**Emily Brown: The American Empress of Korea**

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On October 24, 1903, Americans were surprised to discover how much influence the United States had gained in Korea. A newspaper in Chicago first broke the news that a fellow American, Emily Brown, the young daughter of the late Dr. Peter Brown, had married the Korean Emperor, Kojong, in an elaborate wedding in August of that year.

According to the story, Emily Brown was an only child who was born in Ohio in 1879 and spent most of her early childhood there, but at some point moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her father, a successful doctor, was forced to raise her himself after his wife died at an early age. He was a devout Presbyterian, and like many of his generation, the desire to go abroad and witness to ‘the heathens’ took hold. Missionaries were badly needed in Korea, and so when he volunteered to serve there in 1894 he was readily accepted His daughter was to accompany him on this adventure and he would gain the distinction of being the first Protestant to settle in Korea. He was considered a brave man.

Korea in 1894 was a dangerous place. The Tonghak Movement had swept through the southern provinces and threatened to engulf the entire country. There were daily reports of Korean army defeats at the hands of the Tonghak rebels, and of government soldiers who threw down their weapons ana joined the rebel ranks. Rumors circulated that the Tonghaks would take Seoul and massacre all foreigners, an event that was rather common in China. Adding credibility to these threats, circulars were found on the gates of the city and even on the Japanese legation’s door, and the foreign population pleaded for protection.

These events led the Korean government to ask for the assistance of the Chinese military in putting down the insurrection. The Chinese promptly sent troops to Korea. Japan quickly denounced the Chinese action and sent even a greater number of troops to occupy Seoul and Chemulpo (Incheon), ostensibly to protect the lives of Japanese citizens living there. Hostilities broke out between these two countries, resulting in the Sino-Japanese war of 1894-95, with much of the combat taking place within Korea and in the surrounding waters.

In 1895 an unheard of atrocity occurred. Japanese soshi (ruffians), working with members of the Japanese consul, orchestrated an attack on the palace in the middle of the night and assassinated Queen Min, leaving the badly frightened King [page 80] Kojong and the Korean government in the hands of the Japanese Eventually Kojong and his son, disguised as women, escaped to the Russian legation and Kojong was able to re-establish control over his kingdom.

It was into this environment that Dr. Peter Brown brought his beautiful 15-year-old daughter. She graced his church’s choir in Seoul with her beautiful voice and her sparkling character, and soon caught the attention of the grieving Kojong, now Emperor, who sought solace in her presence. He commanded that she attend him at his palace but she, a virtuous woman, demurred. A king’s attention, however, could not be avoided for long, and she soon found herself at the palace. One can only imagine what she was thinking as she was brought before. the Emperor of a nation of 17,000,000 people. What their first conversation was about has not been recorded, but it was probably light banter considering the number of attendants listening and whispering amongst themselves about this strange match. Fortunately for the Emperor, who wasn’t able to speak any English, Emily could speak Korean, having learned it while assisting her father, and quickly won over the court with her obvious intelligence and wisdom, becoming one of Kojong’s most-trusted confidants. As she spent more and more time within the walls of the vast palace, their relationship grew stronger until finally the Emperor did something unimaginable ᅳ he professed his love for her and proposed marriage.

The wedding took place in Seoul in August 1903 and was witnessed by representatives of the United States, England, and Japan. It was the social event of the year and had been planned several months in advance. Gifts filled the treasure vaults of the kingdom. No expense was spared by Emperor Kojong to show his American bride his love. As the day drew near, noblemen and coolies alike from all points of the empire dressed in their finest clothing and made their way to Seoul to witness their Emperor’s marriage to the American beauty.

Even though the wedding took place in August, it was not reported in the United States until October. The first full account of the wedding was published in the Boston Sunday Post on November 29, 1903:

At the entrance to the palace were stationed a great squad of the imperial guard, who, armed with hatchets at the end of poles, prevented the throng from crowding in too close. All along the proposed line of march similar guards were placed In the narrow streets immediately surrounding the palace the Emperor’s army awaited a signal to march.

The signal was finally given. At the head of the procession moved the generals of the army and the most favored troops. When a thousand or more soldiers had passed, trumpets blared, the palace gates were thrown wide open, and in glittering helmets and armor of five hundred [page 81]

years ago out marched the Emperor’s bodyguard.

Following the bodyguard came the attendants in dazzling silks and waving plumes. Finally with a deafening din of drums, two chairs emerged. In one of these chairs sat the Emperor Yi Hi [Kojong] and in the other Emily Brown, Empress of Corea. Never before had a civilized being been appareled as she was. From head to foot she was covered with gems and silk so thick that they fell in folds like heavy woolen cloth.

Above the royal chairs waved a banner with a flying dragon fourteen feet long. Under the banner was an immense red parasol, indicating to the people that their monarch had shared his power and throne with the woman by his side.

The instant Yi Hi and his Empress appeared every back was bowed until each head bumped upon the ground, and not one eye looked up until their Majesties had passed. In the rear of the royal pair marched other nobles and richly appareled guards. When all had emerged the great gates clanged shut, d the rest of the army swung into line.

Through all the principal streets of Seoul the great procession swept, then back into the palace gates. This, so far as the public was concerned, ended the ceremonies, but within a great feast had been prepared. There, covered with royal jewels and wearing a crown, Emily Brown sat at the Emperor’s right.1)

Emily Brown’s wedding was witnessed by more than 50,000 people. Once the crown was placed upon her head, she became known as Empress Om: Dawn of the Morning Light. She would live but another six years before passing awayㅡ the first American Empress.

Of course, the events above never actually happened because Emily Brown never existed. A great deal of the story comes from the Boston Sunday Post, one of the first American newspapers that carried the story which originated in Vienna, Austria.2) Other parts were added by me to make it more readable. The Austrian newspaper that began all of this was the Neve Freie Presse, which had published

1) Boston Sunday Post, Sept. 29, 1903.

2) Recently an Austrian friend informed me that he found a reference citing a German newspaper as being the first to report this story. He has not been able to find the actual newspaper, but once he does, it should give us another clue as to the source of this story.

[page 82] a long article entitled “Empress Brown.” It read in part:

The Almanach Gotha, that immutable text of Royal pedigrees, must have had an inkling of it [the proposed marriage between Brown and Kojong] when it broke its sternest rules this year and inserted a note under the chapter on Korea to say that Yi Ho Hoang, the thirteenth of his dynasty, having been left a widower in 1895，has raised a favorite to the rank of an empress.

It is known that Edla Hensler has been a morganitic queen of Portugal, that Lady Curzon is the, American queen of India, but Miss Brown is the first American to wear an imperial crown over 17,000,000 subjects.3)

Americans were shocked to hear of the event, but many readily believed it. One newspaper stated: “It seems incredible almost, that in this day that news of such widespread interest should be so delayed in reaching the native home of the young American woman.” What is even more incredible is that this story is still viewed by some people as fact. Checking the internet I was surprised to see several sites that are dedicated to listing and giving facts on the Korean nobility with Emily Brown Qm prominently displayed There was a concubine Qm that Emperor Kojong did raise in social stature and then later married, becoming his second wifeㅡbut she was Korean.

The reason that this story seems so captivating is because of the half-truths and outright lies that it contains. First, there were two American missionaries from Pennsylvania, a Dr. Hugh Brown and his wife, both from Union Gap, Pennsylvania, and they arrived in Seoul in 1891 much too early for this story. Second, the story claims that Dr. Peter Brown was the first American Presbyterian in Korea, but the first Presbyterian missionary and doctor to settle in Korea was Horace Allen (later the American Minister to Korea) in 1884. Third, the story claims that Emily Brown was born in Ohio, which coincidentally is the birthplace of Horace Allen. Perhaps another coincidence was that Allen’s niece, Mabel, had spent over a year in Korea and had certainly made a favorable impression on everyone she met. She was from Toledo, Ohio. Fourth, as stated above, Emperor Kojong did marry his concubine Om, who became his second wife, but she was a Korean woman. The idea that a Korean, let alone the Emperor, would marry a westerner at this point in Korea’s history is absurd. There was one Korean who did marry an American, a former nobleman of the Korean court who fled the country to the United States in

3) From a newspaper/magazine clipping titled “Vol. XXXVI No. 114,” October 24，1903，New York Public Library, Allen Archives.

[page 83]December 1884 after a failed coup against Kojong. This man was So Chae Pil, better known as Philip Jaisohn, who graduated from medical school in the United States and became a citizen of that country. He married George B. Armstrong’s (father of the U.S. railroad postal system) second daughter, and brought her to Korea when he returned in 1895, but they returned to the United States several years before this marriage occurred. Finally, the representatives of three of the major powers in the region, Japan, England, and the United States, were said to be present at the alleged wedding. In fact, Minister Horace Allen was in the United States with his wife and did not return until after the ‘supposed event.’ Later the United States legation denied the reported American wedding, and Allen wrote to his family complaining of newspaper reporters making up stories while waiting for the Russo-Japanese war to begin.

There are several possibilities as to how this story originated.

Some people who are familiar with the tale have suggested that Horace Allen might have been the source of this story in an attempt to generate support for the Koreans with his own government and with President Roosevelt. He most certainly possessed the knowledge to do so. However, knowing who was in Korea and what events were unfolding, why would he risk a scandal like this, especially as he was already fighting a smear campaign launched against him by Raymond Knimm.4) Allen knew that there were many missionaries in Korea from the Pennsylvania area, and many of the leading American businessmen and their employees were from Ohio, so why would he choose these locations for his fictitious protagonist’s home when they could be so easily disproved?

A newspaper man一probably European-based in Korea, wrote about Emperor Kojong’s wedding to Om. Several mistakes appeared in his report, made either by

4) Raymond Krumm was also from Ohio and came to Korea with his half-brother William to work as an engineer with the American mining concession and the American-owned Seoul-Chemulpo Railroad. Raymond fell in love with Allen’s niece and proposed marriage to her, but was rejected. He was convinced that Allen was responsible for it and swore to get revenge. In addition, he thought that Allen was the cause of a delayed payment from the Korean government for land that it had purchased from him. The relationship between Allen and Raymond grew steadily worse until it cumulated in a physical attack by Raymond. Allen was forced to defend himself with his umbrella. When Raymond’s contract was not renewed with the Korean government, he felt that Allen was behind it. When one of the Korean members of court, Yi Yong-ik, offered to pay for his ticket and renew his contract if Krumm would return to the United States and level charges against Allen and the Collbran and Bostwick Company, he readily accepted. Some of these charges were meddling in the affairs of Korea, graft, bribery, and the unlikely charge of murder. Krumm did manage to get a congressional investigation started, but Allen was founa innocent and Krumm was warned to quit causing trouble or he would be committed to an insane asylum.

[page 84]himself or by the editor at the Neue Freie Presse in Vienna. He might have used several sources and accounts and mixed them up. During the summer of 1903 Horace Allen and his wife were in Europe on their way to the United States, having crossed Russia via the Trans-Siberian Railroad. It is possible that Allen could have mentioned the names of certain individuals in Korea, and the editor or reporter got them mixed up while writing the story.

Another possibility, of course, is a reporter in Korea deliberately wrote a false report. But why? What was there to gain? The story could easily be checked, and the foreigners residing in Korea quickly denounced the story as mere fiction.

Was this story a deliberate hoax, or just a horrible mix-up? And who was the author? We will probably never know. The passage of time tends to distort facts and hide secrets.

Part of this article appeared previously in The Korea Times, but because of space constraints I was not able to include it in fall.5) I have submitted it to the RAS in hopes that its members might find some enjoyment in one of these strange incidents that occurred in Korea’s colorful past that are generally glossed over in history books.

5) Robert Neff, “The Tale of Korea’s American Empress,” The Korea Times, January 3, 2004