin and that the official was “much impressed with the advantages that his country would derive from such a treaty.” Although not named by Li, this Korean official probably was Cho Yong-ha who was in China at this time as a condolence envoy to the Ch’ing court following the death in April of the widow of the Emperor Hsien-feng. Li further stated that he had written to the Korean court on the subject but had not yet received a reply. Cho Yong-ha, it may be inferred, carried the letter back to Korea. Li urged Shufeldt to be patient and expressed the opinion that the United States “would realize its wishes.” He appeared less enthusiastic, however, than he had the previous August and less willing to act as an intermediary. Two weeks later he again spoke with Shufeldt and urged him to remain at Tientsin until a reply to his letter came from Seoul. Li suggested a time frame of 90 days for this waning period.

Li’s apparent change of heart was due at least in part to the satisfactory settlement of the Ili question during the months between Shufeldt’s first and second visits. As early as January 1881 Minister Angell reported that[page 19] officials of the foreign office had informally told him that “danger of war with Russia is over.” In June Angell reported that the Sino-Russian settlement conceded to China practically the whole province of Ili and that the treaty was “more favorable to China than a few months ago it was supposed she could secure.” Finally, in July, after talking with Shufeldt and learning of the results of his meeting with Li Hung-chang, Angell wrote that the real “present temper” of the Chinese government on the Korean question “is not known” but:

If the United States had acted before the fear of a war between Russia and China was fully dispelled, it is very probable that we might have negotiated a treaty with Corea... Nothing that I see in the Legations here indicates the intention of the part of any of the Western Powers to press Corea for a treaty just now. They are waiting for us to do it, knowing well that they would soon share in the advantages to be secured.

These developments in China can be brought into sharper focus when supplemented by information that Minister Bingham was reporting from Tokyo. In a conversation at the end of December 1880 the Chinese minister at the Japanese capital, He Ju-chang, told Bingham: “[The] Chinese Government had advised Corea to first make a friendly treaty of commerce with the United States before entertaining any treaty proposition from any of the European Powers.” At the same time he showed Bingham a draft of a proposed Korean-American commercial treaty which, Bingham commented, was “substantially the same as the United States-Japan treaties of 1857 and 1858.” The following day Minister He informed Bingham that he had just dispatched the draft to Seoul “by special messenger’’ for the ‘‘consideration’’ of the Korean government. He appears to have been misleading Bingham at this point, however, for his correspondence was directed not to Korea but to Li Hung-chang in Tientsin. He suggested that China should either send an envoy to Korea to take care of the negotiations for a Korean-American treaty or should issue an imperial edict ordering Korea to enter into treaty relationships with America and to mention this order in the treaty text. Li rejected both of these suggestions.

Six months later in June 1881, just after Shufeldt passed through Tokyo for the second time on his way to Peking, Minister He wrote to Bingham:

I have lately received a private letter from H.E. Chin Hung- chi [Kim Hong-jip], Corean envoy who came to Japan last year, to the effect that the Corean government, being advised[page 20] by me, have been very desirous to hold intercourse with the United States of America and other countries, but that the people still have a little doubt about the advantages of foreign relations, so that at present my proposals on that matter cannot be carried out yet.

Other developments in Tokyo in this same time frame, involving Chinese Minister He and various visiting Koreans, cannot be disregarded but need not be detailed here. It is possible and probably necessary, nevertheless, to posit a certain element of competition between Li Hung-chang in Tientsin and He Ju-chang in Tokyo. The validity of this assumption is enhanced by the abrupt replacement of He in the late autumn of 1881. With the benefit of hindsight it would seem that, if Korea was to open her doors to the Western nations, Li Hung-chang intended to permit her to do so only on his terms.

Commodore Shufeldt was kept waiting at Tientsin during the remainder of the summer and throughout the autumn of 1881. He had expected Li Hung-chang to take action regarding his offer of a responsible post in the Chinese navy, but Li avoided the subject. He often consulted Shufeldt about naval matters, however, and the commodore made frequent visits to Chinese ships of war and the Tientsin arsenal.

The period of 90 days suggested by Li as sufficient for the reception of news from Korea came and went, but no news had been received. Shufeldt’s position became embarrassing, and the question arose whether or not his dignity would be sacrificed by remaining longer at Tientsin, where to outsiders he appeared as a hanger-on to Li’s court and a solicitor of a naval job. The American minister at Peking advised him to depart, but Shufeldt decided to remain until he heard something from Korea.

Finally on December 15 Li Hung-chang sent his naval secretary to Shufeldt with word that a Korean official had reached Tientsin and that Korea was willing to negotiate a treaty with the United States. Li declined to meet personally with Shufeldt, however, or to introduce him to the unnamed Korean official, before leaving for Paoting, the site of his winter residence as governor of the province of Chihli.

This unnamed Korean official was O Yun-jung. O had been in Japan from May to October, as a member of a Korean government study mission. This group was in Tokyo when Shufeldt passed through in June, but there is no evidence that he met any of them in the course of his brief three-day visit. Most likely it was one of the members of this study mission who brought to Chinese Minister He the letter from Kim Hong-jip just cited.

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The leaders of this Korean study group left Tokyo in August and were back in Seoul by mid-October. Only O Yun-jung remained in Japan until the end of October and then left, not for Korea but for China. From O’s own travel diary there is no explanation for his China trip, only an inference from a chance meeting in Kobe with other Korean officials enroute from Seoul to Tokyo. From the diary, however, it is clear that O met Li Hung-chang in Tientsin on December 1, the last day of his eight-day visit to that city. Absent from Seoul since the previous spring on what was basically a study mission to Japan, O had no authority to officially commit his country to enter into treaty relations with the United States. When Li Hung-chang told Shufeldt that a Korean official had arrived and that Korea was willing to negotiate a treaty, he misled the American commodore. What Li meant was that he had decided that Korea should negotiate a treaty with the United States and that he had told O Yun-jung to convey this message to the king of Korea. This undoubtedly is what O did when he finally reached home and was received in royal audience on February 2, 1882, although his diary entry for the audience is silent on this point.

Other treaty-related events, meanwhile, had overtaken O Yun-jung’s return. To focus properly it is helpful to go back to June 1880 when the king directed that Korean artisans and students be sent to China to learn about military training, weapons manufacture, and other fields. As a result Py6n Won-gyu, chief interpreter of the previous winter solstice mission to Peking, was sent to China to discuss these matters with the board of rites. In Peking Pyon was instructed to transact his business with Li Hung-chang. From this point in time dates the transferral of responsibility for Korean affairs from the board of rites to the foreign office and, more specifically, to Li Hung-chang.

Pyon met Li at Tientsin on October 19, less than two months after Commodore Shufeldt’s first talk with the Chinese statesman. In the days that followed they worked out an agreement by terms of which nearly 90 young Koreans were to be sent to Tientsin for training at the arsenal, at the army barracks, and as language students. It is unlikely, in view of their respective ranks, that Li and Pyon actually did any negotiating. Li simply set tire terms which China would offer. In the course of their meetings Li also stressed the necessity of opening Korea to foreign commercial intercourse and voiced his concern about the possibility of Russia forcing its way into northeastern Korea.

Pyon Won-gyu went back to Seoul and reported to the king on January 4, 1881. Two months later the king directed that necessary steps be taken in order to send young Koreans to China, under the guidance of a responsible [page 22] envoy, for training in accordance with Pyon’s report. Preparations dragged on throughout the summer, and in September Kim Yun-sik, a respected Confucian scholar, was designated as the envoy to head the student group to China. Kim and his party, including Py6n Won-gyu, left Seoul in November and reached Peking on January 6, 1882. Kim then went to Paoting to confer with Li Hung-chang and on to Tientsin to arrange for the placement of his students. Pyon returned directly to Seoul from Tientsin to report on the safe arrival of the mission.

While all this was going on, another Korean official and member of the winter solstice mission, Yi Yong-suk, on February 18, 1881 delivered to Li Hung-chang a letter from Chief State Councillor Yi Ch’oe-ung expressing regrets at the rejection of the American letter (from Commodore Shufeldt) in the summer of 1880 and announcing Korea’s readiness to conclude a treaty with the United States. When Yi Yong-suk reported to the king on the results of his mission on May 4, he delivered a copy of a proposed draft treaty which Li Hung-chang had given him.

Later in the year, and shortly before O Yun-jung’s arrival in Tientsin, Li gave a letter to yet another Korean official, Yi Ung-jun, to be carried to Seoul, urging the dispatch of a plenipotentiary envoy to Tientsin to negotiate a treaty with the United States. Yi met Kim Yun-sik at the border station of Uiju, as Kim was enroute to China with the student mission, and updated him on treaty proposal developments before continuing on to Seoul himself. Both Yi Ung-jun and O Yun-jung, therefore, carried messages from Li Hung-chang to Korea regarding Li’s wishes for a treaty between Korean and the United States.

By early February 1882, when both O Yun-jung and Yi Ung-jun had reported to the king on the subject of a treaty with the United States, Kim Yun-sik was back at Paoting meeting with Li Hung-chang on this very topic. Entries in Kim’s travel diary at this time give the impression that his mission to China was as much concerned with making preparations for the treaty as with training the Korean students.

Commodore Shufeldt, of course, had knowledge of none of these happenings and had yet to meet even a single Korean. All he knew was that Li Hung-chang had assured him that Korea would negotiate a treaty, that Li was too busy then see him, and that the post of adviser to the Chinese navy seemed to have evaporated. Some idea of Shufeldt’s personal feeling of disgust at this juncture is apparent from a brief quote from a letter which he wrote to his friend the aforementioned Senator Sargent:

Six months residence in this city [Tientsin], the political center of the Chinese Government, and an intimacy rather ex-[page 23] ceptional with the ruling element, has convinced me that deceit and untruthfulness pervade all intercourse with foreigners; that an ineradicable hatred exists, and that any appeal across this barrier... is entirely idle. The only appeal or argument appreciated is force.... All sympathy will be construed into weakness, all pity into fear.... Our policy, therefore, should be positive and governed, to the extent of the moral law, by American interests alone, and followed up by the argument which they understand: the argument of force, pressure, not persuasion.

The fear of Russia, temporarily dispelled with the settlement of the Ili question, remained ever in the background. American Charge d’Affaires Chester Holcombe, who replaced Minister Angell in October 1881, reported at the end of the year that Li Hung-chang still was interested in opening Korea to friendly Western powers “lest Russia should seize the Corean peninsula and so threaten the integrity of China in a far more serious manner than ever before.” Holcombe also said that Li had already prepared a draft of a treaty and had given it to the Korean government. His source for this statement may have been Shufeldt or it may have been the British Minister, Sir Thomas F. Wade, who had been in Tientsin conferring with Li Hung-chang at the very time that Li was refusing to see Shufeldt. Whatever the source, it was Yi Yong-suk, as mentioned earlier, who carried the treaty draft to Seoul earlier in the year. In February 1882 Holcombe further advised the secretary of state that ministers of the foreign office had informed him that “sooner or later the autonomy of Corea would be threatened by the aggressions of Russia and/or Japan, and that this serious danger could best be met by bringing the peninsula Kingdom into the family of nations.”

After leaving the United States in May 1881, Commodore Shufeldt received no additional guidance from Washington with regard to his mission throughout the remainder of the yean On January 19, 1882, however, he received detailed instructions, dated in the previous November, from the secretary of state as well as a letter of credence from the president appointing him special envoy to Korea and authorizing mm to negotiate a treaty. The aura of confidentiality surrounding the beginning of his mission had been removed.

Shufeldt’s new instructions stated that the prime purpose of his mission was to obtain a treaty for the relief of American vessels and crews ship-wrecked on the Korean coast. However, should he find the “temper and [page 24] disposition of the king favorable,” he was to negotiate a treaty of amity and commerce, securing rights of trade, fixing tariffs, establishing consular and diplomatic representation, and granting extraterritorial jurisdiction. Shufeldt was cautioned not to ask for too much and was ordered not to begin negotiations unless there were reasonable prospects of success. In any event his sojourn in Korea was limited to two months. All of this assumed, of course, that Shufeldt would be going to Korea to negotiate the treaty directly with the Koreans, which was not the case at all.

As soon as Shufeldt received these new instructions he wrote to Li Hung-chang at Paoting suggesting a meeting at such time and place as Li might select. Li replied that he would be happy to meet Shufeldt at Paoting if the commodore would come incognito. Shufeldt refused because he did not want to give the negotiations the character of a personal intrigue between Li and himself. It was agreed, therefore, that the meeting would be postponed until Li’s return to Tientsin.

In February Shufeldt went to Peking to confer with American Charge Holcombe. Together they prepared a draft of a treaty with Korea that was not limited to a simple shipwreck convention and was modeled on the 1876 Japan-Korea treaty. Inasmuch as Holcombe had resided in the East for many years and was an accomplished Chinese scholar, the two men agreed that he would attend Shufeldt’s next meeting with Li.

Li Hung-chang returned from Paoting to Tientsin in mid-March 1882 and conferred again with Kim Yun-sik. Li then met both Commodore Shufeldt and Charge Holcombe on March 25 and presented them with a draft treaty, drawn up during the winter by two of Li’s closest associates, while receiving their draft in return. Li intended his draft to serve as a model for all future treaties between Korea and Western nations. He stated that he would represent both Korea and his own country in the negotiations and that if an envoy did not come from Korea within thirty days he would send a Chinese official to Korea with Shufeldt. Li made no reference to the Korean envoy already in Tientsin, Kim Yun-sik, whom Shufeldt had never met and never did meet. Shufeldt did suspect, however, that a Korean official was in fact already in Tientsin, as he wrote to the secretary of state on April 10: “I have every reason to believe that there is at this moment in Tientsin a Korean official who is consulted at every step.”

On exchanging first drafts of the proposed treaty it was apparent that there were many areas of difference but that the real obstacle to agreement was the form of acknowledgement of the existence of Korea’s traditional relations with China. Clarification of this important point, and all other differences, finally was reached after three more negotiating sessions when[page 25] Li agreed to eliminate from the treaty text the sentence: “Chosen, being a dependent state of the Chinese empire, has nevertheless heretofore exercised her own sovereignty in all matters of internal administration and foreign relations.” In exchange Shufeldt agreed to write a letter to Li, stating that he had requested the assistance of China in making the treaty, and to transmit to the president of the United States a letter from the king of Korea stating that the treaty had been made with China’s consent. While all of this was taking place, Shufeldt sent two telegrams to the secretary of state asking for instructions on the dependency issue and for permission to take Charg6 Holcombe to Korea to assist him as an interpreter. He received no reply to either telegram.

It was at this juncture, with Li and Shufeldt finally in agreement but with Shufeldt still never having met a Korean, that Li Hung-chang’s mother died on April 19. Normally he would have gone into mourning for two years, but his services to the empire being so critical at this point, he was granted only one hundred days’ leave of absence to attend the funeral. Shufeldt, without Holcombe, left Tientsin for Shanghai and from there proceeded to Chefoo where the commander of the American navy’s Asiatic squadron had placed the corvette U.S.S. “Swatara”(1,900 tons; 8 guns) at his disposal for Korean service.

In Seoul in the interim, Pyon Won-gyu had submitted his report on the safe arrival of the student mission, and the aforementioned O Yun-jung had been directed to proceed to Tientsin to check on the training of the students. More importantly, however, O bore instructions to convey Korea’s agreement to the proposed American treaty to Kim Yun-sik and Li Hung-chang. O and his party left Seoul on April 4. When they reached Tientsin on May 15, all preparatory arrangements for the Korean-American treaty had been completed, Commodore Shufeldt was already at Chemulp’o (Inch’on), and Li Hung-chang was off to Wuchang to attend his mother’s funeral. O, et al. might just as well have stayed at home.

Commodore Shufeldt left Chefoo on the morning of May 8 and anchored off Chemulp’o on the afternoon of May 12. He was preceded by two Chinese officials, Admiral Ting Ju-ch’ang (commander of the northern fleet) and Ma Chien-chung (one of Li Hung-chang’s principal assistants in Tientsin and one of the two principal drafters of the original Chinese version of the treaty), and three Chinese gunboats. Ma carried with him copies of the proposed treaty for presentation to Korean officials. A Japanese man-of-war was also in port when Shufeldt arrived, the Japanese minister having just returned from Tokyo.

Ma, who acted as intermediary between the Americans and the[page 26] Koreans, called on Shufeldt on May 13 to arrange for a visit by the two Korean officials who had been appointed by the king to “negotiate” the treaty. Shufeldt at long last met a Korean official face to face when these two gentlemen came on board the “Swatara” the following day. The senior of the two was 72-year-old Sin Hon, who had been one of the Koreans who negotiated and signed the first treaty with Japan in 1876. The other was Kim Hong-jip, mentioned earlier as the envoy who visited Japan in the summer of 1880 when Shufeldt was waiting at Nagasaki for an answer to his letter sent to Seoul via the Japanese minister. The “Swatara” fired a salute of three guns, and the Koreans were extended the courtesies of the ship. In return they gave Shufeldt presents of rice, eggs, fowl, and beef.

Six days later, on May 20, Shufeldt went ashore and again met the two Korean officials at the office of the magistrate of the district. Credentials were examined and found satisfactory on both sides. The commodore presented Sin and Kim with a letter from the American president to the king of Korea. A disagreement over the question of rice exports was settled by Shufeldt accepting the Korean position. The only other item of business transacted was the agreement to meet again two days later for the purpose of signing and sealing the treaty which had been negotiated in Tientsin.

Concerning this last formality, which took place on May 22, 1882, Commodore Shufeldt made the following memorandum:

At 9:30 a.m. Commodore Shufeldt, accompanied by Commander P.H. Cooper [and then he goes on to name the officers who accompanied him], and preceded by the marine guard of the U.S.S. ‘Swatara’.... left the ship and proceeded to the place previously selected for the signing of the treaty between the United States and Corea, which was on the mainland near the town of Sai-mots-fo [Chemulp’o] and in full view of the ship at anchor.... he proceeding at once to the tent which had been put up by the Corean authorities, finding there the two commissioners on the part of Chosen, Shin Chen [Sin Hon], president of the Royal Cabinet, and Chin Hong Chi [Kim Hong-jip], member of the Royal Cabinet, with their suite, and Ma Taotai, and Admiral Ting and Captain Clayson of the Imperial Chinese Navy. After a little preliminary conversation, the six copies of the treaty, three in English and three in Chinese, were sealed and signed by Commodore Shufeldt on the part of the United States, and by the two commissioners already named on the part of [page 27] Chosen. As soon as the signing was completed, at a signal from the shore, the ‘Swatara’ fired a salute of twenty-one guns in honor of the King of Chosen. Commodore Shufeldt and party then returned on board the ‘Swatara.’

When Commodore Shufeldt left Chemulp’o on May 24, he carried with him signed copies of the new treaty together with a friendly letter from the Korean king to the American president in reply to the one from the president which Shufeldt had delivered to the Korean officials on May 20. He also carried a separate letter from the king to the president which stated:

The Chao-hsien country (Korea) is a dependency of China, but the management of her governmental affairs, home and foreign, has always been vested in the Sovereign.... In the matter of Korea being a dependency of China any questions that may arise between them in consequence of such dependency, the United States shall in no way interfere.

CONCLUSION

To continue the narration would only be anticlimactic, although too much already has been left out and still more remains to be told. America’s first treaty with Korea, and Korea’s first treaty with a Western nation, was duly signed and sealed one hundred years ago at what is today the city of Inch’on. Advice and consent to ratification were given by the United States Senate on January 9, 1883, and the treaty ratified by President Chester A. Arthur on February 13, 1883. Ratifications were exchanged at Seoul on May 19, 1883, and the treaty was proclaimed by the president on June 4, 1883.

Unquestionably there was some interest on the part of Korea in a treaty with the United States, but there can be no doubt that it was China’s Li Hung-chang who assumed full responsibility for that treaty’s negotiation and with less than altruistic motivation. John Russell Young, who went to Peking in June 1882 as America’s new minister to the Ch’ing court, asked the following not inappropriate question concerning the treaty: “How far should we commit ourselves to a convention which China would regard as protecting her frontiers from some dreaded ultimate danger on the part of Russia or Japan, and which Russia and Japan might deem an unwarranted interference in Asiatic affairs?” And Commodore Shufeldt himself aptly concluded that Li Hung-chang’s object had been “to make an American [page 28] Treaty for the benefit of China.”

It is the anniversary of the beginning of a century of peace, amity, commerce and navigation between the United States and Korea to which the sands of time have now brought us, and it is the story of that beginning which I have attempted to tell in this paper.

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