*Frank Carpenter’s Visit To Joseon*

Robert Neff

In the 1880s, articles about Korea were quite popular and often appeared in American newspapers and magazines but most of them were written by missionaries and the occasional traveler. It wasn’t until early 1886 when the first American journalist – Maximillian Taubles – arrived in Korea. Unfortunately, Taubles died of smallpox before he had the opportunity to publish any accounts of Korea. The first American journalist to actually write about Korea was Frank G. Carpenter in 1888.

Carpenter was a reporter for the *New York World* – many of his articles seem to have dealt with social events in the Washington D.C. area. Thus, it is not surprising that when the first Korean Minister to the United States, Park Jeong-yang, and his suite – including Horace N. Allen, the embassy’s secretary – arrived in the American capital on January 9, 1888, that he was there to interview them. Through the assistance of Allen, Carpenter got his story but he failed to get a photograph for the article because Park “shut his almond eyes when asked to look at the camera.” [[1]](#footnote-1) The Koreans informed Carpenter that they were too busy to pose for another picture. Undaunted, he resorted to hiring an artist to secretly sketch the minster as he ate in the hotel.This was the first image of the Korean representative to appear in American newspapers.[[2]](#footnote-2) It was Carpenter’s first encounter with Koreans but it wasn’t to be his last. Ten months later, he and his wife, Joanna, visited Korea as part of their “belated honeymoon trip around the world.” [[3]](#footnote-3)

In early October, the Carpenters sailed for seven days from Yokohama aboard a Japanese steamer to Jemulpo (modern Incheon) – the port city or entryway to Seoul some 26 miles away. [[4]](#footnote-4) Travel from the port city to the capital was usually done overland and, while it was a tiring journey – especially in the heat of summer or the bitter cold of winter, it was generally not dangerous. [[5]](#footnote-5) The only danger he and his wife faced were being locked out of the city:

I rode a savage little Korean pony, while [my wife] came in a chair, borne on the shoulders of four coolies, with four others jogging along awaiting their turn to relieve their comrades. Toward the end we had to push on at top speed for fear we might not reach Seoul before the gates closed. As it was, we got into the city just in time to see the heavy doors, covered with thick plates of iron, swing to behind us.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Because there were no hotels, they were forced to stay with Hugh Anderson Dinsmore, the American Minister to Korea. [[7]](#footnote-7) Carpenter described the legation as a compounded surrounded by a high wall and contained a half dozen one-story Korean buildings. The minister’s residence “had many rooms finished with the great varnished beams of Korean architecture and his parlor and dining room are arranged that they can be thrown together.” There was also a guest house behind the minister’s residence for the use of his friends. [[8]](#footnote-8) It was actually quite common for American visitors to stay at the legation and while it may have alleviated the loneliness of the minister, entertaining guests occasionally caused financial duress.

The Carpenters spent about two weeks in Korea – most of it with the American community in Seoul. “The Americans have the full swing” in Korea he proudly wrote and added that he had heard from the American minister that the Korean monarch favored the Americans.[[9]](#footnote-9) Carpenter’s Yankee pride probably did not endear him with the British nor did his decidedly negative view of the British government and its policies in the Far East. In Korea, the “British hog” was attempting to force its way into Korea through the support of China and its claim of sovereignty over the peninsula:

Great Britain has the most selfish foreign policy of any country on the face of the globe. It would be glad to throw Corea to China in order to keep it out of the hands of Russia, where, by the way, it is now in no danger of going. It would in this way be more easily able to control Corea's small foreign trade. The national honor of the British is a matter of shillings and pence. The English half-penny is bigger in their eyes than the comfort of this whole round earth. They forced the Chinese to become opium eaters to add a trifle to their national income, and it is an open secret in Japan that the adoption of English railways and the letting of contracts to English subjects was the price paid for their pretended support in treaty revision. [[10]](#footnote-10)

It is unlikely Carpenter spent any time with the British residents in Korea but fortunately for him, the largest contingent of foreigners living in Seoul was the Americans who dwelt in comfortable homes and were well-provided with provisions and all sorts of delicacies from Shanghai which arrived by ship every ten days or two weeks.[[11]](#footnote-11) Carpenter wrote: “They have a pleasant society among themselves, play tennis, have concerts, and as far as I can hear, are the most free from social bickering and strife of any of the foreign colonies of the Western Pacific.” [[12]](#footnote-12) The Americans seem to have been on their best behavior while the Carpenters were in Seoul because there was a great deal of bickering amongst the Americans – missionaries and advisors – and with other nationalities.[[13]](#footnote-13)

While the American community supposedly dwelt in peace amongst themselves, there were external dangers such as the baby riots that occurred earlier that summer when “some of the anti-foreign fanatics among the natives started the story that the foreign devils were feasting on Corean babies.” [[14]](#footnote-14) American troops were summoned to Seoul to help protect the Americans and the king issued a proclamation calling for anyone with evidence of foreigners eating babies to step forward and make their case. According to Carpenter:

[The king] called attention to the fact that foreigners were civilized and asked the question as to how civilized people could eat children. “But,” the proclamation went on, “If children are being stolen, let the information be filed before the proper authorities and the offenders will be arrested and if found guilty by evidence will be punished. A reward of forty thousand cash will be paid for each person so found guilty, to the informant, but in case the information is not supported by the evidence the informant shall be fined in a like amount for bringing the charge. This proclamation was signed with the royal seal and was pasted on the gates and on the great bell in the center of the city.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Fortunately there were no attacks upon the American community and the unrest soon died down.[[16]](#footnote-16)

**Business in Korea**

Carpenter also had the opportunity to meet with Walter D. Townsend (1856-1918), an American merchant in Jemulpo. Townsend, who Carpenter described as a “young bright Bostonian”, came to Korea in 1884 and established the largest American merchant shop in the country. [[17]](#footnote-17) Carpenter learned in his conversations with Dinsmore and the merchant that American products, such as American cotton, despite being more expensive than its British competition, were very popular. According to Townsend: “The average Corean spends all he makes on his back and his belly, and the people according to their incomes spend as much upon clothes as any people in the world.” [[18]](#footnote-18)

But not all American products were a success. American Kerosene was initially very popular but once Koreans discovered that it froze during the winter (it was low-grade oil) they went back to their own poor quality and expensive native oil.[[19]](#footnote-19) There was also the problem associated with collecting money from products sold. “Business with [Koreans] has to be done largely upon the credit system, and they think nothing of forgetting to meet their payments at the time they are due.” [[20]](#footnote-20)

As for Korean businesses, Carpenter denounced them as a “parody”. [[21]](#footnote-21) The stores were small – usually no more than little booths crowding the street or small huts – and the largest of these shops were generally located on Bell Street (Jongno) near the great bell “which is rung in the morning for the opening of the gates of the city.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Describing these “curious stores” he wrote that they surrounded an oblong court of some fifty feet in length and twenty feet wide. “If you would take one of the boxes used for the packing of a good-sized piano and stand it on end, make a curtain for the front, and line the inside with shelves, you have about the size and style of one of these stores.” [[23]](#footnote-23) In front of the little stores were shelves about two feet wide and upon which the merchants, dressed in white clothing and wearing broad-brimmed hats tied to their heads with ribbons running from under their chins, sat on their heels and smoked four-foot long pipe as they dealt with their customers. Not all of the goods for sale were visible to the potential buyers and would only be brought out, one by one, as the customers inquired about them.

The inventory of the stores was modest – the entire contents could have been purchased for about ten American dollars. But the merchants displayed attitudes of indifference to whether their customers purchased their goods or not. They were especially reluctant to sell large quantities of goods and, as Carpenter later wrote in his book, “the more goods you want, the higher the price they will ask. You may get one pair of shoes, for instance, for fifty cents, but if you want a hundred, the merchant will be very sure to charge you at least a dollar a pair, on the plea that if he sold all his goods he could not keep his store open.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

But there were not many goods manufactured in Korea that he felt were worth buying. “The Koreans are good workers in brass, and this is one of the few things that you care to carry away from the city. They make also very fine mats, and their fans are worth taking. The best of all things are made for the King, and it is only through him or one of his officials that you can get the best product of Korean workmen.” [[25]](#footnote-25)

But doing business transactions in Korea was greatly hampered by its coinage system:

The unit of money is the copper or brass coins known as the cash of which it takes more than 1,300 to make a Mexican dollar, worth here seventy-five cents.[[26]](#footnote-26) It cost me in the neighborhood of 50,000 cash to travel from the sea coast to the capital and back, and it is the custom in traveling in the interior of Corea to take an extra pack horse along to carry your money. The people outside of the three sea ports know nothing of silver and gold, and one of the common sights near Fusan, which is the southern port of the country, is a coolie laded down with a bushel or so of these copper coins, which he carries upon his back. Each coin has a square hole in it, and the common way of putting them up is in strands of hundreds strung on straw cords of about the thickness of a clothesline. Ten dollars is a load for a man, and thirty dollars would break down a mule if the journey was long.[[27]](#footnote-27)

His was a complaint shared by many Westerners – especially those traveling in the interior – along with the number of counterfeit coins that were in circulation.

**Food**

There was one group of merchants that Carpenter seemed to admire and found to be very enterprising – the roasted chestnut vendors who loudly advertised their goods through the streets of Seoul. “They are little boys with their hair parted in the middle like girls and braided in one tightly woven cord down the back. Their stock usually consists of about a quart of chestnuts and they have a little pan of coals over which they roast them while you wait.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

There were two commodities in Seoul that seemed to have a constant market: tobacco and food. Korea is “a land of smokers and the boys and men are seldom seen without pipes in their mouths”, declared Carpenter, and, shockingly, even the women were voracious smokers.[[29]](#footnote-29) “[The Koreans] have, it seems, an ever present craving for food and they make their bellies their gods. To eat, to smoke, to sleep and to squat is all outward appearance the chief employments of the people and to be fat in Corea is a sign of wealth.” [[30]](#footnote-30) Small restaurants were found scattered throughout the city and they served up dainties from raw fish to toasted liver and were served on small round tables and delivered to homes and businesses by boys who balanced them on their heads as they made their way through the busy streets.

Carpenter was generally willing to sample the local fare. While in Tokyo, he dined on slices of white uncooked trout that was covered with ice and served as one of the entrees. His Japanese friends devoured it with great gusto and Carpenter proclaimed it as “not bad to taste.”[[31]](#footnote-31) But in Korea he was very reluctant. “Such dishes as I saw were not at all appetizing and everything was seasoned highly with red peppers.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Everything had red peppers on it. “[It is] not uncommon for the fishermen to take a bottle of pepper sauce along with them and to eat a fish as they take it from the hook, sprinkling a bit of red hot chili over it, and eating it down before cleaning anything off except the scales.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Even if red peppers did not grace it, he was in no hurry to sample it. Koreans are “by no means particular as to the manner in which their fish and meats are served,” and that entrails were sold in the markets and taken home and eaten. “[A] common dish at a big dinner is a chicken baked feathers, entrails and all and served whole on the table.” [[34]](#footnote-34)

According to him, food played such a key role in Korean society that “a big stomach is an honor, and the very small children in the country districts, in the summer, who, I blush to say, rarely wear more than a little jacket coming down two inches below the arm pits, are, in nine cases out of ten, pot-bellied. The skin of their abdomens is stretched like a drum head, and a leading authority on Corean life says that mothers, in order to increase the size of the stomachs of their babies, stuff them day after day with rice, paddling them on the stomach to press down the contents to make room for more.” [[35]](#footnote-35)

It is interesting to note that after Carpenter returned to the United States he visited the National Museum in Washington D.C. in order to write an article about how people in the Far East coped with the heat of summer. This is what he wrote concerning Korea:

The Korean gentleman has a wicker-work shirt which keeps his clothes away from the body and acts as a sort of ventilator, lying between his abdomen and his gown. He has wicker cuffs which run from his wrist to his elbow, and which are made of the finest of stiff straw. These keep the sleeves away from the person, and the Korean embassy at Washington is the coolest of all the legations.

It is from these wicker bustles worn over the belly that the Koreans get their reputation of being such a fat race. They are fat, but not half so fat as is supposed. It is this wicker arrangement that increases their apparent avoirdupois, and as fatness in Korea is a sign of wealth, there is no hesitancy shown by a thin man in trying to make himself look like the fat man in the dime museum.[[36]](#footnote-36)

The wicker clothing not only provided comfort but also status in a land that valued fatness. A lot has changed since then.

**Advisors and Teachers**

Merchants, missionaries and diplomats weren’t the only Americans Carpenter encountered, he also met the military advisors and teachers brought to the peninsula to help educate young Korean men. The American military advisors were General William McEntyre Dye, Colonel Edmund H. Cummins, Major John Grigg Lee, and Captain John Henry Nienstead.[[37]](#footnote-37) Carpenter met “the leading Generals of Korea” several times and learned through them that the Korean army had 4,000 men in Seoul (500-600 guarding the palace) and 8,000 scattered throughout the country. There was no cavalry. The soldiers in the capital were the best equipped and were armed with 2,000 Remington rifles while the troops in the interior were armed with old muzzle-loaders of different makes. According to them, the army had no cavalry and troops of the city are the best armed of the soldiers. They have 2,000 Remington rifles, and the others of the troops have old muzzle-loaders of different makes. The advisors’ role in reorganizing the military was hampered by a large number of Korean officials who “worships the things of China, and think the Asiatic civilization is the only one in the world.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Despite the opposition, the Americans were able to organize “a school of about 80 scholars” – all the sons of nobles who were “drilled twice a day in the palace grounds.”[[39]](#footnote-39) But government policies were not the only obstacles they faced. When the cadets were introduced to the new uniforms of foreign-cut pantaloons, vests and leather shoes, 14 of them refused to wear them. It was only after they were told that they would not be able to attend the academy that they relented.

Carpenter attended a review of the cadets and noted that “they marched very well but their evolutions were not those of war, and were, it seemed to me, of little practical value in a military sense. They were more a series of gymnastic exercises than anything else, and of great advantage, I doubt not, in developing the muscles.” [[40]](#footnote-40)

Koreans were experts with bows and Carpenter had a chance to witness their prowess when he visited the archery grounds of the Mulberry palace with Colonel Cummins. “The distance between the palace where the arches stood and the target was fully 300 yards, and the judges had such confidence in the accuracy of the shots that they had their seats within five feet of the bull's eye.”[[41]](#footnote-41) While they may have been accurate with bows, their skill with rifles was lacking and they could not hit a barn door at 100 yards with more than two shots out of five. [[42]](#footnote-42)

As for the old army, Carpenter had even less praise. The soldiers he met were “dressed in Zouave pantaloons, with heavily padded shoes and stockings; a blouse waist with big sleeves, and black hats, which set on the crowns of their heads. The color of their dress is blue or purple, faced with red, and they tie their hats on under their chins. They are not dangerous-looking men by any means…” [[43]](#footnote-43) And yet, in another article, Carpenter claims that one of the soldiers sent out to escort him was “very fierce looking.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Carpenter had a short conversation with the commander of the army, General Han, who he described as “a bright young fellow of 33 … dressed in a long gown and a horse-hair hat … [and] bore on the front of his gown a piece of square embroidery representing the royal tiger.” [[45]](#footnote-45) The general asked Carpenter some questions about the military and seemed to have an active interest in improving his own. Other generals were not. They were the “most pompous” of Korean officials declared Carpenter and gave this anecdote as evidence:

One of these silk-gowned, black horse hair hatted Corean generals was going up one of the hills about the capital the other day. He had two men behind him to push him and two others held his arms, when General Dye, who by the way is twice the man's age, walked by him with a springing step and asked him as he passed if he expected to have that retinue with him in battle. It took some time for the Corean to appreciate the sarcasm in this remark, but it finally crept through his top knot that among the Western people, that laziness and inability were not marks of honor and the next time the two came together the yang ban general walked alone. [[46]](#footnote-46)

Carpenter was also interested in Korean education. He visited a Korean traditional school visited presided over by a very imposing-looking teacher who sat on the floor, wearing a bright gown, a cap of black horsehair upon his head and glasses with lenses the size of Mexican silver dollars. “His scholars squat about on straw mats studying their lessons out loud. They sway themselves back and forth as they sing out again and again the words they are trying to learn, all shouting at once. If one stops, the teacher thinks he is not studying, and calls him up for a whipping.” [[47]](#footnote-47) Their chief subject was to learn “by heart the sayings of the great Chinese scholars.” [[48]](#footnote-48)

Seoul, at the time the Carpenters were there, had just hosted the literary examinations at the palace and those who had passed their tests took to the streets of Seoul “on horseback with their retinues. They were dressed in the gayest of trappings, and each had a crier and band. They made the ordinary people get out of their way, and they took the town in like a gang of cowboys on a raid.” He denounced them as the “curse of Korea.”

But changes were coming to education as well as the military. In the summer of 1886, Dazell A. Bunker, Homer B. Hulbert and George G. Gilmore arrived in Korea from the United States. They began instructing young Korean men using American schooling techniques and enjoyed a degree of success:

I visited today the king's royal school for the teaching of young Corean nobles on the American plan. I saw about forty bright young men sitting in a room before desks that might have been used in an American college, and using English books. I heard their superintendent, Professor Bunker, address them in a lecture in English, and could see that they understood what he said, though he talked very fast. I was asked to make a speech to them, and the few words I uttered brought forth some English words in reply. Each student had his big round hat on his head and these school boys all wear their hats in the school room. Professor Bunker tells me there are many bright minds among them, and I learn that many of the pupils are of the royal family and that all are the sons of nobles. The best of them when educated will probably be sent by the king to serve in his diplomatic service aboard.[[49]](#footnote-49)

This fascination with Western education would lead to other schools being formed in the 1890s run by Germans, French, English and Russian teachers. In the 1890s a number of young noblemen (including one of King Gojong’s sons) were also sent to the United States to study.

**Observations of Korean Society**

Carpenter’s observations were often mixed with a degree of smugness and while much of what he wrote about was based on his own observations, a part of it was influenced by others – including William E. Griffis. He seems to have especially taken pleasure of describing Korean men – especially the noblemen:

I wish I could show you a Korean noble. He is the gaudiest creature on the planet, and the richer he becomes the gaudier he gets. He dresses in silks of the brightest colors, wears a pair of yellow spectacles, the glasses of which are as big around as the top of a coffee-cup, and has an army of retainers to take care of him. These hold him up as he walks, and when he rides one leads his pony and two go on each side of him to steady him. He holds on to the front of his saddle. He has a band of howling musicians who trot along in front of him, and tell the poorer devils of the race to get out of the way. He prides himself on doing nothing, and some of these nobles have 100 servants in their households. They own all the land of Korea, and they hold all the offices. They squeeze the poorer farmers, and suck the blood out of the country. Their chief business seems to be squatting on their heels, and there are but a few of them who are well educated. [[50]](#footnote-50)

His contempt went beyond their clothing and work ethics. Carpenter, who was slightly built, very animated and a “blonde of the most violent type,” possessed a thick moustache which he apparently took some degree of pride in.[[51]](#footnote-51) He disparagingly described the Koreans as having moustaches like a baseball game – “having nine hairs on each side and one in the middle for the umpire” – and noted that Koreans, if they had beards, were usually thin and straggling. [[52]](#footnote-52) As for their hairstyles:

The boys of Korea dress their hair like the school girls of America: they part it in the middle and wear it in long braids down their backs. They are not considered men until they are married, and it is at this time they are permitted to wind up their hair into a knot on the top of their heads and put it under their hats. One of the most insignificant and contemptible specimens of manhood in the far East is a Korean boy of 40, with his hair parted in the middle, trailing in a braid below his waist. He is kicked around as though he were 6, because he has as yet got no wife to make a man of him. [[53]](#footnote-53)

Carpenter further declared that there were no barbershops in Korea and that the Koreans – men and women - saved “the combings of their hair and the parings of their nails, in order that they may be buried with them when they die.” [[54]](#footnote-54) This wasn’t quite true. Hair and nails were often saved and burned at the front gate of their homes on the New Year so as to protect themselves from malevolent spirits and disease.[[55]](#footnote-55) But not all hair was burned. Some was used to wrap goods within Korea while quite a bit of hair was exported to Japan where some of it might have been exported to Europe.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Like many early visitors, Carpenter noted the strange tapping or pounding sounds that could be heard at all hours of the day and throughout the night. [[57]](#footnote-57) The sound was caused by women ironing their families’ clothing “on a wooden block, and by pounding them with a mallet or stick of about the length of a rolling pin.”[[58]](#footnote-58) Women were, according to Carpenter, kept penned up in their homes attending to their household duties – the primary one being laundry. The views he espoused were similar to those of earlier writers concerning Korean women and their role in society:

Among the lower classes in Korea the women do the most work. They carry the heaviest loads in going to market, and they are supposed to never allow their faces to be seen by any other man than their husband. The touch of a strange man, even when no evil intent accompanies it, is thought to be pollution; and it is said that fathers have killed their daughters and husbands their wives when strange men have touched them with their fingers. The husband may be as unfaithful as he pleases, but if the wife falls from virtue the husband can divorce her, drag her before the magistrate and have her whipped. After such divorces she becomes the property of the judge, who gives her as a concubine to one of his servants. This slavery is the most horrible known to the civilized world, and laws of Korea give the wives and children of criminals to the judges who pass upon their cases. They act as slaves and do the most menial duties. The condition of the females under such circumstances is most horrible. They are at the mercy of the officers and the lowest servants of the court, and are hired or sold as these judges desire. [[59]](#footnote-59)

Carpenter explained, “Slavery exists to some extent in Corea, but it is more a serfdom than such slavery as we had years ago in the South.”[[60]](#footnote-60) The number of slaves was declining but he speculated that slavery would continue for some time to come because of “the conditions of labor and government.”[[61]](#footnote-61) While criminal acts could lead to a life of slavery, so too, could acts of kindness: “[F]oundlings, when picked up and taken care of, become the slaves of those who take them.”[[62]](#footnote-62) Children, if we are to believe the knowledge provided to Carpenter, were especially vulnerable to slavery:

The selling of children is, however, not uncommon in Corea, and I am told that many are exported to China. Good, fat, well-disposed babies bring from $5 to $20 apiece, and a father has a perfect right to sell his children. Babies are sometimes bought for adoption and as to the girls, they are sold for purposes of which the less said the better. [[63]](#footnote-63)

Desperation also led to slavery. Men and women sometimes sold or gave themselves into slavery and farmers were “practically the slave of the tax-gatherer.”[[64]](#footnote-64) He was convinced that the Korean nobility were to blame for the poor conditions of the country.

**An Audience with the Royal Family**

Prior to leaving Korea, Carpenter was granted an audience with King Kojong whom he described as having “the best qualities of his ancestors” and “one of the most progressive of the Asiatic rulers.” [[65]](#footnote-65)

Their procession to the palace was a colorful affair. Dinsmore and Carpenter both wore “high hats, dress shirts, and swallow-tail coats [while] the servants sent from the palace to attend [them] were dressed in white gowns, belted in at the waist with sashes of green.” [[66]](#footnote-66) They were conveyed in two chairs – Carpenter’s was covered with navy blue silk and Dinsmore’s was green – and each borne by eight “big-hatted Corean coolies and whole escorted by twelve of the King’s soldiers” who “wore blue coats and plum-coloured trousers, and from the back of their black fur hats streamed tassels of the brightest vermilion, each of which was as big as a fly brush.”[[67]](#footnote-67) In addition, they were accompanied by two splendidly-dressed nobles who were to act as their interpreters.

The procession made its way through the streets of Seoul with the attendants warning pedestrians to get out of the way for great men were coming.[[68]](#footnote-68) Naturally this elicited a great deal of curiosity. Carpenter wrote, “Groups of white-clad, almond-eyed, yellow-faced men squatting in the streets stopped their smoking as we passed. Women with green cloaks thrown over their heads scurried along to get out of the way” and even grooms leading nobles on their horses paused in respect.[[69]](#footnote-69)

When they arrived at the palace they dismounted at the gate and then walked to the reception hall. Carpenter claimed that no one, other than the king, was allowed to enter the palace while being borne in a chair but this wasn’t accurate. The Chinese representatives often rode their chairs into the palace.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Escorted by “two of the greatest generals of the Corean army”, they were led to “a long, one story, tiled building with [a] great overhanging roof upheld by massive beams, which showed in all the natural beauty of the wood. A Brussels carpet covered the floor, tables like those you eat from at home were in the center of the hall and upon these were plates of cakes, which might have been made at an American baker shop, and arranged around the table were glasses of champagne.”[[71]](#footnote-71) Here they drank with the Korean ministers while awaiting their 4 p.m. audience with the king:

They were all clad in their court dresses, and the head of each showed a top-knot shining through its fine Corean cap of horse hair, with great wings flapping out at the sides. They had gowns of fine materials of various colors, which fell from the neck nearly to their feet, and their feet were shod with great boots, which made each look as though he had the gout and had wrapped up his feet for the occasion. The most striking feature of their costume, however, was a stiff hoop like belt, which ran around the body just below the arm pits, and which was so big that it came out about six inches from the dress. These belts are emblems of rank. They were about three inches wide, and they were plated with a great number of small squares fastened by joints. On some of the belts these squares were of gold, on others they were silver, and on others they were of green jade or other precious stones.[[72]](#footnote-72)

The hats that they wore captured Carpenter’s attention. He was told, as they sipped champagne, that the flapping wings symbolized the quick receipt of the king’s orders and the owner’s desire to fulfill them.[[73]](#footnote-73)

When they were finally brought before the king, Carpenter was clearly impressed with the Korean monarch who looked him in the eye while they talked. In his article, Carpenter described the king as:

[A] man that would attract attention anywhere; not over five feet high. He weighs perhaps 125 pounds and his bright, black almond eyes sparkle with intelligence. He has, like most Coreans, a very thin moustache and straggling chin whiskers of black. He has a pleasant smile, good well-kept feathers and his face is oval and the color of a rich Jersey cream. His hands are very small and delicate and he has no pompous airs about him. His hair was combed in a Corean top-knot and upon his head was the royal cap of dark blue color. This was of open work and I did not notice that it had the butterfly flaps of his ministers. His costume was a gown of brilliant red or scarlet satin which came up close around the neck and which bore upon the breast a square of embroidery, in gold, of the royal dragon. He stood easily during the talk and he did not look to be over 32 years of age, though I am told he is 36. He talked in a simple manner in one of the sweetest voices I have ever heard.[[74]](#footnote-74)

The audience was a pleasant one and Carpenter would later claim to be the first western journalist to have an audience with the king but he neglected to note Henry Norman (1858-1939), an Englishman working for *Pall Mall Gazette*. Norman was also in Seoul at the same time and was staying at the British legation. Norman’s audience was at the end of October and Carpenter’s seems to have been just prior to his departure in mid November.[[75]](#footnote-75)

After his audience with the king, Carpenter was granted a short and “rather tame” audience with 14-year-old Crown Prince Sunjong. While the king looked younger than his actual age, Sunjong appears to have looked older. Carpenter guessed he was about 16 and noted that the boy was taller than his father but his face lacked his father’s strength and his ability to rule. Sunjong, dressed in strawberry-colored silk and attended by two eunuchs, “expressed a kindly feeling” for the United States. [[76]](#footnote-76) Carpenter’s description of Sunjong was far more complimentary than Henry Norman’s:

I was presented to the Crown Prince, a flabby-faced youth of about nineteen, bloated with dissipation, turning helplessly to two horrible eunuchs who stood beside him, for what he should say to us, bobbing up and down and almost slobbering in his pitiable physical nervousness – a dreadful object, more fit so far as looks go to occupy a seat in an asylum for idiots than a throne.[[77]](#footnote-77)

Neither Norman nor Carpenter had an audience with the Korean queen as she was “never seen by men” and was surrounded by several hundred court ladies and attended by a “number of eunuchs among the regularly appointed officers of the court.”[[78]](#footnote-78) The queen wore fine silk Korean clothing and had many beautiful diamonds and carried a diamond-studded chatelaine watch. He also noted that the queen “smokes American cigarettes by the thousand.”[[79]](#footnote-79) How he came by this knowledge is unclear but perhaps it was from Lillias H. Underwood who had served as the queen’s physician. According to her, all of the palace women smoked cigarettes and were slightly put off by her refusal to join them in this vice when she visited the palace. [[80]](#footnote-80)

**Closing**

The Carpenters left Korea around November 11, 1888. Prior to leaving he wrote: “I feel that I have had but a taste of Corea, but that taste has shown me that there is here a rich meal for the man whose soul longs for things unknown and unwritten.”[[81]](#footnote-81) That taste lingered for he continued to be interested in Korean affairs even after he returned to the United States. He maintained contact with residents in Seoul – including Horace N. Allen, who later became the American Minister – and wrote several books about his journeys. He later returned to Korea in 1894 (in time for the Sino-Japanese War) and in 1908, this time accompanied by his daughter. His final voyage to the Far East was in 1924 and he most likely would have visited Korea had death not claimed him in China.

Carpenter’s writings are of interest because he is one of the few early journalists to travel to Korea during its final three decades and write extensively about his observations. Through his writings we can witness the turbulence of this period – the power of the Chinese influence in the 1880s, the struggle for Korea by the Japanese and Chinese in the 1890s, and the complete dominance by the Japanese in the 1900s.

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1. Apparently Park was not that photogenic. One reporter described him as not being very handsome but his face has an intelligent look.” “Pak Chung Yang”, *Daily Alta California*, November 26, 1888, p. 1; Frank G. Carpenter, *Japan and Korea* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1927), pp. 266. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Frank G. Carpenter, *Japan and Korea*, pp. 266-267. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.* p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. There is some question as to which ship they sailed on. They are listed as being aboard the *Higo Maru* –which stayed one night in Nagasaki and was bound for Tientsin – and the *Saikio Maru* which only took on passengers and cargo at Nagasaki and continued on its journey.”Shipping Intelligence”, *The Rising Sun & Nagasaki Express*, October 10, 1888, p.4; Frank G. Carpenter, *Japan and Korea*, p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Carpenter asserts that up until the late 1860s through early 1870s, “there were so many tigers in the forests between Chemulpo and Seoul that travelling over the road from port to capital was extremely dangerous. And so the ruler of that day ordered that a strip three miles wide be cleared on each side of the roadway” so as to destroy the cover of these great cats. Despite his claims, I have only found one reference in contemporary English accounts of someone hunting or encountering a tiger on the road. Frank G. Carpenter, *Japan and Korea*, p. 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hugh Anderson Dinsmore (1850-1930) of Arkansas served as the American Resident Minister and Consul General in Seoul from April 1, 1887 until May 25, 1890. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Frank G. Carpenter, “Americans in Asia”, *The Salt Lake Herald*, April 21, 1889, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Frank G. Carpenter, “Americans in Asia”, *The Salt Lake Herald*, April 21, 1889, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For some examples of these early conflicts see Robert D. Neff, Sunghwa Cheong, *Korea through Western Eyes* (Seoul, South Korea: SNU Press, 2009), pp. 24-24, 87-106 and 203-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. For more information on the Baby Riots see Robert D. Neff, Sunghwa Cheong, *Korea through Western Eyes* (Seoul, South Korea: SNU Press, 2009), pp. 107-118. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. For more information see Harold F. Cook, *Pioneer American Businessman in Korea* (Seoul, South Korea: Royal Asiatic Society – Korea Branch, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. John Grigg Lee, an American advisor to the Korean military, claimed that both Standard Oil a Russian oil were sold on the streets of Seoul and that “Coreans burn it and bring their little lamps to be filled at the trading stores - lamps that are often nothing but old aniline dye bottles, holding half a gilt with rough, tin burners on top.” “Light of the World”, *Davenport Morning Tribune*, September 13, 1889, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Frank G. Carpenter, “Capital of Korea”, *The National Tribune*, December 20, 1888, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Frank G. Carpenter, *Carpenter’s Geographical Reader – Asia* (New York, NY: American Book Company, 1897), p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Frank G. Carpenter, “Capital of Korea”, *The National Tribune*, December 20, 1888, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Mexican silver dollars were commonly used throughout Asia and were equivalent to 0.75 USD. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Frank G. Carpenter, “Audience with the royal family”, *Morning Oregonian*, (Portland, Oregon) January 6, 1889, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Frank G. Carpenter, “Fish Eating in Korea”, *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) November 17, 1889, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Frank G. Carpenter, “Fish Eating in Korea”, *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) November 17, 1889, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Frank G. Carpenter, “Summer in the East”, *Pittsburg Dispatch*, June 29, 1890, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Dye and Cummins had served as an officers in the Union and Confederate armies (respectively) during the Civil War. Lee was a coroner by profession but had also served as an aide in the Pennsylvania Militia and Nienstead had served in the American navy in the Far East and then as the constable at the American legation in Kobe, Japan. For more information on the early American military advisors see Robert D. Neff, Sunghwa Cheong, *Korea through Western Eyes* (Seoul, South Korea: SNU Press, 2009), pp. 87-106. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Frank G. Carpenter, “Capital of Korea”, *The National Tribune*, December 20, 1888, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Frank G. Carpenter, “Capital of Korea”, *The National Tribune*, December 20, 1888, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Frank G. Carpenter, “Capital of Korea”, *The National Tribune*, December 20, 1888, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Frank G. Carpenter, *Carpenter’s Geographical Reader – Asia* (New York, NY: American Book Company, 1897), p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Frank G. Carpenter, “Capital of Korea”, *The National Tribune*, December 20, 1888, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. “Frank G. Carpenter at home”, *The Salt Lake Herald* (Salt Lake City) November 09, 1890, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Frank G. Carpenter, “Barbers in Korea”, *Syracuse Standard* (Syracuse, New York) November 24, 1889, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Choe Sang-su, *Annual Customs of Korea* (Seoul, South Korea: Korea Book Publishing Company, Ltd, 1960), p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. In Pusan – “Human hair figures for $1,512, and it may be noted that the Corean women's hair is recognized as of greater length and fineness, and therefore fetching more in the market, than that of Japanese.” “Trade Report of Corea, 1883”, *The North China Herald*, October 15, 1884, pp. 414-420; *The North China Herald*, June 18, 1886, p. 638; William R. Carles, *Life in Corea* (London, UK: MacMillan, 1888), pp. 77-78. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Frank G. Carpenter, *Carpenter’s Geographical Reader – Asia* (New York, NY: American Book Company, 1897), pp. 87-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Frank G. Carpenter, “Women in Korea”, *The Daily Independent* (Monroe, Wisconsin) January 9, 1890, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Frank G. Carpenter, “Women in Korea”, *The Daily Independent* (Monroe, Wisconsin) January 9, 1890 p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Frank G. Carpenter, “Women in Korea”, *The Daily Independent* (Monroe, Wisconsin) January 9, 1890 p. 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Frank G. Carpenter, “Capital of Korea”, *The National Tribune*, December 20, 1888, p. 2; Frank G. Carpenter, “Audience with the royal family”, *Morning Oregonian*, (Portland, Oregon) January 6, 1889, p. 1; Frank G. Carpenter, *Japan and Korea*, p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Frank G. Carpenter, *Japan and Korea*, pp. 257-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Carpenter seems quite pleased with his and the minister’s chairs but others weren’t. According to a letter from Seoul and published in an American newspaper: “Concerning the sedan chairs, however, the natives have a curious saying when they see a foreigner's chair. If it be a brand new one it is a missionary who is coming; if only respectable, it belongs to one of the foreign Legations. If old and shabby, it must be that of the American Minister.” *The Van Wert Republican* (Van Wert, Ohio), March 21, 1889, p. 6; Frank G. Carpenter, *Japan and Korea*, p. 258; Frank G. Carpenter, “Audience with the royal family”, *Morning Oregonian*, (Portland, Oregon) January 6, 1889, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Dinsmore translated the cry as: “Get out of the way, you villains. Don’t you see these great men coming?” [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Frank G. Carpenter, “Audience with the royal family”, *Morning Oregonian*, (Portland, Oregon) January 6, 1889, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. It appears this wasn’t known to most of the Western and Japanese diplomats until September 1893 at an audience with the king. After the diplomats had dismounted and were walking across the courtyard for the audience they suddenly found themselves in a torrential downpour. A few were able to take cover and spare themselves from being drenched but they still had to navigate through the mud to the reception room. They were shocked when the Chinese Minister and his consul, still in their chairs, were left off at the reception room door. King Kojong then received them all in an audience – the Japanese and Western representatives muddy and disheveled while in contrast the Chinese were clean. The humiliated diplomats then demanded equal privileges as the Chinese – they threatened that they might be forced to decline further invitations to audiences with the king. The Korean government eventually built a covered path from the gate to the reception hall, thus protecting the representatives from the elements but the Chinese still were granted the right to enter the palace in their chairs until the Sino-Japanese War. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Frank G. Carpenter, “Audience with the royal family”, *Morning Oregonian*, (Portland, Oregon) January 6, 1889, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. It is interesting to note that Henry’s first published letter is dated October 31 where as Carpenter’s is November 10. *The Rising Sun & Nagasaki Express*, October 24, 1888, p. 2; Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions”, *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1; Norman Henry, “The Capital of Corea,” *The North China Herald*, March 8, 1889, pp. 290-292. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Frank G. Carpenter, “Audience with the royal family”, *Morning Oregonian*, (Portland, Oregon) January 6, 1889, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Norman Henry, “The Capital of Corea,” *The North China Herald*, March 8, 1889, pp. 290-292. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Lillias H. Underwood, *Fifteen Years Among the Top-Knots*, (New York, NY: American Tract Society, 1904), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Frank G. Carpenter, “First Impressions,” *Morning Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon) December 23, 1888, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)