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**Satanic Devils in the Hermit Kingdom**

Wilson Strand, Minneapolis

“one of the most extraordinary affairs ever known”

-William Elliot Griffis

In 1853, as is well known, Matthew Perry, an American naval commander, led an expedition to Japan to open that country to trade and contact with the West. He succeeded and has been praised in the West ever since. Perry himself declared that he was only trying to bring a then isolated people into the family of civilized nations. Japan then modernized and became a world power.

In April, 1868, Ernst Oppert, a merchant from Hamburg, led an expedition to Korea to open the country to trade and contact with the West. The “hermit kingdom” of Korea, like Japan, was likewise isolated and, from the Western point of view, backward and uncivilized. Oppert, however, failed. Although the two expeditions were very different, Oppert’s expedition has been ridiculed or ignored ever since.

The only item of any length on the internet in the last few years about Oppert called his expedition an “incident of piracy” and the participants “criminals” and “satanic devils,” which included Koreans, “a handful of miserable Christian converts who were more than willing to sell out their country to the foreign devils.” Among other things, the author also declares that Frederick H. B. Jenkins, the American interpreter at the U. S. consulate in Shanghai, financed the expedition. He then quotes extensively from a contemporary review of Oppert’s book, criticizing the fact that Jenkins, who he says provided lots of money and arms for Oppert, was scarcely mentioned. The review ridiculed Oppert’s attempt as “grave robbing.”1

This is not unusual. The author was following contemporary writers, who likewise treated Oppert with scorn and ridicule. Typical was a writer for The Nation,” who in 1880 described Oppert’s men as “wicked ghouls” who[page 144]attempted “a perfect burlesque.” The whole thing, he declared, was absurd.2 William Elliot Griffis wrote the most complete account 14 years after the event. He said Oppert was “a Jewish peddler” who led a “body- snatching...piratical expedition,” financed by an American, “for the sake of money.” Somewhat unfortunately, he has been followed ever since. And yet, quite correctly, he also called it “one of the most extraordinary aftairs ever known.”3

The Koreans then saw it differently and, when aware of it, still do, although their mention of the event is brief. They saw Oppert’s expedition as a mission of revenge for Korea’s persecution of the Catholics.4 Thus, they seemed more concerned with Feron, the French priest who accompanied Oppert, than with Oppert himself. At that time all but two of the French priests in Korea and thousands of their converts had already been executed by the Korean government. To be sure, Feron was interested in reopening Korea to missionaries and protecting the Korean Christians already there, but Oppert’s primary motive was not religious.

Modern historians are no better in understanding Oppert. Wanne J. Choe’s impressive history, published in the year 2000, writes of the “body-snatching expedition” by “the Prussian adventurer” though Hamburg was never part of Prussia and repeats the assertion that it was financed entirely by Jenkins. He agrees with the Korean version that Oppert acted to retaliate for religious persecution of Christians but adds that he was “lured by precious metals and stones,”5 i.e. going to rob the tomb. Even Andrew Nahm, probably the foremost Korean historian today in America, calls Oppert’s expedition “a tomb-robbing expedition...to steal treasures” from a royal tomb. He also calls Oppert a “naturalized American citizen,”6 but does not provide any documentation for this assertion. Modern accounts typically mention him in a paragraph at most and are always negative.

The purpose of this article is not to justify or excuse what Oppert did but, for the first time, to understand Oppert by examining his expedition in the light of further research about the too long neglected merchant. Modern[page 145] writers have been only too eager to accept a single contemporary account without questioning it Who, after all, was Oppert? What was he trying to do by his expedition to Korea? Was the expedition his idea? Can we believe what Oppert wrote considerably later in his own account? And, how different would Korean history be if Oppert had succeeded?

Who Was Oppert?

Ernst Jacob Oppert( 1832-1903) was a member of a distinguished Jewish family in Hamburg, one of the most active seaports in western Europe. An ancestor, Samuel Oppenheimer, was the banker in Potsdam for the German Emperor Leopold X. Although the family changed their name to Oppert, perhaps signaling a change of religion, they continued to be bankers. Officially, the family lived in Hamburg beginning in 1832, the year Ernst was born on December 5 to Julius Edward and Henriette(b. Gans) Oppert, but since Germany did not become a nation until the German Empire was declared after the war of 1870, and since has suffered many wars, Hamburg records are incomplete. His parents had been married in Berlin on August 5,1824. Her father was also a banker and her brother a jurist and professor of law. In 1825 her brother changed from the Jewish faith to the Christian religion.

Ernst was the sixth of ten surviving children, six boys and four girls. His brother Julian became the assistant librarian in the Bodelian Library at Oxford, working especially with their Hebrew collection, and later a distinguished professor of Assyriology in Paris. His brother Gustav became a professor of Sanskrit in Madras. The family was well-todo, well educated and well traveled.

Ernst decided to be a merchant and left for Hong Kong in 1851. He was 29. Three years later he moved to Shanghai(as shown in the box below), where he founded Oppert & Co., a publishing house. Two of his younger brothers, Hermann and Emil, joined him there. In the same year the United States opened Japan to limited trade. In 1858 Western powers concluded[page 146]treaties with China.

Time Box

1853 Perry arrives in Japan 1868 May: Oppert’s third expedition to Korea

1864 Taewongun rises to unchallenged power 1871 American Fleet tries to open Korea

1866 August 27: General Sherman burned. 1876Japanese show of force opens ports to Korea

 October: French Fleet in Korea 1882 Treaty with the US opens Korea

During a visit to Europe in 1858 Oppert spoke with government ministers in both London and Hamburg. With the help of his father and recommendations from 15 trading firms in Hamburg, he applied for the position of Hamburg consul in Shanghai but did not get the appointment. The new consul was chosen from within. Rudolph Heinsen, already working in the consulate(and a later supporter of Oppert), was selected instead. This was a major disappointment for Ernst.

On June 10，1863, back in Hamburg, he married Olga Bunsen, the daughter of a German merchant in Moscow. She was seven years younger than him and of the Evangelical religion. Ernst was a member, like his parents, of a German Jewish synagogue. She accompanied him back to Shanghai and two years later gave birth to their first child, Alma. There would be four children altogether: two sons and two daughters.7 When he returned to Shanghai, he no doubt looked forward to a successful career in the Far East.

What Was Oppert Seeking in Korea?

The next year, in April, 1866, Oppert made his first of three trips to Korea. His plan was to approach the capital by ship in order to initiate friendly negotiations with the government for establishing trade. That he believed firmly in the commercial value of opening Korea can be seen by the title of the report he wrote On the Capability of the Land to Absorb European Manufactured Goods and Imports and with the Unquestionable Advantage[page 147] of Production Inside Korea at this Time . 8

However, maps of Korea were then unreliable. He did not find the mouth of the Han River and soon returned to Shanghai. His second trip, in August of the same year, was likewise unsuccessful Financing both his trips was Jardine Matheson & Co.,an English firm which was then one of the leading commercial houses in Shanghai.

In the summer of 1866 an American ship, the General Sherman, as is well known, steamed up the Taedong River in an attempt to establish trade with Korea. It was attacked, the sailors killd and the ship burned. Although the Koreans mistakenly considered it English, this event interested the Americans who, for lack of reliable information, thought some of the American sailors might still be alive and could be rescued. Oppert was then looked upon by the American consulate in Shanghai as their major source of information about the Hermit kingdom because of his earlier voyages.9 A stone monument today in North Korea shows where the General Sherman was burned by the Korean people, supposedly led by the great grandfather of Kim II Sung, showing how easily historical events become political in today’s hermit kingdom.

After his two unproductive trips to Korea, Oppert was bankrupt, as recorded by the Prussian consul in Shanghai, Tettenborn, to the amount of 180,000 taler10 and as testified later in the Jenkins trial.¹¹ Gaining a commercial foothold in Korea was thus seen by him as a way out of his financial difficulties.

At this financially crucial time for him, he met Feron, a priest who had been the driving force behind the French mission in Korea. Foreign priests and their Korean Christian followers had already been executed in Korea by order of the Taewongun, the political leader then in Korea. Feron and Ridel, another priest, were the last two French religious leaders to Jeave Korea. Oppert had already received a plea for help from Ridel while in Korea but had been unable to help him escape. In September of 1866 a French fleet arrived at the mouth of the Han River but was too late to rescue Feron, who[page 148] had already escaped to Shanghai. The French fought with Korean soldiers on Kangwha Island, then left, but left behind a growing feeling against all foreigners.

Oppert met Feron in Shanghai and was impressed. Feron convinced Oppert that only the Taewongun, then ruling Korea, was hostile to Christianity, and that from his experience the Korean people were desperately searching for something spiritual to believe in and would welcome Christianity. The Taewongun, Oppert was told, ruled harshly and repressed all foreign and progressive ideas. The outside world was shut out and there was no freedom of speech. It was time for change, not just for trade with foreign nations, but also for the good of the Korean people. But because of the Taewongun’s hostility to western influences, force had to be used. He believed in the saying, as Oppert would write later, “Great ends require great means.”

Feron, advised by his Korean followers, suggested a plan for opening Korea that he said involved little risk. The tomb of the father of the Taewongun lay in the countryside not far from the coast. It would be unguarded since it was unthinkable in Korea that anyone would disturb the dead. Feron’s plan was to seize the sarcophagus. Because of the great respect of Koreans for their ancestors, Feron argued, the Taewongun would do anything to get back his father’s remains. The expedition would not damage the body in any way but safely return it as soon as the Taewongun opened some Korean seaports to trade. Oppert thought the plan plausible and decided to try it. No doubt his financial worries helped persuade him. If successful, he would be in a position to benefit as the first to trade with Korea.

For the third voyage Oppert chartered a ship from Siemssen & Co., a Hamburg firm in Shanghai. Its records noted only Oppert’s name, not that of Feron or the voyage’s purpose, nor was anyone else listed in the ship’s records. Oppert did not want his plan to be known but thought the risk slight and the prospects great. According to the ship agreement, in a postscript the[page 149]ship company as the financial sponsor, would be paid one per cent of the value of any goods or money brought back up to 500,000 taler, 3/4 of one per cent if between 500,000 and 750,000 taler, and one-half of one per cent if more.12 Therefore, Siemssen must have known of the destination and of Oppert’s hope that trade could be started almost immediately, but quite possibly was not told the means.

Oppert and Feron were soon on their way to Korea for Oppert’s third visit. Oppert later said that he took with him an agreement for the Taewongun to sign, along with money and gifts from Hamburg, which he thought would make Koreans grateful and more willing to do business. He also took with him an impressive amount of German alcoholic drinks, remembering no doubt that such gifts had helped Perry negotiate in Japan. He realized the Taewongun would be angry and that it would be necessary to placate various officials involved in the negotiations. His plan was thus, not to take the bones of the Taewongun’s father out of Korea, but to negotiate immediately afterwards with the Taewongun, thus persuading him to sign the agreement he carried with him.

Since his major ship, the China, was too big and too obvious to cruise up a shallow river unnoticed, he carried on board a smaller ship, the Greta, which he had secured from J. C. Godeffroy & Sohn in Shanghai through arrangements made by Heinsen, who asked Woldemar Nissen to “keep quiet” about it. The deputy consul for the German consulate, who also was associated with William Pustak & Co., the oldest German trading company there, was informed of Oppert’s expedition but had no questions.13

The China left Shanghai in late April under the German flag. On board, in addition to Oppert and Feron, were four Germans, two Swedes, two Italians, 21 Filipinos and about 120 Chinese, a “motly crew-the riff-raff of humanity,”14 according to Griffis, who had nothing good to say of Oppert. There was also one American, Jenkins, who spoke Chinese fluently and was put in charge of finances, which was probably mistakenly construed later to mean that he financed the expedition. [page 150]

They stopped on the way at Nagasaki to pick up guns and ammunition. They then landed on the Korean coast in what was then Asan Bay and hiked for six hours inland, but the tomb was farther than Feron had led them to believe- Nevertheless, they found the tomb in what is today Taedok County, Chungnam Province, but had much trouble digging into it because of the heavy stonework surrounding the sarcophagus and their few tools. Although Griffis declares that they leveled the tomb and reached the sarcophagus, 15 this is unlikely. More likely, they shoveled off the top dirt above the stonework, which they could not budge. Moreover, soldiers under the command of Honsu Yang, arrived, killing two Filipinos and wounding a German seaman. Without uncovering the sarcophagus, they returned to their ship empty handed. Korean reinforcements of 100 soldiers arrived at the tomb under the Taewongun’s son, Chaemon Yi, too late to take part in the fight. Yang was soon promoted to naval commander for his service and honored later with another promotion, a residence and money.16

The small tomb today shows no signs of attack but the large underlying stone blocks would surely have been too difficult to pierce, using only four spades, as Oppert later declared.17 The inscription in front of the tomb still attributes the financing of the expedition completely to Jenkins.

Back in Shanghai, neither Heinsen nor Probst, the consular agent, made any fuss about what had happened, perhaps because they were not told everything. The whole episode might well have been quickly forgotten except for Tettenborn, who did not get along with Heinsen or Probst. He complained to the German government, calling Oppert’s crew “pirates,” “freebooters” and “treasure hunters” who had misused the German flag to “loot corpses,” words that would be used freely by historians thereafter. Tettenborn demanded that Probst be dismissed or transferred. His complaints were passed on to the Prussian Senate where Rudolf von Delbruck, president of the chancellery, added his own opinion, calling Oppert’s expedition “an infamous act” which had compromised the honor of the German nation. Oppert, he declared, should be arrested and brought to Hamburg for trial. [page 151]

The Spanish government, on behalf of the Filipinos used, also complained to the German government about Oppert’s misuse of the Filipinos he’d hired as crew and demanded 4000 talers compensation for the families of the two killed and 462 talers for each of the surviving Filipinos for the hardships they had suffered. Oppert, in the eyes of both the German and Spanish governments, was clearly a German citizen from Hamburg. Heinsen was dismissed as consul and some time later returned to Hamburg.

Oppert soon returned to Hamburg for trial. His lawyer was Johann Georg Monckeberg, a distinguished lawyer, son of a priest, and himself a future mayor. The Supreme Court found Oppert guilty, declaring that his motives of opening up Korea to trade and spreading Christianity among the Koreans did not justify the means used. They sentenced Oppert to three months in prison but Oppert’s lawyer appealed for a pardon.18 Frederick Henry Barry Jenkins was also brought to trial. Charges were made by Dr. S. Wells Williams, the American charge d’affaires in Peking, the indictment formally written, reluctantly, by George Seward, who apologized for the trial to his uncle, explaining that he’d been pressured into doing so by the European powers.19 The translator of the American consulate in Shanghai, where Seward was consul, was charged on eight counts with preparing and assisting an expedition for the purpose of “illegally and clandestinely exhuming and removing the remains of a deceased sovereign of Corea.”

The trial, which involved testimony from several members of Oppert’s crew as well as Oppert and members of the foreign shipping community in Shanghai(Feron had already left China), heard that the “purpose of the expedition,” in the words of Oppert, “was to conclude treaties and possibly obtain an embassy.” According to Oppert, Jenkins “lent me some money. That was all” Jenkins did not help plan the expedition, knew nothing of its purpose, was only a passenger, and did not go ashore in Korea. Be that as it may, it was established that Jenkins, described by the defense attorney as “a shrewd man of business,” did loan Oppert money to charter the ships and [page 152] loaned him more money in Nagasaki to pay for the arms purchased there. However, he did this as a businessman, expecting a profitable return if the expedition was successful. Moreover, as the Defense argued, no known Korean law had been broken, the grave had not been robbed nor the body exhumed; therefore, no crime had been committed.20 Jenkins was acquitted. Griffis, however, cites an unidentified witness to the trial as calling it a “perfect burlesque.” Serious or not, the consulate would not have wished their translator’s involvement to become an international scandal.

Oppert served his sentence in the summer of 1889 and lived the rest of his life inconspicuously in Hamburg. He was listed as a stockbroker in the telephone book. He moved several times, never owning a house of his own. One street on which he lived still exists in a middle class neighborhood, but it was destroyed during the wars and has been completely rebuilt. His two daughters both studied to be teachers and married, one in New York. All his children were baptized Christians, perhaps by his wife’s brother, a priest. One son worked in Frankfurt, the other as a company graphic designer, also in Germany, but he attended the world rair in St. Louis in 1904. Oppert died on September 19,1903，at the age of 71. He’d spent his last years writing.21

Can We Believe Oppert?

It’s only A Forbidden Land: Voyages to the Korea, published in 1880, twelve long years after the expedition, that discusses his expedition to Korea in much detail. In it he argues that Korea was ready to join the family of nations, but to reach the level of China and Japan, it had to be opened to international trade and Christianity. Its government should not be treated tenderly, as the West was wont to do. Instead, a “very small army and a very few war vessels” would be sufficient. Russia, he predicted, would try next.

In an aside, he wrote that although he considered the Korean language more difficult than Japanese, one could, with little effort, understand it after a month of study.22 Perhaps he meant only that the alphabet could be learned in a month, though it can actually be learned in an hour or two. If he really[page 153] meant that one could speak and understand Korean in a month, he was certainly a gifted linguist.

His accounts of the three voyages are all peaceful until the very end. The first five-day expedition sought only “to open up commercial and friendly relations with that country,” to explore the mouth of the Han River and to make initial contact with Korean officials. He did meet with a provincial governor and general and sent a message to the capital but, after a few days of waiting for a reply and, unable to find the entrance to the Han River, he left- Oppert told the officials he would return.23

The second expedition, which included six Europeans and a smaller boat good for river passage, reached the mouth of the Han River, where they were met by friendly officials who discouraged them from going up river to approach the capital They agreed to wait four days for a reply. They meanwhile collected plants from the neighborhood. The government representative returned but asked Oppert to get permission from the Chinese emperor. Angry at what he considered an evasive reply, he left.24 In a vague sense, Korea could then be considered a tributary vassal of China. Was the Taewongun really encouraging Oppert by asking him to go through proper channels and get Chinese approval? More likely, considering the Taewongun’s anti-foreign feelings, he was just trying to get rid of Oppert

Oppert’s account of the much criticized third voyage is the most intriguing. The author admits that his previous good will was a failure. He harshly criticizes the Taewongun, calling him a “bloodthirsty tyrant,” advised by an “unscrupulous faction,” who garrisoned all towns, persecuted those with foreign ideas and excluded new ideas because, only by maintaining the status quo, did he feel he could survive.

He provided some information about the elusive Feron. The priest was well-educated, a devoted missionary who had previously entered Korea to spread Christianity but had escaped when he learned that his arrest had been ordered, Feron told Oppert that the Korean people hated the Taewongun and wanted foreigners admitted. The plan to seize the bones of the Taewongun’s[page 154] father was not Oppert’s idea or that of Feron, according to Oppert, but of Feron’s Korean followers, who assured him that the Taewongun would then “accede to anything to have them returned.” The Taewongun could thus be compelled to conclude a treaty that would open Korea and send embassies to western nations. By following the river inland and hiking for only four hours, no more, the followers said, they could reach the tomb and carry out the task.

Feron, in turn, suggested the plan to Oppert, saying it would benefit all nations and especially the Korean people. After several days of reflection and hesitation, Oppert agreed. Thus, it seems that while Oppert’s main motive was to open Korea to trade, albeit largely for his own profit, Feron’s motive and that or his Korean Christian followers was to protect Christians in Korea from the Taewongun’s wrath and persecution. Likewise, it seems certain that the plan could originate only with someone who knew of the Taewongun’s father and where in the countryside his tomb was located. Thus, the idea must have originated with a Korean Christian.

Oppert does not mention any other Europeans, only Feron. He does mention an unnamed American translator, obviously Jenkins, and a crew of Filipinos and Chinese. They reached the mouth of the river in Prince Jerome Gulf at night and started up the river at daybreak, watched by a whole village on the bank of the river. Did the Korean Christians accompany them? He says they left them on board the ship, apparently for their own safety, and hiked inland, but were stopped by a local official attended by a few soldiers. However, the soldiers deserted the official who nevertheless, when one of Oppert’s group fainted from the heat, gave them a palanquin to carry him until he felt better. The kind official even told them of a “short cut” to the tomb! Since they did not arrive at the tomb, near modern Tokson, until about 5:00 p.m., four hours later than expected, it’s quite possible that the official tricked them. Oppert’s party carried “hardly any implements” with them, perhaps expecting only a European type of grave filled with dirt, but managed to get other tools from a friendly village nearby. They found the[page 155]tomb and reportedly broke through the outer wall, while Koreans watched passively, but found the entrance blocked by a huge stone they could not budge. So, in order to return before the changing tide would leave their ship stranded, they gave up and returned to the ship without anything accomplished. No mention is made of their being fired upon by Korean soldiers at the tomb. Upon their return they found the ship surrounded by a curious but friendly crowd.

Oppert did not leave Korea at once. As planned, he still attempted to open Korea to trade. He stopped at the mouth of the Han River on Yongjong Island off Inchon and gave a message to local officials for the Taewongun, asking him to open his country for the good of his people by signing the treaty sent him. While waiting for a reply, he shared their European drinks with local officials, who criticized their unpopular leader. The official reply was polite but protested the attempt to harm the tomb of the Taewongun’s father. It stated clearly that Korea had no need of the West. Korea was self- sufficient and would remain so. It would continue to keep foreigners away.

Defeated, Oppert tried to enter the nearby town to collect his crew and leave. One German,25 however, was caught trying to carry off someone’s calf for food. Korean soldiers, probably acting on orders, opened fire on the retreating foreigners. A Filipino was killed and the culprit wounded. The rest of the crew rushed back to the ship and prepared to fire on the town but Oppert forbid it, he says, and the ship left. “Thus ended the third and last of my voyages to this remarkable country which, to the shame of all western nations, be it said, still remains a forbidden land up to the present day.”26

Was the older Oppert, looking back, telling the whole truth or only part of it? Disappointingly vague, the book nevertheless reveals a country not only full of friendly people but also of friendly officials and soldiers, supposedly free to criticize their government, who remained friendly until ordered to fire upon the foreigners. If this view is correct, the Taewongun could scarcely have been as tyrannical as Feron asserted. Moreover, it seems incredible that neither officials nor soldiers would try to stop a group of foreigners trying to[page 156] break into the tomb of the father of the most powerful leader in the country! It seems that Oppert conveniently forgot in his book events that he didn’t want to remember. Moreover, factual discrepancies such as the number of men killed demonstrate that his book is not a historical work trying to set the record straight, but what an older Oppert wanted his friends and posterity to believe. Thus, mystery remains. Some scholar needs to research the still mysterious Feron for his account. Surely he reported back to his superiors. Was he also reprimanded?

In summary, Oppert was a German merchant in Shanghai from the free city of Hamburg. He was essentially a man of peace. He left the tomb, just as he left Korea, at the first sign of trouble. He never tried to force his way up the Han River to the capital but eventually followed the wishes of local officials and what he considered proper protocol. He was, above all, a businessman. He wanted to open Korea to trade, for what he believed was the good of Korea as well as the West, but also for his own profit. He wanted, like others in his family, to be a success. His third voyage to Korea, financed like the others by a Shanghai firm, and supported by loans from Jenkins, was done under the persuasive influence of Feron and the financial pressure of Oppert’s being bankrupt. America was not directly involved, though one of his crew happened to be American. Oppert had no official backing. He was neither a statesman nor a diplomat. All three of his voyages were limited in time and funds. He had no official position, did not represent any government, had secured no authority from the Chinese government. Thus, it’s not surprising that the Korean government viewed him as an individual of little importance or that, after suffering the French military attempt, the Taewongun did not hasten to do as he wished. Oppert believed that Korea was ready to join the family of nations, which meant to him world trade and Christianity, but the Taewongun was not. The Korean leader preferred to keep things as they were and increasingly saw the West as a threat to Korea. Oppert’s dream would come true later, but by more orthodox means. Korea would in 1882 sign its first commercial treaty with a Western[page 157] power with the United States but by then the Japanese, by using superior force, would already be on their way to eventual domination of Korea.

**Influence of the Oppert Affair**

Oppert’s final attempt to open Korea can only be condemned as an intended sacrilege. However, had he succeeded peacefully in opening Korea to trade - the eternal What if? - he may well have been praised and his means overlooked by the West. Moreover, a Korea opened to the West may well have been stronger and more modern militarily and diplomatically, better able to resist Japanese imperialism when it came. Such friendship and trade may well have prevented decades of suffering under Japanese rule in the twentieth century.

More easily discernable, and perhaps less debatable, what influence did the Oppert affair have on the American attempt in May, 1871, to open Korea to trade with a show of force? Because of the involvement of the American Jenkins, the American government was aware of the Oppert episode, as shown by the correspondence from China of the American consul, George Seward, to his uncle William Seward, then Secretary of State, before and after the incident.

Writing before, the nephew argues that trade with Korea would certainly develop in a few years and that it was desirable for the United States to have, if not a commercial treaty, at least a treaty providing for the kind treatment of shipwrecked American sailors.27 The Shanghai Recorder greatly increased interest in Korea by writing that Korea was militarily weak and undefended, that it was richer in gold and silver than California, and that neither force nor even a show of force would be necessary to have one’s way with her.28 George Seward repeated this view to his uncle, saying that force, even the show of force, was unnecessary to get a treaty of trade with Korea. That country was interested in relations with the West. However, after learning of the Oppert episode and probably speaking with Jenkins, he reversed his advice and told his uncle, often mentioning Jenkins, that Korea was not[page 158] eager for a treaty. He now believed that negotiations, unless supported by a considerable show of force, though not force itself, should be sufficient.29

The correspondence of Low, who represented the American government in its later attempt to open Korea with a show of force, shows that he was not hopeful of the results but thought the goal worth trying,30 that he hoped that a show of force would be sufficient and that actual force would not have to be used.31 Low, consciously or not, tried to follow George Seward’s recommendations in America’s later military attempt to open Korea. Indirectly, the Oppert affair thus helped determine American foreign policy toward Korea. Oppert’s failure, by increasing the resistance of the Taewongun to foreign contact, also helped to ensure the subsequent failure of the American military expedition to open Korea.

Was Oppert really a pirate or satanic devil in search of buried riches? Some writers have wanted to think so. Or, what seems more likely, a merchant in financial difficulties with a grander vision? Although his final means were inexcusable, would Korea have been better off if he had succeeded in opening the Hermit Kingdom then to trade?

Notes

1 Lee, Wha Rang(. Ernst Oppert’s Kingdom of Corea: Grave-Robbing in the Name of God. http://www.kimsoftxom/2000/oppert.htm(May 27，2000), with quotations from S.Wells Williams’ review of Oppert’s A Forbidden Land.

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3 Griffis, William Elliot. Corea, the Hermit Nation(1882), 396-97.

4 Kim, Key-Hiuk. Opening of Korea: A Confiician Response to the Western Impact. Yonsei University Press, Seoul: Institute for Modern Korean Studies(1999).

5 Choe, Wanne J. A Cultural History of Modern Korea(2000), 157.

6 Nahm, Andrew. A History of the Korean People(1988), 146-50.

7 Hauschild-Thiessen, Renate. “Ernst Oppert( 1832-1903), Ein Hamburger Beschreibt

Korea, “ Hamburgische Geschicht Geschichts und Heimatblatter(Oktober 1989),, 99-114.

8 Ibid. [page 159]

9 George Seward to William Seward(April 20, 1870), US National Archives and Records, Microfilm FM 112, Roll 9.

10 Ibid.

11 Report from the Supreme Court and Consular Gazette(July 11, 1868).

12 Oppert, appendix.

13 Hauschild-Thiessen, 99-114.

14 Griffis, 399.

15 Ibid.

16 Pak, Chehong. “Conflicts with the West from Kunse Choson Chonggaro, “ I,236-76 in Peter H. Lee, ed., Sourcebook of Korean Civilization, II, 306-310.

17 Report(July 11, 1868).

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 Hauschild-Thiessen, 105-09.

21 Ibid. Five years before, Oppert published East Asia Wanderings and Memories of a Japanese. A sole copy of the former can be checked out of the university library in Hamburg. No known copy of the latter exists.

22 Oppert, ix-x.

23 Oppert, 178-206.

24 Ibid.

25 Oppert, 319, calls the culprit a “countryman,” thus a German.

26 Ibid, 206.

27 Seward(Nov. 27, 1866), US National Archives and Records, Microfilm FM 112, Roll 9.

28 Shanghai Recorder(Oct. 16, 1866).

29 Cf. Seward(April 24) with(May 25,1868), US National Archives and Records, Microfilm FM112, Roll 9.

30 Low to Fish(Nov. 22, 1870), Ibid.

31 Ibid.,(May 13, 1871). [page 160]