

# Chosŏn Entering the International Arena: Three Witnesses

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**Abstract** The last decades of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) are remembered as a period of inner turbulences and competition between foreign powers over their dominance of the Korean peninsula. Yet, during the crucial period from the mid-1880s to the early 1900s, Chosŏn was considered ready to independently enter the international arena. In the roughly twenty-five years between the first treaties with the USA and European countries and 1905, when Japan took charge of Korea's foreign affairs, it sparked the interests of Western diplomats, adventurers, and travelers. The texts and images of three visitors during this period, Isabella Bird, Burton Holmes, and Jack London, present very different perspectives on Korea. Rather than seeking historical information, this study attempts to highlight these different views within their personal background and intentions. In addition to their publications, collections of unpublished photographs reveal a wider spectrum of experience and allow for a closer comparison between textual and visual representation.

**Keywords** Travel photography. Travelogue. Documentary film. Photography of Korea. Late Chosŏn. Russo-Japanese War. King/Emperor Kojong. Queen Myŏngsŏng. Isabella Bird Bishop. Burton Holmes. Jack London.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 Between Objective Description and Moral Judgement: Isabella Bird. – 3 Travel as Entertainment: Burton Holmes. – 4 A War Adventure: Jack London. – 5 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

The three 'cases' chosen for this study, Isabella Bird (married Bishop, 1831-1904), Burton Holmes (1870-1958) and Jack London (1876-1916), were prolific writers, enthusiastic photographers, and 'travelers of the

world'. They visited the Korean peninsula during a short but important historical period, between the 1880s and 1905, when Chosŏn was internationally recognized as an independent country. Early diplomatic exchange with the USA, the first non-Asian country with which Korea signed a treaty in 1882, had brought a Korean delegation to the United States. As a result, King Kojong 高宗 (r. 1864-1907) invited Percival Lowell (1855-1916) to Korea in the winter of 1883-84 and let him take photographs (Kwon 2011; Pai 2016).<sup>1</sup> Through its treaties with European countries signed during the mid-1880s, Chosŏn Korea attempted to step into the international arena, introduce new technologies, and modernize its political, economic, and social structures. These attempts failed all too often, due to inner conflicts and lack of foreign support, and were finally put to an end in 1905 when Japan took charge of Chosŏn's foreign policy. In 1910, Korea became a Japanese colony and thereby practically vanished from the world map. Between 1885 and 1905, however, Western diplomats, adventurers and travelers saw the peninsula as territory to be newly explored, and the fact that it was called the 'Hermit Kingdom' heightened the fascination of finding something 'picturesque' and 'exotic'.

A sense of Western superiority and colonialist attitude can easily be detected in almost any account of European and North American travelers to Asia of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. After all, it was the technological progress that provided them with their means of travel and equipment. Apart from steamships and railways, the camera, their favourite instrument for visualizing their adventures, was another blessing of the new age of progress. In addition, European imperial conquests, and usurpation of territory on other continents allowed for convenient facilities, such as hotels, and for dependable networks of communication with people at home. It is thus no wonder that they overall identified with the idea of 'Western' supremacy.

In addition, many contemporaneous accounts readily follow stereotypes or copy from unreliable sources. This is apparently not the case with the accounts by Bird, Holmes, and London of their travel to the Korean peninsula, as they convincingly report on personal experiences. However, they often differ to such a degree in observation and presentation that they almost appear to have visited three different countries. Therefore, rather than trying to evaluate the account of the three visitors as historical information, this study attempts to highlight their different perspectives onto Chosŏn Korea within their personal and public contexts. Through an analysis of their social and educational backgrounds, the contacts through which they acquainted themselves with the unknown country, and

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<sup>1</sup> See also Yizhou Wang's essay in this volume.

the motivation of their travel, it considers the visual and textual presentations not as reflections of Korean conditions but rather of their own conditions of seeing and not seeing, understanding, and not understanding. The selection of their published images gives an idea of what they thought appropriate to present to their specific audiences and the layout of their publications reveals how they and their publishers employed photographs as a means to cater to their audiences' expectations. Extant collections of unpublished images by all three photographers allow for a wider spectrum of investigation, even at a glimpse at what was held back. They also enable us to further enquire whether texts and images support each other or whether they convey different messages.

## 2 Between Objective Description and Moral Judgement: Isabella Bird

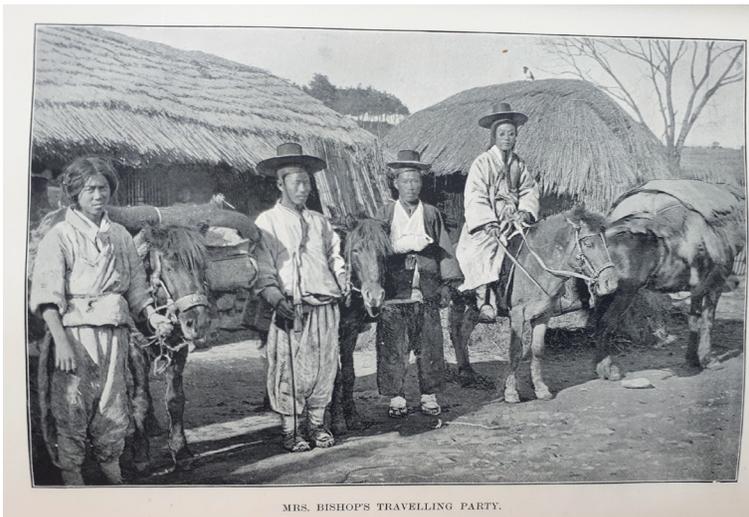
Isabella Bird visited Korea four times between January 1894 and March 1897 in order to, as she writes herself, "study the Mongolian races" (Bird Bishop 1898, 1: xi). She was already an elderly woman of sixty-three when she started out on this last great journey. Born into the family of a cleric that had formed her ideas of religious propriety and social empathy, Bird had started her travel adventures in her early twenties in the United States, resulting in her first major publication, *The English Woman in America*, in 1856. Although she never seems to have questioned the restrictive conventions of Victorian society, she found herself healthiest and strongest under the often extremely challenging conditions of her travels to the Sandwich Islands (Hawaii), the Rocky Mountains, Canada, Australia, and in 1878 for the first time to Asia: China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaya. Travel was also the remedy after falling into depression when her beloved sister died and after she lost her husband John Bishop. Her book *Korea and Her Neighbors: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Position of the Country*, published in 1898 in two different editions in London and New York, was the result of her last journey that brought her once more to Japan, Korea, and China.<sup>2</sup> In 1892, Isabella Bird became one of the first female members of the Royal Geographic Society and through acquaintances with other members learned the techniques of taking

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<sup>2</sup> Published in 1898, by Murray in London in two volumes and in one volume in the same year by Revell in New York, the two publications do not differ in text, but in chapter titles, the number of illustrations, and the layout of text and illustrations. Vol. 1 of the British edition has 12 woodblock printed illustrations and 10 photographs, and in vol. 2 has 15 engravings and 11 photographs. The US edition contains altogether only 12 engravings but all 21 photographs.



**Figure 1**  
Isabella Bird, *Korean Man, Wearing a Traditional Hat*. 1894-95. Albumen print. Courtesy of The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. MS.42033



**Figure 2** Isabella Bird, *Mrs. Bishop's Travelling Party*. 1894-95. Illustration from *Korea and Her Neighbors: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Position of the Country* (London: Murray, 1898). © Author

and developing photographs (Gartlan 2011; Barr 1970, 267). Of her photographs of Korea, a collection of twenty-one images is in the John Murray Archive of the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh.<sup>3</sup> About sixty photographs are extant at the Royal Geographic Society in London, available through Getty Images.<sup>4</sup>

Even today Isabella Bird's *Korea and Her Neighbours* is probably the most well-known account of that country by a Western visitor of the late nineteenth century. In fact, Jack London read it in preparation of his own trip to Korea in 1904. Although most comprehensive, it is also a curious book without proper structure: a collection of impressions with quick, often harsh judgements, vivid descriptions of personal encounters, scientific explanations, and statistics. Her descriptions of travel by boat and donkey into the Diamond Mountains and further on to Pyongyang, of the flora and fauna and her admiration of the landscape, are interspersed with accounts of unpleasant experiences at dingy inns and overcurious country folk. Her scientific explorations of nature are thought to result from early botanic excursions with her father. In addition, she had acquired medical training at a hospital in London before she set out for this second journey to the East and defined herself as medical missionary. The photographs that are still extant demonstrate her interest in the landscape, in people of different professions and social classes and her eagerness to provide a comprehensive picture of Chosŏn society. The *Korean Man, Wearing a Traditional Hat* [fig. 1], who was also part of her 'Travelling Party' [fig. 2], gives an idea of the 'documentary' character she sought in her photography. Standing at the side of a large tree trunk in front of a blurred landscape, it reminds us of studio photography, such as that of *Two Korean Women* which Isabella Bird must have purchased during her trip [fig. 3].<sup>5</sup> It is curious to see how the staged setting of the studio, that pretends to evoke real surroundings by arranging the women in front of a painted wallpaper, is recreated with the Korean man in an existing scenery, a double staging so-to-speak with a focus on documenting the native 'type' (Gartlan 2006). In other photographs by Isabella Bird people are similarly arranged in front of their shops, houses, a temple hall, or a school.

<sup>3</sup> The album is accessible online: <https://digital.nls.uk/isabella-birds-travel-photographs/archive/116740979#?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-1050%2C-190%2C4598%2C3785>.

<sup>4</sup> Mixed with photographs from China and Japan, the labels of these images are misleading. For example, Bird's photograph of King Kojong [fig. 4], published as woodblock print titled 'The King of Korea', is identified on Getty Images as 'A Korean noble, Japan, 1895': <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/search/photographer?assettype=image&family=editorial&photographer=Royal%20Geographical%20Society&phrase=Isabella%20Lucy%20Bishop&sort=best#license>.

<sup>5</sup> Another copy of the same photograph is preserved at the Ferenc Hopp Museum of Eastern Asiatic Arts in Budapest.



**Figure 3** Anonymous, *Two Korean Women*. 1894-95. Albumen print.  
Courtesy of The National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, MS.42033

Most important, perhaps, are Isabella Bird's audiences with King Kojong, Queen Myŏngsŏng 明成, aka Queen Min 閔 (1851-95), the crown prince, and the notorious Taewŏn'gun 大院君 (1820-98), the king's father, whose interferences in politics caused the struggling monarch fundamental problems, nationally and internationally (Bird Bishop 1898, 2: 40). Although not travelling in any diplomatic capacity, Isabella Bird brought official letters of recommendation along, which opened the gates of foreign legations and to the palace. Moreover, she became an eye-witness of developments on the peninsula at particularly crucial times, during and after the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95),



**Figure 4** Isabella Bird, *A Korean noble (King Kajong)*. 1894-95. Albumen print, 6 × 4.5 inches (15.2 × 11.4 cm). Courtesy of The Royal Geographical Society, London, RGS ref. S0022537

which resulted in Japan's victory and the end of Chinese suzerainty over Chosŏn, and before and after the queen's assassination on October 8, 1895. During her second visit to Korea in the winter of 1894/95, Bird was four times invited to audiences, and the king allowed her to take photographs of the palace and of himself (2: 39-45) [fig. 4].

Nearly all visitors to Korea at the time were men who, because of Chosŏn's particularly strong Confucian restrictions, could only meet with women of low social standing, female entertainers (*kisaeng*) and female servants. Isabella Bird, in contrast, had several private audiences with Queen Myŏngsŏng. She was introduced by Lillias Hor-

ton Underwood (1851-1921), an American medical doctor and close friend of the Queen's female physician. Mrs. Underwood, a Presbyterian missionary, also acted as medical advisor of the queen. Together with the Korean female physician who was always present at the queen's side, they apparently formed a network of women of a certain social standing and of political interests (Bird Bishop 1898, 2: 42-3). During her farewell audience with the royal couple, which took place in an air of secrecy, the king urged Bird to help upgrade diplomatic relations with Great Britain (Barr 1970, 289-90). The queen then sent a direct message to Queen Victoria which Isabella Bird cites in her book:

The Queen spoke of Queen Victoria, and said, "she has everything that she can wish - greatness, wealth, and power [...]. Does she ever in her glory think of poor Korea?" (Bird Bishop 1898, 2: 48-9)

Bird's interest in and compassion for the queen is attested by another passage:

She was surrounded by enemies, chief among them being the Tai-Won-Kun [...]. She fought with all her charm, shrewdness, and sagacity for power, for the dignity of her husband and son.

When she returned to Korea nine months later, Bird reports: "the Queen had been barbarously murdered and the King was practically a prisoner in his own palace" (2: 43 and 49). She devotes a whole chapter to the assassination of the queen and its aftermath. Apparently based on the accounts of the foreign residents, it reads like a dramatic first-hand eye-witness report (2: 73-4).

Isabella Bird met with women of all ranks of life, and by adding her own observations to her general descriptions of marriage customs and the life of country women she gives her text credibility and liveliness. Regarding women's education, for instance, she comments "the number of women who can read is estimated at two in a thousand", and on the seclusion of girls:

Girl children, even among the poor, are so successfully hidden away, that in somewhat extensive Korean journeys I never saw one girl who looked above the age of six. (2: 152)

Somewhat surprising, yet in line with her ideas of female education, is her verdict on those professional women who were considered lowest in social standing in Chosŏn society, the *kisaeng*:

The *gesang* [*kisaeng*] are trained from a very early age in such accomplishments as other Korean women lack, and which will ensure

their attractiveness, such as playing on various musical instruments, singing, dancing, reading, reciting, writing, and fancy work. As their destiny is to make time pass agreeable for men of the upper classes, this amount of education is essential, though a Korean does not care how blank and undeveloped the mind of his wife is. (2: 164-5)

Meeting with upper-class Korean women was in most cases an unpleasant experience. During her journey on the Han River, she was invited to the female quarters of a well-to-do household in a village. She writes:

I was surrounded by fully forty women, old and young, wives, concubines, servants, [...], but one and all were destitute of manners. They investigated my clothing, pulled me about. Took off my hat, untwisted my hair and absorbed my hairpins, pulled off my gloves, tried them on with shrieks of laughter. (1: 97-8)<sup>6</sup>

From our present-day point of view, it is obvious that in Korean eyes she must have made quite a show of herself:

So great was female curiosity that a number of women waded waist-deep after the boat to peer under the mats of the roof [...] some women presented themselves at the boat, having walked several *li* with a present of eggs, the payment for which was to be a sight of me and my poor equipments. (1: 105)

Yet, there is no indication in her book of any self-reflection on how strange she must have appeared to common Chosŏn people.

Unfortunately, among the roughly eighty photographs left behind by Isabella Bird, there is only the studio photograph of Korean women already mentioned. A few woodblock-printed illustrations were added to her descriptions of the relationship between husband and wife (1: 133, 135) and the social standing of women (2: 30, 149). However, no corresponding photographic prints can be found. The number of photographs and illustrations in Isabella Bird's books is comparatively small in comparison to the amount of text. They obviously play a minor role in her effort to convey concrete information. While her unpublished photographs add to the variety of subject matter, offering an overview of a city or landscape and showing people neatly arranged in front of the camera, they are of a documentary, impersonal character.

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<sup>6</sup> This household was adorned with French clocks, large German mirrors, and the host smoked foreign cigars and wore a diamond ring. Bird was invited to watch a circus in the courtyard. At another place, in a desperate attempt, she pretends to clean her revolver to frighten people off (1: 144).

### 3 Travel as Entertainment: Burton Holmes

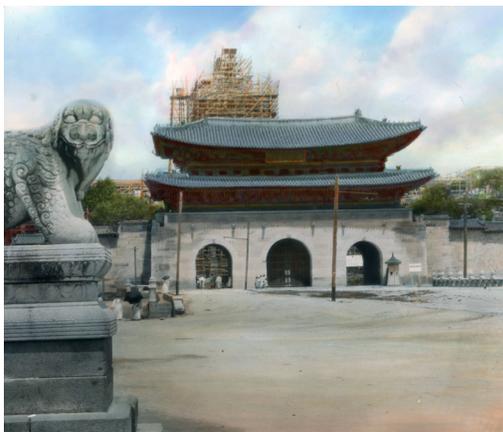
Burton Holmes, a 'tourist' by his own account, made travelling and lantern slide lectures his profession. He went to Korea in 1899, 1901, 1903, 1904, and probably again in later years during the colonial period [fig. 5] (Yecies, Shim 2011, 27).<sup>7</sup> Born into a wealthy entrepreneur family in Chicago in 1870, Holmes ventured on his first five-month trip to Japan in 1892. He usually travelled abroad in the summer and toured the United States during the winter, lecturing on journeys from Morocco to Sweden, Hawaii to the Philippines, China, Korea, Japan, Mexico, and on the Trans-Siberian Railway. When he moved from Chicago to New York in 1910, he decorated his apartment with his East Asian collection and called it 'Nirvana'. As a film pioneer, he shot documentaries for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. In 1930 he made Hollywood his second home and is still remembered on the Walk of Fame.

World expositions had during the nineteenth century sparked the appetite of the public for exotic places. Those who could not afford to go abroad enjoyed 'armchair travel', often in the form of book clubs (Hoganson 2007, 153 ff.). Holmes's lectures, into which he early on also introduced short documentary films, were successful over six decades, filling famous venues, such as Carnegie Hall in New York, Symphony Hall in Boston, and Orchestra Hall in Chicago (Caldwell 2006, 8-16). Of his 'travelogue' series more than 40,000 copies were sold.<sup>8</sup> Holmes is particularly known for finding ways of captivating his audience by giving them a continuous visual narrative in his performances on stage (Peterson 2013, 25). As film pioneer, he played a particularly important role in Korea shooting the first documentary film in Seoul in 1901 and performing the first private film screening in the palace in front of Emperor Kojong. Film historians have therefore called Burton Holmes "the forefather of cinema in Korea" (Yecies, Shim 2011, 30). Holmes's lecture slides are in the collection of the Department of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles. In addition, photographs, negatives, and films are preserved in the collection of the George Eastman Museum at the University of Rochester, USA. As was common practice at the time, Burton Holm-

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<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Genia Caldwell for sending me a manuscript with lecture notes in 2017, bearing the dates 1899, 1901 and 1903. The visit during the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 is documented by a story Holmes told the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, published on November 6, 1904 (Yecies, Shim 2011, 16). Two lantern slides of the new Chosun Hotel (finished in 1913), and the Government General Building under construction (completed in 1926) [fig. 5] must have been taken during colonial times.

<sup>8</sup> Because later editions appeared under the title *Burton Holmes Travelogues*, Holmes is said to have coined the word 'travelogue' in 1904. Yet, the contents and layout remained the same, except for a few lines added to photographs, as in the cases described below. See also Peterson 2013, 23 ff.

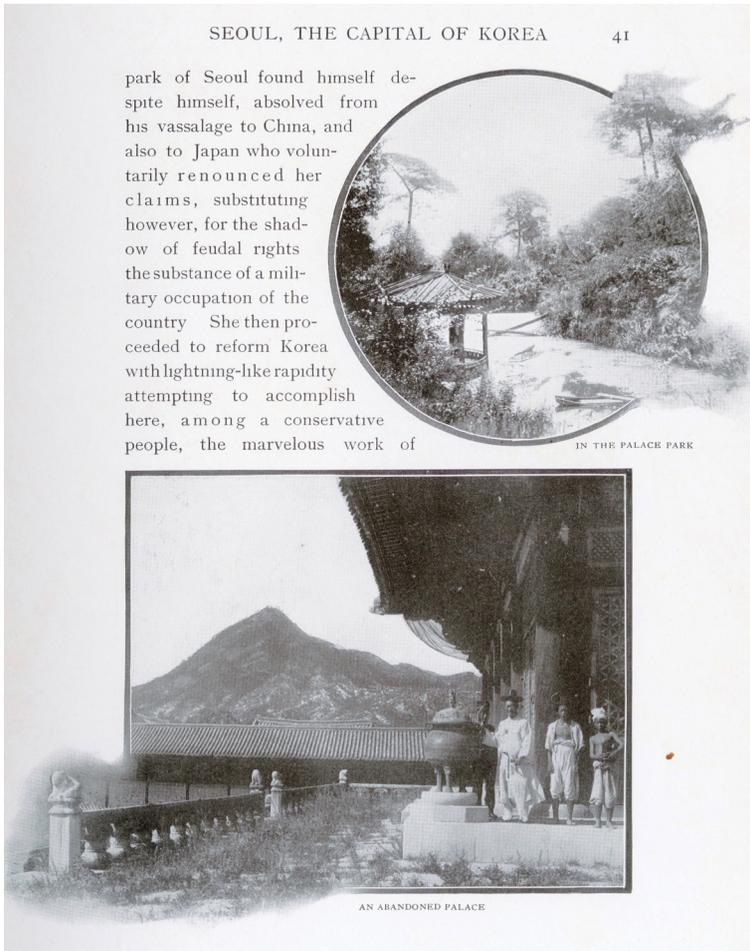


**Figure 5**  
Burton Holmes, *Government General Building under Construction*. Early 1920s. Hand-coloured lantern slide, 3.5 × 4 inches (8.3 × 10 cm). Courtesy of the Burton Holmes Collection, Department of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles

es also borrowed images taken by other photographers. From selected negatives he produced lantern slides, glass slides that were then hand-coloured (Caldwell 2006, 10-11).

Compared with Isabella Bird's meticulous efforts to provide readers with scientifically sound information Holmes's textual accounts of Korea's more recent history is superficial and partly incorrect. He gives a swift narrative of the latest events in Chosŏn politics, including the assassination of Queen Myŏngsŏng, but then relates the queen's family name, Min, to the Chinese Ming dynasty (Holmes 1901, 10: 47). Holmes also declares an older official on a studio photograph be the Taewŏngun, but it actually shows the portrait of the official and diplomat Cho Pyŏng-Sik 趙秉式 (1823-1907) (10: 43). Holmes's obvious negligence in providing reliable text is, however, complemented by his emphasis on visual representation. There is no page that goes without photographs, and through the layout – by sheer size, a special frame, or by 'bleeding' into the page – the visual impression takes priority over the text [fig. 6]. Similarly, his lantern slides are enhanced by careful coloration which occasionally give them a romantic touch but more often evoke the striking illusion of a real scene.

Although not as well-connected on the diplomatic level as Isabella Bird, Holmes did have contact with the US legation and with foreign residents (10: 52-65). In addition, a member of the royal household, Yi Chae-Sun 李載純 (1851-1904), became curious when Holmes filmed a street scene and introduced him to the king who then invited him to the private screening already mentioned. Yet, the most important source of information probably was his interpreter, Mr. Pak. The special respect they had for each other is testified by the frontispiece of his book, several lantern slides – one with Mr. Pak wearing Holmes's hat with a broad smile [fig. 7] – and a passage in his book:



**Figure 6** Page from Burton Holmes, *The Burton Holmes Lectures; with Illustrations from Photographs by the Author*, vol. 10 (Battle Creek: Little-Preston Co., 1901). © Author

Mr. Pak-Kee-Ho is the most picturesque cicerone it has ever been my fortune to employ. He is the best dressed guide that ever smiled into my camera. He speaks English that is eminently comprehensible. [...] We liked to be seen with Mr. Pak, although we always felt ashamed of our crude, inartistic, and convenient clothes, for he wears exquisite attire immaculately laundered. [...] Mr. Pak is a man of family, with a wife, two children, a mother-in-law, and a maid-servant. He himself fixed the price, said by old residents to be exorbitant; - we pay it without a murmur, after the manner of extravagant Americans. His help was worth ten times the cost. (10: 26-8)



**Figure 7** Burton Holmes, *Mr. Pak*. 1901. Hand-coloured lantern slide, 3.5 × 4 inches (8.3 × 10 cm). Courtesy of the Burton Holmes Collection, Department of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles

In the four years that passed between Bird's and Holmes's visit the secluded situation of Korean women had not changed much. It is therefore undoubtedly a great favour of Mr. Pak to introduce Holmes to his family and let him take photographs (10: frontispiece).

Burton Holmes caters to the interest of his audience by describing the appearances of Korean women and men:

there are comparatively few women in the streets. Most of them shrouded in coats of brilliant green, which are not put on like coats, but merely thrown over the head and clutched under the chin, concealing the faces as do the veils and haiks of Moorish women. [...] the dress beneath is not a dress, for it is a pair of baggy trousers. (10: 22)

The lively street scene showing a woman wearing a cover as described in the text [fig. 8] also appears in mirror-reverse in his book with the title *Latest Fashions* and can thus be firmly dated to 1901. Describing the variety of men's headgear in detail, he calls Korea 'the land of hats', and adds some fairy tales. His rare and mild crit-



**Figure 8** Burton Holmes, *Latest Fashions*. 1901. Hand-coloured lantern slide, 3.5 × 4 inches (8.3 × 10 cm). Courtesy of the Burton Holmes Collection, Department of Art History, University of California, Los Angeles

icism usually carries a mocking tone, “the fillet of woven horsehair bound around the head so tightly that it keeps ideas out” (10: 70), and is balanced by self-mocking. Not only does Burton Holmes, in contrast to Isabella Bird, refrain from stronger criticism of Chosŏn society and ways of life, he also never complains, as she often does, about any inconvenience.

Burton Holmes interest in the country was, as he says himself, on the ‘picturesque’. In his case, we must take this term literally, not just as a search for the exotic, but as a focus on the visual. His photographs, imbedded on every page of his book, play a prominent role in relation to his text, and his well composed and carefully coloured lantern slides attest to his ability to create an atmosphere of ease for the people in front of his lens. Moreover, he refers to his filming in his book, vividly describing an instance of near collision with an ox cart when he did a documentary on a moving railroad trolley through the streets of Seoul, culminating in his philosophy:

To record life in such a way that every gesture, movement and expression of one man or of a hundred men be reproduced at will and make that man or that multitude appear to live again and reenact their parts, this is the end and aim of the art-science of motion photography. (10: 61-3, 75-6)<sup>9</sup>

#### 4 A War Adventure: Jack London

Yet a different relationship between text and images can be seen in the accounts on Korea by Jack London, who was commissioned by William Randolph Hearst (1863-1951) to report as a correspondent on the Russo-Japanese War in 1904 for *The San Francisco Examiner*. Although admired as an author of adventurous novels world-wide, his non-fiction publications, including his newspaper articles, are lesser known, and only his book on the slums of the city of London, *People of the Abyss*, first published in 1903, contains a considerable number of his photographs. Born in 1876 in San Francisco to a single mother and raised without a father, he spent his early years as an oyster pirate, a vagabond and a sailor. Aspiring for higher education, he attended Oakland High School and entered the University of California Berkeley in 1896 but could not afford to graduate. He then joined the Klondike gold rush but being without success he finally turned to writing as occupation. His novel *The Call of the Wild*, also published in 1903, became his first huge literary success.

While in Korea, from mid-February to early June 1904, Jack London developed his negatives and photographs himself and sent them to *The San Francisco Examiner*.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Isabella Bird and Burton Holmes, he did not meet with members of the royal family. Rather, due to his assignment, he often communicated with Japanese military personnel, who were determined to prevent foreign journalists from getting to the front. Frustrated of being unable to report on the war he gives accounts, in his typical daredevil manner, of playing hide-and-seek with the authorities. Diplomatic contacts only played a major role when London's situation became seriously dangerous. At the beginning of his journey, he was detained in Japan and accused of espionage. His camera was confiscated and only returned

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<sup>9</sup> The documentary film shot from the moving railroad trolley has been made accessible by The Eastman House: "Preserving the World of Burton Holmes", [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwC9COY\\_TEO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WwC9COY_TEO).

<sup>10</sup> The Huntington Library in San Marino, California, owns thirteen albums of photographs collected by Jack London during his stay in Korea. These include about 1,000 photographs, the majority of which were taken by him and often bear labels in his handwriting, but they also contain photographs which he purchased from local studios. <https://hdl.huntington.org/digital/collection/p16003coll7>.

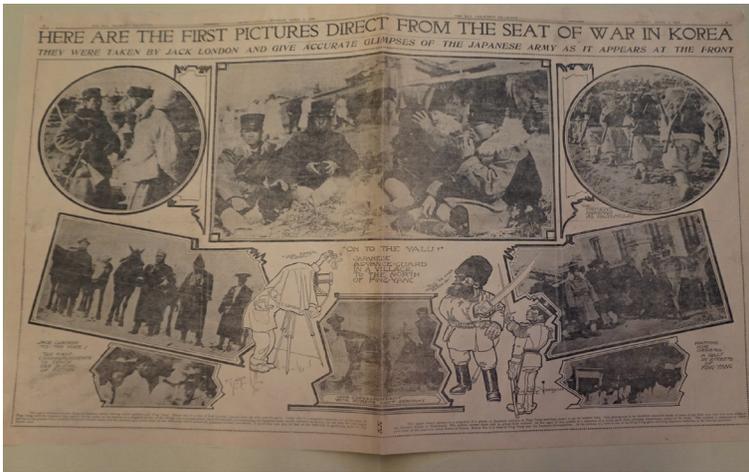


Figure 9 Double page from *The San Francisco Examiner*. April 4, 1904. © Author

to him upon the intervention of the U.S. American Minister in Tokyo (*Jack London Reports* 1970, 26-32; Reesman et al. 2010, 64-5). In Korea he almost faced Japanese martial law after beating a Japanese servant who had stolen from him but was rescued through the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt (*Jack London Reports* 1970, 24-5; Reesman et al. 2010, 65). Although he had a Japanese interpreter, his main source of information on Korean matters was his devoted young servant Manyoungi, who helped him in every possible way, as interpreter, cook, and go-between, and whom he later took home to San Francisco as a houseboy (*Jack London Reports* 1970, 15 no. 1, 35).

As the headline of *The San Francisco Examiner* of April 4, 1904 indicates, the focus of the newspaper was rather on the famous correspondent than on the war: “Here are the first pictures direct from the seat of war in Korea, they were taken by Jack London and give accurate glimpses of the Japanese army as it appears at the front” [fig. 9]. Separated from the text, the photographs are incorporated into another narrative reminiscent of a cartoon, framed by caricatures of a large Russian crossing swords with a small Japanese and of Jack London behind his camera under the black cloth, holding a little doll inscribed ‘Korea’, and giving instructions: ‘Look fierce, please’. The drawings and the jagged frames catch the readers’ attention even more than the photographs themselves.

Knowing the poor side of American society all too well, Jack London is known for advocating for the socially marginalized and exploited. One is therefore taken by surprise when he writes about



**Figure 10**

Jack London, *My Boy Manyoungi*. 1904.

Black-and-white photograph, 14 × 9 cm.

Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

Korean farmers, servants, and refugees without conveying any empathy for their plight. He describes them as “apathetic Koreans, too lazy to get out of the way” (*Jack London Reports* 1970, 36) and notes “for the Korean is nothing if not a coward” (44). His comments culminate in the statement:

In short, the first weeks of a white traveller on Korean soil are anything but pleasant. If he be a man of sensitive organization he will spend most of his time under the compelling sway of two alternating desires. The first is to kill Koreans, the second is to commit suicide. (47)

The only person who escapes his harsh judgement is his servant Manyoungi:

He dressed in European clothes, with a white shirt, and he talked English better, far better, than my provisional interpreter, and he was Korean. (37)

On London’s photographs, Manyoungi is always seen in Western clothing, whereas the lowlier servants are clad in Korean dress. A photograph that shows him proudly, yet relaxed standing in front of two crossed U.S. flags emphasises his exceptional status: halfway between Korea and America [fig. 10]. In another passage London writes about Manyoungi:



Figure 11 Jack London, *Washing clothes*. 1904. Black-and-white photograph, 9 × 14 cm. Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

in his short life he had learned, what all Asiatics learn, that justice is a characteristic belonging peculiarly to the white man, and that from the white man only it is obtainable. (85)

The master-servant relationship with the young Korean is quite apparent, as is London's racist attitude. His ideas of the superiority of the white race become even clearer when he describes his encounters with Russian prisoners of war whom he sees through a window together with a local crowd:

On my mind it had all the stunning impact of a man's fist. There was a man, a white man, with blue eyes, looking at me. He was dirty and unkempt. [...] But his eyes were bluer than mine and his skin was as white. [...] I found myself suddenly and sharply aware that I was an alien amongst these brown men who peered through the window with me. (106)

As Jeanne Reesman explains, London's racism must also be seen in context of the anti-Asian hysteria in California at the time. Jack London supported socialist causes, such as the fight against immigration of non-Caucasian workers who caused the 'dumping' of salaries in the U.S. (Reesman 2009, 90-3).

Yet, if we compare Jack London's texts and his unpublished photographs the situation becomes more complicated, as we find some portraits that give quite a different impression of his relationship with the Korean people he met. Women smile into the camera or look with

**Figure 12**

Jack London, *Korean Man*. 1904.

Black-and-white photograph, 14 × 9 cm.

Courtesy of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

pride [fig. 11] (Reesman et al. 2010, 80-1). Girls and boys reveal their feelings: tiredness, curiosity, amusement (105-8). A series of portraits of men of different generations is taken from a low and close point of view and suggests mutual interest on an even level between sitter and photographer [fig. 12] (107-14). In addition, among the handwritten titles Jack London added to photographs in the albums preserved at the Huntington Library, which show him together with Korean people, we find phrases such as “some of my friends” and “yours truly with friends” (63). Usually, we perceive text as the more dominant means of documentation, as representing the ‘voice’ of the author. Photographic images, in contrast, do not readily allow for an easy ‘reading’ (Berger, Mohr 1982, 65-92; Barthes 1981, 77). Although our three author-photographers offer texts that appear to be able to explain the meaning of the images, we must ask whether these texts really provide us with the ‘correct’ interpretation of their photographs. After all, how the ‘object’ responds to the ‘subject’s’, that is the photographer’s, gaze is a strong indication of their relationship.

## 5 Conclusion

The three author-photographers offer varying textual and visual ‘constructions’ of a nation that had just entered the international arena. Isabella Bird’s, Burton Holmes’s, and Jack London’s social and educational backgrounds play an important role in shaping their attitude towards travel and to the exploration of the country. They also had a bearing on their choice of mediators: Korean nobility, diplomats and foreign residents, Japanese and Korean interpreters, and servants. These, in turn, influenced their experiences. Yet, their aim to address specific audiences were even more important, even though editors and publishers undoubtedly had a say in the selection of photographs for publication and the layouts of texts and images. While Isabella Bird sought to give the most substantial and reliable information on Korea to a scientific-minded audience, such as the Royal Geographic Society, Holmes’s attitude is easy-going, often careless, with occasional humorous self-reflection, meant to entertain arm chair travelers through photographs and films. Jack London, when writing about Korea for sensation-seeking newspaper readers, needed to uphold his reputation as a daredevil to whom war was the ultimate masculine adventure. In his last report from East Asia for *The San Francisco Examiner* London writes:

Personally, I entered in this campaign with the most gorgeous conceptions of what a war correspondent’s work [...] must be. [...] In brief, I came to war expecting thrills. (*Jack London Reports* 1970, 122)

The collections of unpublished photographs of Korea have the potential of revealing a wider spectrum of experience which the authors were not willing or not allowed to show. Isabella Bird’s unpublished photographs do not differ from the illustrations in her books: the distance she keeps from her motifs give them an overall documentary character. The layout of Burton Holmes’s publication, on the other hand, emphasises visual representation and his lantern slides further intensify the romantic image he means to convey of the ‘Hermit Kingdom’. In contrast, Jack London’s portraits of Korean people in his albums at the Huntington Library contradict his written statements, because many Koreans ‘looked back’ at him in a much friendlier way than he lets his readers know.

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