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**Paul-Georg von Moellendorff—Scholar and Statesman**

by Walter Leifer

It is almost one hundred years ago that the first advisor to the Korean King, Kojong, arrived in Seoul, on December 13, 1882. His name was Paul-Georg von Moellendorff. When he came to Korea it was a time marked by nationalistic emotions on the part of the powers. The Romanticism of the early nineteenth century had taken a new turn. The world of the powers had moved from this early Romanticism with ideas of political duties and literary speculations to a world of confrontations.

The upsurge of nationalistic emotions with all the different shades that “imperialism”—the word had not yet the offensive meaning it took on after the First World War—has somewhat marred the image of Moellendorff, who was to participate in Far Eastern developments for three years from his eminent position in Korea. Friedrich von Schiller, one of Germany’s great poets, says of one of his heroes, Wallenstein, that his character and its evaluation is somewhat vacilating in history. A poet’s imagination may help to create a personality, but a historian’s duty is to discover reality by going back to vasic values, to impartiality and modesty. They are necessary when speaking about historical personalities, when discovering their works and elucidating their ideas.

Moellendorff’s arrival in the capital city on the Han River had drawn thousands of Koreans to the streets, who wanted to catch a glimpse of the first stranger from the Far West who was to hold high office in the residential city of the Yi-dynasty.1 He was granted his first audience in the royal palace only 13 days later, on December 26, 1882. After this ceremony he began his work immediately.2

Before taking a closer look at Moellendorff’s activities in Korea I would like to introduce you to the man, his origins, his personal plans, and to the sensational circumstances that led to his tenure of an extreordinary position in the Hermit Kingdom.

Paul-Georg von Moellendorff belonged to that Brandenburg-Prussian class of lower aristocracy called the “Junker” who were loyal servants to Hohenzollern princes, electors, kings and emperors. They were always ready to support their sovereigns. This class existed all over Europe, but had taken on special characteristics throughout Brandenburg and Prussia. Their re-[page 42] sponsibilities and functions were similar to those of the yangban in Korea or the samurai in Japan. Whereas in East Asian soldier families respect for the territorial lords and the chief of a clan were the predominent motive for obedience, the Prussian Junker was led by his sense of duty in accepting service for the state or the military.

This past autumn a Moellendorff seminar conducted by historians dealt—among other questions—with the subject of how a member of the German Junker class was able to adapt himself to conditions governing a Confucian state. Personally, I think that for him it was quite easy to accept the spiritual attitudes and the atmosphere that surrounded Korea’s king and his servants. But let’s rather start with the beginning.

Paul-Georg von Moellendorff was born on February 17, 1847 in the Prussian province of Brandenburg. His family later moved to Gorlitz in Silesia, where Paul-Georg and his brother Otto-Franz attended high school. In 1865 Paul-Georg von Moellendorff began his studies at the University of Halle on the Saale. He studied languages and law. After graduating, the young man, who had shown a keen interest in East-Asian culture and in the Chinese language, learned that Robert Hart, the director of the Customs Administration in imperial China, was looking for young Europeans to serve in that office. Moellendorff submitted his application and left his widowed mother and his brother and sisters on September 1st, 1869 to set out on his voyage to the Far East. It became an odyssey full of tragedies.

In China he was assigned to various places, such as the port city of Shanghai, the tea-trading port of Hankow, and the rising city of Kiukiang. All of these were located in the region of the mighty Yang-Tse Kiang.

Contrary to his expectations, his work in the office left him very little time for other activities. He had intended to translate texts from German lawbooks into Chinese, but found himself too occupied by his duties. The texts that he did translate were highly praised but he was too busy with the kind of work that normally took up his time. He therefore tried to find a new assignment. With the help of his brother Franz-Otto, who had just arrived from Germany to work with the German legation in Peking, he handed in an application for the newly-established German Foreign Service, called Deutscher Auswartiger Dienst. In 1874 he was appointed as the interpreter of the German Consulate in Canton. After that he served in Shanghai, Macao, Peking, Tientsin and again in Shanghai.

In the meantime he and his brother had compiled their first book: A Manual of Chinese Bibliography. One year after the publication of this book, which has remained a valuable source of information to the present day, he went on home-leave in 1877 and brought back with him his wife, [page 43] Rosalie nee Holtzhausen, daughter of a protestant minister in Werden, whom he had married immediately after his arrival in Germany, and who would become his biographer.

After his return from Europe, Moellendorff was sent again to Tientsin. Here he met with Viceroy Li Hung Chang who was to influence his career most decisively. Li was the most prominent Chinese statesman of his time and, as Viceroy of Chihli, he was also responsible for Chinese relations with Korea. In Tientsin the German consulate interpreter very soon was on friendly terms with the Chinese statesman, who was his senior by 24 years. Now Moellendorff made another important decision. As the German legation in Peking had not taken into consideration any of Moellendorff’s professional aspirations, he resigned after long hesitation.3 This step proved to be the beginning of the short-lived height of his career. Moellendorff spent three years in Korea. He had arrived in December 1882 and returned to China in December 1885. From then on he lived in Ningpo near Shanghai, where he died in 1901.

This is only a brief outline of Paul-Georg von Moellendorff’s life. The short and brilliant period he spent in Korea as a statesman certainly was the climax of his career, despite the humiliation and setbacks he experienced at the end. In my opinion, however, Moellendorff’s character was above all marked by his enthusiasm for all of his duties, especially for academic research. Therefore I consider it my task to point out, at first, Moellendorffs merits in this field.

Even as a student, Moellendorff had conducted linguistic research in a way that gives proof of the universality of linguistics in the 19th century. Above all, he admired Professor August Friedrich Pott who had taught general linguistics in Halle since 1839. This scholar dealt with a variety of linguistic subjects with great universality. As we known from Frau von Moellendorff’s biography of her husband, Pott was Moellendorff’s admired mentor.4 This universality in philological research as advocated by Professor Pott was handed down to his student von Moellendorff, 45 years his junior. Pott conducted etymological research within the Indo-Germanic language group and dealt with linguistic problems concerning the numerical method, Gipsy dialects, etc. In a similar way Moellendorff was active in the field of philology and worldwide etymology, and also wrote papers ranging from subjects like Pali (the language of Buddha) to Pehlevi (a Middle- Persian language spoken after the Achaemenid dynasty and before the onset of Islam against Iran).

On my visit to the Foundation for the Preservation of Prussian Cultural Property (Preussischer Kulturbesitz), where I examined [page 44] Moellendorff’s remaining documents and manuscripts, I was especially looking for these unpublished papers. They were proof of Moellendorff’s linguistic efforts concerning the Iranian and Northern Indian languages in the field of Indo-Germanic Studies. But Moellendorff also studied Hebrew, besides the classical languages of Europe like Ancient Greek and Latin. He was fluent in English and French, while he was able to read Italian, Spanish and Portuguese一which was nothing unusual for someone knowing Latin well. Later on he learnt Manchu, Korean and some Chinese dialects. Chinese, however, would become his special field of interest.

In the documents mentioned above I found manuscripts pertaining to many Sinological subjects, for instance a dictionary of Chinese radical words. This was planned to be the first volume of a collection of handbooks for the study of the Chinese language in 16 volumes. Unfortunately the dictionary has never been edited. In the same collection a “Practical Guide for Learning High-Chinese”—he meant Mandarin—was to be published. It was printed several times in Shanghai as an individual book.

Moellendorff wrote numerous papers on special philological questions, namely on method, various dialects, etymology, comparative philology, etc. For a certain period he served as the president of the Royal Asiatic Society, China Branch.5 One of the subjects he treated in a Royal Asiatic Society lecture was “On the Limitations of Comparative Philology”. This lecture was impressive, and dealt with all fields of worldwide etymology.

Later on there was a discussion between Moellendorff and Dr. Joseph Edkins about a special etymological problem. Moellendorff had criticized a recently published paper in which Edkins had compared the roots of the Mongolian word “murun” or river, the Manchu “muke”, the Korean “mul”—water, on the one hand—or with Latin “mare” and English “mere”—lake or pond, on the other hand. Moellendorff had refused to accept an etymological link between the Asian words and the European ones.6 This discussion at the end of the nineteenth century between a German-Chinese customs director and the British missionary and Sinologist was clear indication that this was still the age of etymology and comparative philology in the search for new linguistic discoveries. Only a few decades later there were not many traces left. Etymology as the once most rewarding field of philology was replaced by new scientific and logical methods now accepted as the highest form of linguistic research. Fortunately Moellendorff and his contemporary fellow scholars did not live to see this drastic change.

In another article published in the China Review (Vol. XXI, 1894, p. 141—146) Moellendorff wrote on the language of the Gilyaks. He located [page 45] this Siberian tribe between the Tunguses and the Samoyeds. Today a strong group of scholars say that this Arctic tribe is more closely related to the Ainu in Japan. Moellendorff’s statements; however, are said to be quite convincing.

Unfortunately, I cannot present you with more material published by the Royal Asiatic Society, China Branch. They could perhaps testify to his prolific work in Ningpo. Moellendorff’s abundant scholarly work also contains translations from Chinese, Japanese, and English. Nobody has ever taken the trouble to list Moellendorff’s contributions to various fields. So far, I myself may give the titles of books I found in some of the most important libraries:

Essay on Manchu Literature (Journal of the RAS China Branch, New Series, Vol. XXIV, Shanghai 1890)

The Family Law of the Chinese, Shanghai 1890

A Manchu Grammar, Shanghai 1892

Ningpo Colloquial Handbook, ed. by G.W. Sheppard, Shanghai 1910

Catalogue of Manchu Library

Catalogue of Paul-Georg von Moellendorff’s Library printed posthumously by Presbyterian Mission Press, 1905, a volume containing 220 pages

Die Juden in China, 327 pages, o.O.

Die Weltliteratur—eine Liste mit Einleutung, Shanghai 1894

In the face of Moellendorff’s prolific work on languages, law and literature one can hardly understand that this man did not become one of the most outstanding scholars in a limited field of linguistics. But after making his choice to come to the Far East Moellendorff must have been aware that this demanded complete devotion to the tasks assigned to him. And totally devoted he really was!

Paul Georg von Moellendorff began his second lebensaufgabe, another task of life, that of a statesman, on the abovementioned important day of his first audience with Korea’s King Kojong on December 26, 1882. He had arrived with great ideas, full of plans for his adopted country. There came now a time that allowed him to rise to the position of the most important and powerful personality in the period of Korea’s opening to foreign powers.

In a proper sense this opening took place only on May 19,1883 when the American-Korean treaty concluded a year earlier, on May 22, 1882, was ratified. Moellendorff’s presence made itself felt for the first time on the day of the ratification of this treaty, which had been signed at the port of [page 46] Chemulpo (now part of the big city of Inchon) by the American Commodore Robert Wilson Shufeldt who, at first, wanted to expand trade in Korea with the help of the Japanese, but failed.

At the invitation of Li Hung-Chang, Shufeldt now negotiated with the Chinese. The discussions were held in Tientsin. One of the great problems was the status of Korea. To this Shufeldt Convention, as it first was called, or Chemulpo Treaty, was attached “A Despatch from the King of Korea to the President of the United States of America,” in which the king said that his country was a tributary state to China, but independent in internal and also in foreign affairs. These two words “tributary” and “independent” expressed two different intellectual and political attitudes and situations for the American side, but Chinese and Koreans as children of the Sino-Asian cultural sphere could combine both terms. Also Western law has the possibility to harmonize the terms一suzerainty is the magic word. About these questions Moellendorff started a political treatise after O.N. Denny, his successor, had published a pamphlet entitled “China and Korea.” The two small books are the first examples of a politco-scientific discussion about the status of Korea.

Another treaty with a foreign country existed already, namely the Japanese-Korean treaty of Kangwha, concluded on February 26, 1876. However, there had always been a Japanese settlement in Pusan since the Hideyoshi invasion of 1592 to 1598. Pusan, therefore, had served as a juncture between Nippon and Korea.

One of Moellendorff’s first official acts had been to give orders that any future treaties had to be signed in Seoul. With this measure he intended to protect Korean diplomacy from the gunboats, and to give a new status to the capital, and to Korean foreign politics that were still in the infant stage and taking shape.

The first treaties that can really be attributed to Moellendorff were those with Great Britain and with Germany, both signed on November 16, 1883. Earlier treaties with Britain and Germany, signed on June 6 and June 30, 1882, were never ratified. Therefore, new treaties had to be drawn up in November of the next year. These November treaties were ratified in the British case on April 28, 1884, and in the German case on November 18, 1884.

One episode that took place after the conclusion of the Korean-German treaty may be amusing: Moellendorff asked the German representative, consul General Zappe, whether it was possible to provide some entertainment, and to have the military band of the man-of-war “Leipzig” that brought Zappe to Chemulpo to perform in public. Zappe complied [page 47] with Moellendorff’s wish and the German band was the talk of the town. This was the first time that modern European music was played in Seoul.8 Korean scholars doing research on the last years of the Yi Dynasty say that the band’s performance was probably the reason for King Kojong (who at that time had adopted the title of Emperor) to invite the German musician Franz von Eckert to become Imperial Musikmeister. Von Eckert even composed a Korean national Anthem, even though it was played for a few weeks only, because it was too difficult.

The next two treaties brought about with Moellendorff’s help were the Korean-Italian treaty of June 26, 1884, and the Korean-Russian treaty of June 25, 1884. This treaty with Russia was looked upon with a lot of suspicion by some members of the Diplomatic Corps. Especially the Japanese and British criticized it.

The Americans in Seoul watched the situation. So did the Germans. The French were not yet represented in Korea, though eventually they built up an Indochinese Empire between Cochin China and Tongking. The Annam Crisis, when at first Cochin China became a French colony, later on Tongking was occupied, and Annam changed status to a French protectorate, was a hard blow against the old Chinese order in East Asia, in the Sino-Asiatic world. At the same period the Ryu Kyu Islands became part of Japan, while Siam, today Thailand, found more and more its own identity, and Laos—in Chinese Nan-chang—was protected by Western treaties as a state of its own. Sula was occupied by Spanish soldiers to become part of the Philippines, and Burma became a colonial country eventually, British India holding a protective hand over this Buddhist country.

All these countries mentioned, including Korea, belonged up to the second half of the 19th century to the Shu-pang, the nations or countries dependent on China. They belonged to the family of the Celestial Empire. Membership was the defined by voluntary linkage to China and its capital, not by acts, not by treaties. It is therefore not surprising that all the vital affairs of these countries were handled by the Chinese Department of Rites. Proper conduct in the true Confucian way was more important than bilateral political relations at that time.

There were also certain rules for the missions bearing tribute and congratulary messages to China: Korea had to submit these gifts four times a year, the Ryukyus every other year, Siam every three, Annam once in four, Sula every five and Laos and also Burma every ten years. One has to look at all these countries to understand what it meant when the glacis of China was broken up, was disrupted. I take the liberty to use the notion glacis more in the politco-cultural sense. Moellendorff knew that this world [page 48] was in danger, attacked more and more under the slogan of progress and reform.

It should be mentioned here that during the period of about two years when Moellendorff was the strongman behind Korean foreign politics, one treaty was ratified and four other bilateral treaties were signed and ratified This means that in Moellendorff’s time diplomatic relations were established with five countries. In the twenty years following that found Korea free to take decisions in foreign politics—that is from the end of the year 1885 to November 17, 1905, when Japan made Korea agree to the Convention for Transfer of Korean Foreign Relations to Japan—Korea concluded only four new treaties, and opened diplomatic relations with the following countries:

with France (June 4, 1886)

with Austria, Hungary (July 23, 1892)

with Belgium (May 23, 1901)

and with Denmark (June 15, 1902).

If one is objective, one must admit that a lot of diplomatic work for Korea was achieved during Moellendorff’s stay in the country.

Moellendorff was trusted by King Kojong, who was a well-meaning if rather weak personality, which would become a major problem for Moellendorff. King Kojong had made Moellendorff vice minister of foreign affairs—a position that made him responsible for organizing and managing one of the most important Korean offices. The fact alone that the Korean King commissioned him to act in his name was enough to arouse jealousy in others. Moreover, Moellendorff was in charge of another important post. Even before his arrival in Korea he had been appointed inspector general of the Marine Customs Department.

To make matters worse, he became the director of the national mint office on March 14, 1884. For a short time he was also vice minister in the Office of Labor (from April 24 to June 13, 1884) and vice minister of defense (from December 15, 1884 to February 6, 1885). These nominations certainly were an expression of King Kojong’s special trust in Moellendorff, and at the same time they were the highlight of his career as a royal adviser and statesman. One cannot say that he was overburdened by the variety of tasks. In a way, he was a titanic figure who accepted and accomplished the tasks assigned to him.

One must not forget, however, that Korea in those days had been a hermit kingdom for centuries that did not—and could not—muster the personnel necessary to play an equal part in the power ploys of those days. The King—who respected and esteemed Moellendorff, and therefore [page 49] endowed him with an amount of power that nobody had ever been entrusted with before in Korea—needed a man whom he could also completely trust. Moellendorff was charged with such delicate missions as to ask China for credit, or to get into contact with people who might be willing to help build a modern Korea. Thus, Moellendorff inspected silk spinning factories in China during a brief visit there, and was briefed on their methods. He ordered 100,000 winter-resisting mulberry trees in China and had them shipped to Korea in order to improve silk production. He contacted the firm Jardine Matheson for opening of a regular shipping line between Shanghai or Tientsin and Chemulpo. At the same time he discussed with them about general trade relations, and even about mining concessions. He also tried to get Korea connected to the international cable network, held discussions with specialists on reforestation, and with physicians who wanted to come to Korea to introduce modern medicine and hospitals to the former hermit kingdom. When during a party in the newly-opened Post Office the Kapsin Rebellion broke out when the so-called reformers tried to take over the government and officials were attacked and killed, Moellendorff bandaged the first victim, Min Yong-Ik, and sent for the American missionary, Dr. Allen, asking him to take this opportunity to practice medicine, which he had not done so far in Korea.

It can be read in the annals of Yonsei University’s Medical Center that modern medicine in Korea started exactly on that date at 10 p.m., when the party given by Hong Yong-Sik, the minister in charge of postal affairs, was almost over. Almost all the erractic reports about the incident contain Moellendorff’s name as one who kept cool and did what was necessary at the time.

Apart from his daily routine, Moellendorff contributed to Korea’s modernization in many different ways. Moellendorff, for example, invited Professor Dr. Gottsche of the University of Kiel to come to Korea. He was a geologist and was to do research for the Korean government. In the beginning of one of his travel accounts he notes: “Thanks to the kindness of our compatriot Mr. P.G. von Moellendorff who officially served as undersecretary of state in the Foreign Office, but whose real influence surpassed his position by far, I had the opportunity to travel a lot on this noteworthy peninsula. After a brief visit to Korea I came back for another stay of 8 months in the following year which unfortunately was cut short by the Japanese uprising (*vulgo* ‘rebellion’) on December 4, 1884.”9

Apart from research, Moellendorff also felt responsible for transmitting Western technical know-how (to use a modern term) to young Koreans. Although Moellendorff must have felt pretty soon the jealousy, [page 50] suspicions and egoistic motives of people surrounding him, he tried to overlook them. His aim was cooperation, much in the same way as modern assistance to developing countries is understood today. So he employed harbor-masters and tax and customs commissioners for the ports, like the German captain Schulz and the Englishman Stripling. He also employed a specialist for silkworm raising, a mint-master and a coining specialist, manufacturers of glass, ceramics and porcelain—to revive old techniques that had been lost due to the Hideyoshi invasion in 1598.

Moellendorff also thought about the writing system that might be best for Korea. He came from the country of Gutenberg and was now living in the country of King Sejong. Reading should be the common aim. Maybe that was why he was strongly in favor of using the Korean alphabet Hangul. It is remarkable in a way that Moellendorff as a Sinologist wanted to admit Chinese characters only for scientific research. In his plans for general education, dating back to early 1883 and published later in revised form, Meollendorff intended to established about 800 elementary schools, 24 middle schools and one educational institution on the university level each for sciences, languages and crafts. These plans were based on total population of 10 million.10

According to Moellendorff’s universal plan for education, the English department of the Language School was founded first, in September 1883. After Moellendorff had left, matters slowed down and the newly-founded departments were considered as foundations by the respective nations. This can partly be understood, considering the political pressure that Korea had to sustain. On various occasions, however, endeavors were made to implement Moellendorff’s plans.

These plans fully showed Moellendorff’s potential as a scholar and a statesman. Martina Deuchler, historian at the University of Zurich, introduced Moellendorff’s efforts for the introduction of modern languages in Korea with the following statement: “Driven by his determination to accelerate Korea’s entry in the modern age, Moellendorff also ventured into the field of education.”11 The years 1883/84 also climaxed Moellendorff’s activities in Korea. As mentioned above, a treaty with Russia was concluded in 1884. This, however, brought animosity from certain foreign representatives, and the Chinese felt betrayed. Moellendorff was temporarily dismissed from his post as vice-minister of foreign affairs. He was ordered to come to Tientsin to report to Li Hung Chang, and stayed there for over one month. After his return to Korea, he proceeded with his many other tasks. Li Hung Chang himself seemed satisfied with Moellendorf’s explanations. They seem to have had a frank discussion of the geopolitical situation in [page 51] East Asia.

Moellendorff was remembered as a specialist on foreign policy when there was need to solve the problems of the abovementioned Kapsin Rebellion. It was Moellendorff who urged the Korean government to seek reconciliation, and he was sent over to Japan with a small delegation. The governments of Korea, China and Japan had asked Moellendorff to come to Tokyo to mediate. His aim always had been that political harmony might unite the three countries. But, immediately the picture changed. It was during this stay there that the Russians asked for a consultation with him. Moellendorff granted it, and rumors had it that he had concluded a secret treaty with them. This was the beginning of his downfall.

Things got worse when parts of the British Far Eastern fleet occupied Komun-Do (the Hamilton Islands) without prior notice.12 Many foreign representatives beseeched the King to dismiss Moellendorff. Moellendorffs career ended, although he had been successful in Tokyo in coming to a compromise between China, Korea and Japan. He had been Korea’s strongman for two years. At the end of 1885 Moellendorff returned home—to China, that is. He was well received, even by Li Hung Chang, who tried in vain to send him back to Korea in 1888.

Moellendorff was an unselfish and critical scholar and statesman. His activities were meant to strengthen Korea’s independent position in a balanced Far East. His political game was always connected with the problem of security. His actions were never motivated by activism for its own sake, yet he was persistent in his endeavors. He was struggling alone, pressed against the wall. When he finished his work, he had lost. Had he really lost?

When his mysterious death in Ningpo (there were rumors about poison) became known in Korea there was a thoughtful and reflective obituary. I quote only some characteristic remarks here. The American editor H.B. Hulbert wrote in the June 1901 edition of the Korean Review: “The year 1883 which marked the height of von Moellendorff’s power in Korea witnessed more advance in Korea than any other either before nor after.....

“The Government needed ten men all as strong as von Moellendorff in these multifarious works, but it had—one....

“The foreign Representatives desired to deal more directly with the Korean government.....

“The Koreans got the notion that he was working in the interest of Russia. Such a report, however unfounded, could not but prove detremental to his influence among Koreans.....

“That much of that work was highly beneficial to Korea is as true as that[page 52] the extremely broad field he endeavored to cover made it impossible to achieve success in every part....” 13

To sum up Moellendorff’s importance for Korea, let me repeat one of these statements: “The Government needed ten men as strong as von Moellendorff in these multifarious works, but it had—one.”

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5. Moellendorff was elected President of the Royal Asiatic Society, China Branch, in 1896 and again in 1897. He had formerly been a Vice-President for a number of years.

6. Read at the meeting of the Royal Asiatic Society—China Branch, Jan. 19, 1897.

7. O.N. Denny, Advisor to the King and Director of Foreign Affairs: China and Korea, Kelly and Walsh Printers, Shanghai 1888. Reply to Denny by P.G. von Moellendorff: see R. von Moellendorff, pp. 125-136.

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11. Martina Deuchler: Confucian Gentlemen and Barbarian Envoys, Seattle and London, 1977, p. 163.

12. China No. 1 (1887), Correspondence Respecting the Temporary Occupation of Port Hamilton by Her Majesty’s Government. Presented to Both Houses of Parliament by Command of Her Majesty March 1887. Printed for H.M. Stationery Office (C.-4991) 1887. No. 1 — No. 83 (p. 1 — p. 41).

13. Homer B. Hulbert: “Baron von Mollendorff” in: The Korea Review, June 1901 (Seoul, 1901), pp. 245-252.