

The Belgium-Korea Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation of 1901

Adrien Carbonnet

University of Leuven (KU Leuven), Belgium

Abstract During the second half of the nineteenth century, Belgian diplomats in China and Japan suggested the establishment of official relations with Korea, depicted as a potential access to resources and an outlet for Belgium's industry. This idea did not materialize until the formation of an Anglo-Belgian syndicate in charge of the exploitation of a gold mining concession in Korea. The Belgium-Korea Treaty of 1901 was fundamentally an unequal treaty. Similar to those concluded with other Western powers in the 1880s, it consolidated the regime of multilateral imperialism in Korea by legally paving the way for Belgium's activities in the country.

Keywords Belgium. Late Chosŏn. Imperialism. Léon Vincart. Kojong. Neutrality. Unequal treaties. Pak Che-sun. Eastern Pioneer Company. Ŭnsan gold mine. Commerce. Diplomatic relations. Barbarians. Civilization.

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1 Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Belgium was one of the few states to have diplomatic relations with Korea. By that time Belgium, a neutral country since its foundation in 1830-31, had transformed itself into the second industrial nation in Europe. Until the end of the nineteenth century the efforts of its diplomatic and consular agents were primarily directed at developing national economic interests by concluding commercial treaties, mainly with the neighbouring countries (Vanhemsche 2012, 101). In the eyes of both foreign observers and Belgian officials, the defence of economic interests was the core of Belgium's foreign policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Coolsaet 2014, 642-5). The two Belgian sovereigns Leopold I (1790-1865, reigned 1830-65) and Leopold II (1835-1909, reigned 1865-1909) did elaborate colonial plans (Vanhemsche 2012, 14-19), but in general the economic elite, whose needs were satisfied with the country's immediate neighbours, showed no interest in overseas activities. Influenced by the prevailing liberal philosophy, the political elite, for its part, considered that the potential benefits did not outweigh the costs and risks of such endeavours (Coolsaet 2014, 652). From a diplomatic point of view, actively participating in the increasing colonial rivalries could jeopardize Belgium's relations with the European Great Powers and even call into question its neutrality (Vanhemsche 2012, 15). Thus, the creation of the Congo Free State in 1885 was fundamentally, as Jean Stengers writes, "the personal adventure of one man", Leopold II, who could rely on his fortune and a network of influential men devoted to his cause (Stengers 2020, 45-8; Vanhemsche 2012, 14-32). Although colonial interest groups gradually developed in Belgium, it was only in 1908 that Congo officially became a Belgian colony (19).

The present article, mainly based on Belgian diplomatic archives,¹ aims to shed light on the starting point of official relations between the two countries: the Belgium-Korea Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation (*Han-Pi suho t'ongsang choyak* 韓比修好通商條約 also

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1 In this article, the acronym AEB (Affaires Étrangères Belges) is used for documents held in the Diplomatic Archives of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels, and MAE (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères) for those kept in the Centre des Archives diplomatiques of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs in La Courneuve. KHOM (*Ku Han'guk oegyo munsŏ* 舊韓國外交文書) designates the *Diplomatic Documents of Late Chosŏn Korea* edited by the Asiatic Research Center of Korea University (*Koryŏ tae-hakkyo Asea munje yŏn'guso* 高麗大學校亞細亞問題研究所) in 1971. The documents relating to Belgium are covered by volume 21. CHIKK (*Chu Han Ilbon kongsagwan kirok* 駐韓日本公使館記錄) refers to the *Records of the Japanese Legation in Korea* edited by the National Institute of Korean History (*Kuksa p'yŏnch'an wiwŏnhoe* 國史編纂委員會).

spelled *Han-Paek suho t'ongsang choyak* 韓白修好通商條約) signed in Seoul on 23 March 1901 between the Kingdom of Belgium and the Empire of Korea. Compared with the other international treaties concluded by Korea during the nineteenth century, the Belgium-Korea Treaty has attracted little academic attention.² This study of it is divided into two parts. The first part explores Belgium's plans and initiatives to establish permanent relations with the Chosŏn Court during the second half of the nineteenth century as well as the first encounters between Belgian and Korean diplomats. The second part is an in-depth analysis of the Belgium-Korea Treaty of 1901. This examines the negotiation and ratification of the treaty as well as its provisions. It also discusses the exact number of original copies of the treaty and their current location.

2 Belgium-Korea Relations in the Age of Imperialisms

2.1 The Opportunity of the 'Opening' of Korea by Japan

The idea of establishing contact with Korea seems to have germinated in the minds of Belgian diplomats as early as 1875. At that time, Belgium had already concluded a treaty of amity, commerce, and navigation with China in 1865 (Frochisse 1936, 89-129; Vande Walle 2003) and with Japan in 1866 (Vande Walle 2003; De Ruyver 2016); until the nomination of a consul in Seoul in 1900, reports to Brussels on the situation in the Korean Peninsula would occasionally be provided by the Belgian diplomatic and consular agents posted in China and Japan. It was, for example, Belgium's representative in China³ who in November 1866 provided an account of the French punitive expedition fol-

² We are indebted to the following earlier studies. Chapter 4 of Stéphanie Pirlot's MA thesis (Pirlot 1993) deals with the establishment of diplomatic relations between Belgium and Korea through the dispatches of the Belgian representatives posted in Japan, China and Russia. Surprisingly, the documents contained in the AEB file specifically relating to the negotiation of the Belgium-Korea Treaty were not used in her dissertation. Han Süng-Hun's contribution (Han 2010) to a collective book dedicated to the international treaties signed by Korea in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries discusses the negotiations and provisions of the treaty with a focus on its article 9. The entry "Belgium-Korea Treaty of 1901" in the *Dictionary of Modern Korean Diplomacy* (Kim 2012) primarily derives from Han's previous contribution. Kim Hyŏn-suk's article (Kim 2016) provides an in-depth analysis of the Belgium-Korea Treaty, later summarized in her conference paper (Kim 2021) presented on the occasion of the 120th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. These four valuable contributions by Korean scholars are fundamentally based on Korean and Japanese diplomatic archives.

³ AEB, Correspondance politique des légations (hereafter "CPL"): Chine, vol. 1, t'Kint de Roodenbeek to Rogier, 26 November 1866.

lowing the execution of nine French Catholic missionaries who had clandestinely entered Korea.⁴ Referred to in Korean historiography as the “Foreign Disturbance of the Year of Pyŏngin” (*Pyŏngin yangyo* 丙寅洋擾), this expedition was part of a series of Western intrusions in the nineteenth century that led Taewŏn’gun 興宣大院君 (1821-98), the father of King Kojong 高宗 (1852-1919; reigned 1864-1907) and the ruler of the country during his son’s minority (1864-73), to reinstate Korea’s traditional policy of seclusion characterized by the restriction of foreign contacts to tributary relations with China and limited but equal neighbourly relations with Japan.⁵

Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, Japan attempted to reorganize its relations with Korea. The new imperial government sought recognition from Korea and tried to conclude a treaty of commerce with the country.⁶ To achieve these objectives, the use of force was seriously envisioned among Japanese officials at that time (Unno 1995, 10-38). In September 1875, Japan provoked the Koreans into firing on the Japanese naval ship *Unyō* 雲揚號, an incident that eventually led to the conclusion, in February 1876, of the Japan-Korea Kanghwa Treaty (*Kanghwa choyak* 江華條約) (Deuchler 1988c). This unequal treaty was regarded by Edmond Serruys (1827-1881), the Belgian minister resident in China, as “a first breach [...] in the barriers that separated Korea from the civilized world.”⁷ Although it recognized Korea as an independent state enjoying equal rights as Japan (art. 1), it unilaterally opened Korean ports (Pusan and two additional ports in 1877) to the Japanese trade (art. 5), guaranteed freedom to commerce without restrictions and interference from the authorities (art. 9). The treaty also instituted extraterritorial jurisdiction for the benefit of Japan (art. 10). The Kanghwa Treaty was the first modern treaty (in the sense of Western-style treaty, as Kirk W. Larsen rightly points out) that Korea concluded with any foreign nation, and so marked both the end of the country’s policy of seclusion (Deuchler 1988c) and the beginning of a period of unilateral Japanese imperialism in Korea (Larsen 2016, 28-30).

In a dispatch dated 4 October 1875, the Belgian minister resident to Japan, Charles De Groot (died 1884), who thought that the “imminent war” between the two countries could result in the opening of this “terra incognita” to foreigners, asked for instructions so as “not

⁴ On this punitive expedition, see Roux 2012, 232-75.

⁵ See Deuchler 1977, 4-5; Deuchler 1988d; Okamoto 2008, 12-16.

⁶ Deuchler 1988c; Robinson 1988, 337; Unno 1995, 1-38.

⁷ AEB, CPL: Chine, vol. 1, Serruys to d’Aspremont Lynden, 13 March 1876; AEB, 17.183, “Les relations belgo-coréennes avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale”, study prepared by René Vanhenten and addressed to Ambassador Gaston Jenebely, p. 2, annexed to Note from Willequet to Davignon, 8 January 1975.

to arrive after the others".⁸ In the eyes of Belgian diplomats, Korea in the 1870s and 1880s represented above all access to raw materials,⁹ and an outlet for Belgian industry.¹⁰ The Belgian Foreign Minister replied that if Korea were indeed to become a new market for the products of the Western industrial nations, Belgium would have to secure the place in that market to which it could "legitimately lay claim". However, he was unable to give any precise instructions, presumably because of the lack of information at his disposal, and asked his minister in Japan to keep him informed of what would happen in the future in these "far-off places".¹¹ Later, in January 1879, plans were made to send De Groote on a mission to Korea to explore the commercial potential of the country, but it seems that this mission never took place. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not regard the exploration of Korea as a matter of urgency: De Groote was explicitly requested to give priority to the negotiation of commercial agreements in Japan and an exploration of the Philippines.¹²

It was only after the United States had concluded a treaty of amity and commerce with Korea in May 1882 that Belgium concretely envisioned doing likewise. A spate of other countries followed the American example: Germany in June 1882 and November 1883, the United Kingdom in November 1883, Russia in July 1884, Italy in June 1884, France in June 1886, and Austria-Hungary in May 1892. However, in July 1882, the Japanese legation in Seoul had been set on fire and several Japanese and Korean high officials killed during a military uprising directed against the government and foreigners. China dispatched troops to Korea under the guise of protecting its tributary and in October 1882 obtained Korean assent to a Regulation for Maritime and Overland Trade between Chinese and Korean Subjects (*Cho-Ch'öng sangmin suryuk muyöck changjöng* 朝清商民水陸貿易章程) which granted China privileged access to the Korean market. Japan, for its part, by the Treaty of Chemulp'o (*Chemulp'o choyak* 濟物浦條約), signed in August of the same year, obtained the punishment of the culprits, indemnities, and permission to maintain soldiers on the Korean soil (Deuchler 1988b). The uprising, known in Korean historiography as the "Mutiny of the Year Imo" (*Imo gullan* 壬午軍亂), led the Belgian minister resident in China, Count Hector de Noidans-Calf (1835-84), to recommend not to hurry the conclusion of a treaty with

8 AEB, CPL: Japon, vol. 1, De Groote to d'Aspremont Lynden, 4 October 1875.

9 AEB, 3010/I, Noidans-Calf to Frère-Orban, 15 May 1882.

10 AEB, CPL: Japon, vol. 1, d'Aspremont Lynden to De Groote, 22 December 1875; AEB, 3010/I, Noidans-Calf to Frère-Orban, 24 May 1882.

11 AEB, CPL: Japon, vol. 1, d'Aspremont Lynden to De Groote, 22 December 1875.

12 AEB, 2839/V, Frère-Orban to De Groote, 22 January 1879.

Korea,¹³ a point of view that was shared in Brussels within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: it was decided not to take any concrete action without more information about these “événements révolutionnaires”.¹⁴ Moreover, this ‘revolution’ reinforced Noidans-Calf’s belief that if it were decided in the future to enter into negotiations with Korea, the Belgian representative in China, that is to say he himself, should be responsible for the task. He argued that this was how the other powers had acted in negotiating their treaties and added that China, in his view rightly, claimed sovereignty over Korea.¹⁵

2.2 The First Encounter Between Belgian and Korean Diplomats

The Treaty of Chemulp’o also stipulated that Korea should send an envoy to Japan to apologize on behalf of the country. Pak Yŏng-Hyo 朴泳孝 (1861-1932) was selected for this mission and stayed in Japan from September 1882 to January 1883 (Sin 1971, 273). In Japan, Pak noted in his diary that he “received the visit of the Belgian representative” on 27 September 1882 and, on 2 October, paid a return visit to the Belgian mission (Pak 1971, 198). Although he did not provide any details about these visits, these were likely the first encounters between Belgian and Korean diplomats. One month later, on 27 October 1882, Pak visited Charles De Groote accompanied by Kim Man-Sik 金晩植 (1834-1900), deputy head of the Korean mission in Japan. The Belgian minister reported on this visit to Brussels, explaining that from then onwards he had “frequent” contacts with his Korean colleagues, who at each of their meetings expressed to him their “strong desire” to establish official relations with Belgium. De Groote remarked that they were particularly interested in Belgium’s neutral status as Korea wished to proclaim itself a neutral country. The Belgian representative added:

It is, I believe, interesting for us to see Koreans thinking of taking us as an example and model at the time when they begin to learn about western civilization.¹⁶

The démarche made by Pak Yŏng-Hyo, who shown great interest in Meiji Japan’s modernization and became an advocate of reform after he returned to Korea (Chandra 1988), was perhaps inspired by three

13 AEB, 3010/I, Noidans to Frère-Orban, 12 August 1882.

14 AEB, 3010/I, Frère-Orban to De Groote, 4 September 1882.

15 AEB, 3010/I, Noidans to Frère-Orban, 12 August 1882.

16 AEB, CPL: Japon, vol. 1, De Groote to Frère-Orban, 5 November 1882.

neutralization proposals consecutively issued in Japan in September 1882, a couple of days before his first meeting with De Groote. On 17 September 1882, back from Korea where he had participated in the negotiation of the Treaty of Chemulp'o, Inoue Kowashi 井上毅 (1843-95), a member of the Council of State, published his *Chōsen seiryaku iken'an* 朝鮮政略意見案 (A Policy Proposal for Korea) in which he advocated a neutralization of Korea modelled upon Belgian or Swiss-style permanent neutrality and guaranteed by Japan, China, the United-States of America, the United Kingdom, and Germany.¹⁷ Inoue's proposal was soon followed by another published in the periodical *Yūbin Hōchi Shinbun* 郵便報知新聞 on 20 September 1882 and a third, suggested by the French legal advisor to the Japanese government Gustave Emile Boissonade (1825-1910), on 22 September 1882 (Jin 2021, 34-8; 211). Although these propositions remained dead letters, they opened a series of no fewer than 18 neutralization proposals elaborated by both Koreans and non-Koreans between 1882 and 1907, all having in common Belgium as a model (Jin 2021, 211-20).

De Groote concluded his report on his encounter with Pak Yōng-Hyo with a more trivial – but eloquent – comment on the name cards of both the Chinese and Korean representatives in Japan that he annexed to his dispatch:

The Koreans have already adopted our system of calling cards. The Chinese have not yet changed their habits.¹⁸

Interestingly, De Groote wrote several days later in a personal letter addressed to Baron Auguste Lambermont (1819-1905),¹⁹ the influential secretary-general of Belgium's Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

I have an excellent opinion of the Koreans. They seem to me to be very intelligent, very serious and very capable of doing well,²⁰

a view contrasting with the negative image of the country portrayed by the Belgian diplomats posted in China. In their dispatches, Korea had been alternatively depicted as a “long ignored and barbarian”²¹ land with a “savage and hostile population”,²² “an affront and a dis-

¹⁷ See Babicz 2002, 105-8; Okamoto 2008, 124-8; Jin 2021, 34-6; 211.

¹⁸ AEB, CPL: Japon, vol. 1, De Groote to Frère-Orban, 5 November 1882.

¹⁹ On Lambermont, who served as secretary-general of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1859 to 1905, see Willequet 1971 and Auwers 2022, 20-33.

²⁰ AEB, 3010/I, De Groote to Lambermont, 24 November 1882.

²¹ AEB, 3010/I, Noidans-Calf to Frère-Orban, 15 May 1882.

²² AEB, Papiers Lambermont, série chronologique, vol. 1876-1884, d'Anethan to Lambermont, 31 January 1876.

grace to the Western powers, [as well as] a danger to their situation in the Far East”,²³ or even one of those “barbarian governments [...] full of pretension and stubbornness”.²⁴

2.3 The First Draft of the Belgium-Korea Treaty

The different events that took place in 1882 marked the end of Japan’s unilateral imperialism in Korea and initiated a new period of multilateral imperialism characterized by Sino-Japanese and then Russo-Japanese rivalry over the country, a period that lasted until the establishment of the Japanese protectorate in 1905 (Larsen 2016). It was also in 1882 that a treaty with Korea was concretely envisioned in Belgium. From this year onward, the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs requested its accredited agents in the countries that had signed a treaty with Korea to provide information about these treaties and a copy of their texts.²⁵ It also started consultations with central administrations in Brussels, notably the Ministries of Justice, Finance, and the Interior, seeking their expertise for the clauses falling within their competence.²⁶ In February 1884, a draft treaty modelled upon the German-Korean and Anglo-Korean treaties was drawn up, and instructions were prepared requesting Charles De Groote to start negotiations on the grounds that Belgium could not be the last to benefit from this “new market”.²⁷ However, political turmoil in the Far East – in addition to the Sino-French War which had broken out in June 1884, in December 1884 an attempted coup d’état (*Kapsin chǒngbyǒn* 甲申政變) was launched by Kim Ok-Kyun 金玉均 (1851-94), Pak Yǒng-Hyo, and other young reformists captivated by Meiji Japan (Deuchler 1988a) – led the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to postpone negotiations again.²⁸ Subsequently, in the 1880s and during the first half of the 1890s, the idea of concluding such a treaty was raised several times²⁹ – in 1891 the head of the Korean mission

²³ AEB, CPL: Chine, vol. 1, Serruys to Frère-Orban, 18 September 1880.

²⁴ AEB, CPL: Chine, vol. 1, Serruys to Frère-Orban, 28 September 1880.

²⁵ AEB, 3010/I, Frère-Orban to Solvyns, 12 August 1882; Frère-Orban to Beyens, 12 August 1882; Frère-Orban to Beyens, 21 October 1882; Frère-Orban to Solvyns, 5 February 1883; Frère-Orban to de Bounder de Melsbroeck, 7 February 1883; Frère-Orban to Solvyns & van der Straten-Ponthoz, 7 February 1884; Chimay to Beyens, 17 May 1890.

²⁶ AEB, 3010/I, Frère-Orban to Ministers of the Interior, Justice, Finance, 28 October 1882; Frère-Orban to Minister of Justice, 29 March 1884.

²⁷ AEB, 3010/I, Frère-Orban to De Groote, February 1884 (not sent?).

²⁸ AEB, 3010/I, Note of Directorate B, 31 December 1884.

²⁹ AEB, 3010/I, Note of Directorate B, 17 December 1887; Note from Directorate B to Directorate A, July 1888; Verhaeghe de Naeyer to Chimay, 18 February 1889 & 22 Octo-

in Japan, Kim Ka-Jin 金嘉鎮 (1846-1923), even reiterated his government's readiness to establish official relations with Belgium³⁰ - but never materialized.

2.4 The Ŭnsan Gold Mine and the Anglo-Belgian Syndicate

Things accelerated at the very beginning of the twentieth century. In April 1900, the Belgian chargé d'affaires in Beijing, Emile Cartier de Marchienne (1871-1946), received a visit from the British Member of Parliament and businessman William Pritchard Morgan (1844-1924), who in September 1898 had acquired a gold-mining concession in Korea, the Ŭnsan gold mine (*Ŭnsan kwangsan* 殷山鑛山, also known as the Gwendoline gold mine).³¹ This concession was exploited by the Eastern Pioneer Company, a recently formed Anglo-Belgian syndicate in which Belgian financial institutions and individual financiers held a 50% stake.³² Morgan warned Cartier de Marchienne that "enemies" - primarily meaning the Americans who were opposed to the grant of the mining concession³³ - could turn to their advantage the fact that Belgium had no official diplomatic relations with Korea to have the Belgian general manager of the mine, Gustave Braecke, expelled from the country. That would entail, Morgan believed, "very serious consequences" to the business, which was otherwise "bound to be successful". Cartier de Marchienne conveyed Morgan's concerns to Brussels and urged the government to conclude a treaty with Korea.³⁴ The British chargé d'affaires in Seoul, John Newel Jordan (1852-1925), who was also of the opinion that Braecke risked deportation in the absence of a passport and a Belgian treaty with Korea, suggested that the general manager be placed under the protection of one of the foreign legations in Seoul.³⁵ In Brussels, Foreign Minister Paul de Favereau (1856-1922) instructed that Braecke be placed under British protection pending the conclusion of a treat-

ber 1889 & 8 February 1890; Note from Directorate B to Directorate A, 5 May 1890; De Groote to Chimay, 25 July 1891; Goebel to Chimay, 31 August 1891; De Groote to Chimay, 15 September 1891; Note from Directorate B to Directorate A, 26 September 1891.

30 AEB, 3010/I, De Groote to Chimay, 15 October 1891.

31 AEB, B 109/Syndicat anglo-belge et les mines d'or de Corée: 1900 (hereafter "B 109/Syndicat"), Vinck de Deux Orp to Favereau, 27 December 1898; Cartier de Marchienne to Favereau, 17 April 1900.

32 AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Cartier de Marchienne to Favereau, 12 January 1900 & 17 April 1900; Kurgan-Van Hentenryk 1972, 267-70.

33 AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Cartier de Marchienne to Favereau, 17 April & 21 April 1900.

34 AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Cartier de Marchienne to Favereau, 17 April 1900.

35 AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Whettnall to Favereau, 3 May 1900.

ty with Korea.³⁶ However, it seems that no formal request was made to the Foreign Office.³⁷ This can be explained by the fact that, while the decision to send an agent to Korea to negotiate the treaty was taken quickly, the Belgian government was confident that its nationals would be protected by the Korean government until the treaty was concluded,³⁸ but also perhaps because of Belgium's reluctance to depend on a third power in the Far East. For example, the Belgian minister to Tokyo, Baron Albert d'Anethan (1849-1910), pleaded for the conclusion of a treaty on the grounds that foreign interference in Belgian affairs was not desirable, especially in Korea where rivalries between the accredited powers were strong.³⁹ When d'Anethan wrote in the same dispatch that entrusting Belgium's interests in Korea to a third power was not compatible with the ongoing development of Belgian enterprises in the Far East, he probably had in mind the Belgian-English tensions that from 1897 had arisen in China over the Beijing-Hankou railway concession.⁴⁰

2.5 Korea's Reaction to the Belgian Proposal

On 1 June 1900 Albert d'Anethan was officially instructed to inform his counterpart in Tokyo, Yi Ha-Yŏng 李夏榮 (1858-1919), of the Belgian government's desire to conclude a treaty.⁴¹ The latter was instructed to respond favourably to this request, the instruction he received from Seoul dated 22 June 1900 pointing out that Korea had already been maintaining diplomatic and commercial relations with other Western powers for years.⁴² The Belgian representative in Japan, in turn, informed Brussels that the Korean government would "eagerly" receive a Belgian agent to negotiate a treaty.⁴³ The historian Kim Hyŏn-Suk suggests that the Korean government's readiness to conclude a treaty with Belgium can be explained both by the predominantly positive image of the country conveyed by the press and foreign diplomats, and by the policy of neutrality that the Korean government – and Emperor Kojong personally (Hyŏn 2012; Jin 2021, 126-7) – was pursuing at that time. Belgium, whose territory and sovereignty were preserved thanks to its neutrality under international law, could serve as a mod-

³⁶ AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Arendt to Favereau, 7 May 1900.

³⁷ AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Favereau to Whettnall, 23 May 1900 (not sent).

³⁸ AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Favereau to d'Anethan, 1 June 1900.

³⁹ AEB, B 109/Syndicat, d'Anethan to Favereau, 26 May 1900; Pirlot 1993, 130.

⁴⁰ On the Beijing-Hankou railway concession, see Kurgan-Van Hentenryk, 1972, 82-183.

⁴¹ AEB, B 109/Syndicat, Favereau to d'Anethan, 1 June 1900.

⁴² CHIKK, vol. 14, 357, Hayashi to Aoki, 6 July 1900; Kim 2016, 26.

⁴³ AEB, B 109/Syndicat, d'Anethan to Favereau, 1 July 1900.

el for Korea (Kim 2016, 26; 2021, 107). In fact, in January 1899 Chŏn Pyŏng-Hun 全秉薰, a former government official, had submitted to Kojong a memorial, highly appreciated by the emperor, who could be interpreted as a neutralization proposal with Belgium and Switzerland as models (Jin 2021, 126). One year later, in January 1900, William Franklin Sands (1874-1946), an American national appointed as an adviser in the Imperial Household Department (*Kungnaebu* 宮内府), had presented to Kojong a neutralization proposal – for which he later received the emperor’s endorsement – modelled after Belgian or Swiss-style permanent neutrality jointly guaranteed by the major powers (Kim 2016, 26; Jin 2021, 128-9). Thus, as Kim Hyŏn-Suk argues, the Korean government probably saw the conclusion of a treaty with Belgium as an opportunity to diversify its diplomatic relations and acquire first-hand knowledge about the country’s experience of neutrality (Kim 2016, 26; 2021, 107).

3 The Belgium-Korea Treaty of 1901

3.1 Designation of Plenipotentiaries

The Belgian minister to Tokyo, who had revived the idea of signing a treaty with Korea several months after the *Compagnie Internationale pour le Commerce et l’Industrie* decided to cooperate with Morgan,⁴⁴ volunteered to conclude it himself.⁴⁵ However, it was finally decided that Léon Vincart (1848-1914), then consul in Bangkok, should be dispatched to Seoul as negotiator.⁴⁶ Léon Vincart arrived in Korea on 6 November 1900⁴⁷ with a draft treaty fundamentally modelled upon the France-Korea Treaty of 1886.⁴⁸ One of his first tasks in Seoul was to secure the recruitment of a scholar-official to translate the draft into Chinese, the diplomatic *lingua franca* in East Asia at that time, as well as a Korean interpreter.⁴⁹ On 9 November, just three days after his arrival, Vincart requested an audience with the Korean Minister of Foreign Affairs, Pak Che-Sun 朴齊純 (1858-1916).⁵⁰ It was during this first audience, held on 15 November 1900, that Vincart presented his letters patent – erroneously accrediting him to

44 AEB, 3010/II, d’Anethan to Favereau, 4 August 1899.

45 AEB, B 109/Syndicat, d’Anethan to Favereau, 26 May 1900; Pirlot 1993, 130.

46 AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 1 August 1900.

47 AEB, Pers. ext. 1206, Vincart to Favereau, 8 November 1900.

48 AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 1 August 1900; Kim 2016, 30.

49 AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 15 November 1900.

50 KHOM, vol. 21, p. 154, Vincart to Pak Che-Sun, 9 November 1900.

the “King of Korea”⁵¹ when the Korean sovereign had held the title of Emperor since 1897 – as well as his full powers. After consultation with officials, Pak Che-Sun declared that Vincart was officially recognized as plenipotentiary to negotiate the treaty but indicated that he would only be recognized as consul general in Korea once the treaty had been approved by Leopold II.⁵² On 30 November, the draft treaty and its Chinese translation were sent to Pak Che-Sun.⁵³ As negotiations were about to start, Vincart sent to Brussels a copy of the *Official Gazette* (*Kwanbo* 官報) announcing the nomination of the Korean Foreign Minister as plenipotentiary together with a clipping of the *Hwangsŏng Sinmun* 皇城新聞 (Imperial Capital News), which had devoted an editorial to Belgium, providing the reader with basic information about the country (size, population, religions, finances, etc.) and depicting Belgium as prosperous despite its modest size and population, and independent although surrounded by “strong countries”.⁵⁴

3.2 Negotiation and Provisions of the Treaty

The Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation between Belgium and Korea, signed on 23 March 1901, consisted of 13 articles accompanied by a “Regulation applicable to the Belgian trade in Korea” (*Purok t’ongsang changjŏn* 附錄通商章程), two sections dedicated to “Tariffs” (*Sech’ik* 稅則) – one for imported goods and one for exported goods – and a “Tariff Regulation” (*Sech’ik changjŏn* 稅則章程). On the same day Vincart reported, article by article, what had been negotiated and agreed.⁵⁵ As Kim Hyŏn-Suk rightly points out, the Belgium-Korea Treaty contained all the “unequal elements” already present in the other unequal treaties signed between Korea and the Western powers in the nineteenth century (Kim 2016, 33): without conditions of reciprocity, it opened Korean ports to Belgian trade (art. 5) and instituted the privilege of extraterritoriality for Belgians in Korea until such time as the Belgian government should judge that the Korean judicial system offered the same guarantees as that in force in Belgium (art. 3).⁵⁶

⁵¹ AEB, Pers. ext. 1206, “Provision de consul général de Belgique en Corée pour M. Vincart (Léon)”, 20 June 1900.

⁵² AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 15 November 1900.

⁵³ KHOM, vol. 21, 157, Vincart to Pak Che-Sun, 30 November 1900.

⁵⁴ AEB, 3010/II, clipping from the *Hwangsŏng Sinmun* dated 29 November 1900 and the *Official Gazette* dated 28 November 1900, both accompanied by a French translation; annexed to Vincart to Favereau, 3 December 1900.

⁵⁵ AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 23 March 1901.

⁵⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the clauses of this treaty, see Kim 2016, 29-34.

During the negotiations, which probably started at the beginning of December 1900, the most-favoured-nation clause (art. 9) was the greatest source of difficulties (Han 2010, 242; Kim 2016, 30-1). In the initial draft, article 9 committed Korea to grant to the Belgian Government and its nationals all privileges, immunities, and advantages which had already been conceded *in the past* to other foreign powers.⁵⁷ On 5 December 1900, Vincart telegraphed Brussels asking if the verb in the past tense “conceded” (privileges, immunities, and advantages) could be deleted following a request to that effect from the Korean side.⁵⁸ The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs – which interpreted this request as Korea’s fear of having to concede privileges that it had granted to foreign states in the past but that they no longer enjoyed⁵⁹ – replied that “conceded” could be suppressed, on condition that the words

[privileges, immunities, and] advantages that [other] governments [and their nationals] enjoy or would subsequently enjoy

were included instead.⁶⁰ On 17 January, Vincart sent another telegram announcing that this new wording of article 9 was accepted, provided that it should not be interpreted as necessarily committing Korea to grant railways and other concessions.⁶¹ The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs telegraphed back that it “could probably agree” with this interpretation and that a letter with more explanation would follow.⁶² Vincart informed Pak Che-Sun of his government’s position and explained that he had no choice but to wait for the explanatory letter. However, if the Foreign Minister would accept to withdraw his demand, Vincart concluded, the treaty could be signed at his earliest convenience.⁶³ The Korean side eventually decided, even before the explanatory letter had arrived, to adopt without reservation the amended version of article 9,⁶⁴ according to which Belgium and its nationals would, from the day on which the treaty came into operation, enjoy all privileges, immunities, and advantages which other countries and their nationals enjoyed at that time or would enjoy in the future.⁶⁵ In

⁵⁷ AEB, 2708, *Projet de traité d’amitié, de commerce et de négociation entre la Belgique et la Corée*, p. 19.

⁵⁸ AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 5 January 1901.

⁵⁹ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 15 January 1901.

⁶⁰ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 7 January 1901.

⁶¹ AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 17 January 1901.

⁶² AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 21 January 1901.

⁶³ KHOM, vol. 21, 165-6, Vincart to Pak Che-Sun, 23 January 1901.

⁶⁴ KHOM, vol. 21, 167-8, Vincart to Pak Che-Sun, 1 February 1901.

⁶⁵ AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 23 March 1901.

fact, according to the explanatory letter that arrived a few days before the signing of the treaty, the Belgian side had no intention to claim that all the advantages already granted to other countries in the past be extended to Belgium. It only wanted the “principles” governing the activity of other foreigners in Korea to apply equally to Belgians without necessarily granting them similar concessions.⁶⁶

It should also be noted that while the France-Korea Treaty of 1886 stipulated that the contracting parties could offer their good offices in the event that one of them was in conflict with a third country (art. 1, para. 2), this paragraph is not included in the Belgium-Korea Treaty (Kim 2016, 32). In fact, this provision was deleted in the Belgian draft of the treaty on the grounds that it was not in Belgium’s tradition to intervene in a conflict between two states. The instruction sent to Vincart reminded him that Belgium should

keep completely out of conflicts which might arise in Seoul and in which it would not be involved.⁶⁷

However, the Belgium-Korea Treaty contains a provision, introduced at the request of the Belgian Foreign Minister Paul de Favereau,⁶⁸ and lacking from the treaties previously concluded between Korea and the other powers: recourse to arbitration in case of a dispute between the two parties over the interpretation of the treaty or its execution (art. 12). The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which had included this type of clause in the treaties it had recently concluded, expected Korea to adhere to this method of resolving international disputes, increasingly adopted by “civilized states”.⁶⁹ This clause was accepted by the Korean side, apparently without problems, after Vincart provided some additional explanations.⁷⁰

Belgium’s consular network consisted of a combination of both unremunerated merchant-consuls – Belgians or foreigners selected for their business connections – and remunerated career consuls (Coolsaet, Dujardin, Roosens 2014, 84-118). This is probably why the officials involved in the drafting of the treaty envisioned the possibility of entrusting consular functions to a resident in Korea in addition to the nomination of a career consul.⁷¹ However, the Belgian plenipotentiary failed to obtain the right to appoint merchant-consuls (Kim 2016, 30), although, as he pointed out, Korea had already at

⁶⁶ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 22 January 1901.

⁶⁷ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 1 August 1901.

⁶⁸ AEB, 3010/II, Note by Favereau, 3 July 1900.

⁶⁹ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 1 August 1901.

⁷⁰ AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 23 March 1901.

⁷¹ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 1 August 1901.

that time several consuls in Europe falling into this category.⁷² Like the France-Korea Treaty of 1886, the Belgium-Korea Treaty explicitly prohibited consular agents of both countries from engaging in trade (art. 2). Belgian diplomatic archives reveal that the nomination of merchant-consuls did not constitute a red line for the Belgian side, as even before the start of the negotiations Vincart had been instructed to concede and stick to the provision of the France-Korea Treaty in the eventuality of serious objections being raised on the Korean side.⁷³

On 4 April 1901, Pak Che-Sun celebrated the signing of the treaty by giving a banquet attended by all the representatives of the countries accredited to Seoul, Korean ministers, and the newly appointed Korean representatives to France and Britain. In his speech, the Foreign Minister conveyed the emperor's wish that the treaty be ratified "as soon as possible" and that it be a pledge of "invariable friendship" between the two states.⁷⁴

3.3 Approval and Ratification of the Treaty

On 9 July 1901, Paul de Favereau submitted the bill approving the Belgium-Korea Treaty to the Chamber of Representatives. The parliamentary committee in charge of reviewing the treaty unanimously recommended its adoption. While acknowledging the "relatively minor importance" of Korean trade with European countries, the committee's rapporteur, Jean-Baptiste de Winter (1831-1913), stated that the usefulness of concluding a treaty with Korea had been felt in recent years, which had been marked by Belgium's commercial expansion in the Far East and especially in China. He acknowledged that the Belgians were for the time being mainly interested in mining ventures in Korea but argued that other projects such as the planned construction and operation of the railway network would probably catch their attention in the near future. He added that the loan that the Korean government was thinking of contracting, presumably to start public works, would constitute a "precious outlet" for Belgian industries. Finally, de Winter concluded that the treaty would guarantee the security of Belgian people and capital in Korea and prevent "new difficulties",⁷⁵ an implicit reference to those that the Anglo-Bel-

⁷² AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 23 March 1901.

⁷³ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 1 August 1901.

⁷⁴ AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 5 April 1901; French translation of Pak Che-Sun's speech annexed to the dispatch.

⁷⁵ AEB, 3010/II, "Chambre des Représentants, Séance du 9 juillet 1901, Projet de loi approuvant le traité d'amitié, de commerce et de navigation conclu le 23 mars 1901 entre la Belgique et la Corée, Rapport fait au nom de la Commission par Jean de Winter".

gian Syndicate had faced several months before. The bill approving the treaty was adopted by the Belgian Parliament (Chamber of Representatives and Senate) and given royal assent by King Leopold II in August 1901.⁷⁶ The exchange of the instruments of ratification took place in Seoul on 17 October 1901,⁷⁷ and the next day Vincart was escorted in a palanquin to the palace where he was received in audience by the emperor.⁷⁸

3.4 Exchange of Diplomatic and Consular Agents

Following the exchange of the instruments of ratification, the Korean Government provided Léon Vincart with his exequatur, formally acknowledging him as consul general.⁷⁹ Vincart, whose mandate in Korea was terminated in November 1909, was assisted by a vice-consul: Maurice Cuvelier (1880-1946) from October 1901 to May 1903,⁸⁰ and then Robert De Vos (1878-1956) from September 1903 until June 1906.⁸¹ In addition to a scholar-official in charge of the translation of documents written in Chinese – the Belgium-Korea Treaty (art. 11) stipulated that official correspondence addressed to the Korean Foreign Ministry had to be accompanied with a Chinese translation – and a Korean interpreter,⁸² the Belgian consul general employed a couple of *kisu* 旗手 who cumulated the functions of messengers and guards in charge of the protection of foreign missions in Seoul.⁸³ The building housing the Belgian consulate general, completed in 1905 (Yi 2012, 224), did not fall short of the other diplomatic missions in the Korean capital. The French representative in Korea, Victor Collin de Plancy (1853-1922), remarked that King Leopold II, considering that his consul should be housed under the same conditions as the representatives of the Great Powers, had personally intervened so that the Belgian government would provide a substantial budget for the construction of the consulate, a budget actually higher than those

76 AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 20 August 1901.

77 AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 17 October 1901.

78 AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 19 October 1901.

79 AEB, Pers. ext. 1206, Exequatur of Léon Vincart (in Chinese) dated 30 October 1901.

80 AEB, Pers. ext. 1104, Vincart to Favereau, 12 October 1901; Vincart to Favereau, 8 May 1903.

81 AEB, Pers. ext. 1212, Vincart to Favereau, 30 September 1903; Siffert to Favereau, 13 June 1906.

82 In December 1904, it was decided to only keep the scholar-official who was also able to assume the functions of interpreter. AEB, Pers. ext. 420/V, Vincart to Favereau, 14 December 1904.

83 AEB, Pers. ext. 1206, Vincart to Favereau, 7 December 1900.

allocated by the French, English and Russian governments for their respective legations.⁸⁴ The Korean government, for its part, appointed an honorary consul general in Brussels in November 1901, Emile Le Hon (1869-1911), stepson of Vincart, who had personally recommended him for the position.⁸⁵ Several months later, Min Yǒng-Ch'an 閔泳瓚 (1874-1948), the Korean minister posted in Paris, became the first Korean diplomat accredited to Belgium.⁸⁶ According to information provided by Vincart, he spoke French and English and had already travelled in Europe as he had been the Korean commissioner for the Exposition Universelle de Paris in 1900.⁸⁷

3.5 The Seven Original Copies of the Treaty

From the correspondence exchanged between Consul General Vincart and the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs,⁸⁸ it is possible to deduce that a total of seven original copies of the Belgium-Korea Treaty of 1901 were produced (Table 1). On 23 March 1901, six copies of the treaty – three sets (sets 1, 2, and 3) of two copies each, one in French (F) and one in Chinese (C) – were signed by Vincart and the Korean Foreign Minister Pak Che-Sun. The first set was supposed to be conserved by the Belgian consulate general (copy 1-F) and by the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs (copy 1-C). The second set was supposed to be signed by Emperor Kojong and then exchanged for the copies of the third set (copies 3-F and 3-C) once they had been signed by King Leopold II. The plan was for the third set (copies 3-F and 3-C) to be sent to Brussels to be signed by King Leopold II, after which the signed copies would be sent back to Korea and exchanged for the signed copies of set 2 (copies 2-F and 2-C). As planned, the third set (copies 3-F and 3-C) arrived in Brussels in May 1901. However, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs decided to keep these two copies for the archives of the ministry and, arguing that this procedure was the one “generally followed for the ratification of international acts”, in Summer 1901 drafted the instrument of ratification bearing the signature of Leopold II in which the text of the treaty in French would be inserted. This new copy of the treaty (4-F) was the one that Vincart

84 MAE, *Correspondance politique et commerciale, Nouvelle série, Corée 10 “Étrangers en Corée (1902-1904)”*, Collin de Plancy to Delcassé, 20 July 1903.

85 AEB, Pers. ext. 1477, Vincart to Favereau, 30 November 1901; Gordts 2001, 118-19.

86 AEB, 13.423//II, Credentials of Min Yǒng-Ch'an (in Chinese) dated 17 February 1901 with its French translation.

87 AEB, 13.423//II, Vincart to Favereau, 6 December 1901.

88 AEB, 3010//II, Vincart to Favereau, 23 March 1901; Favereau to Vincart, 25 May 1901.

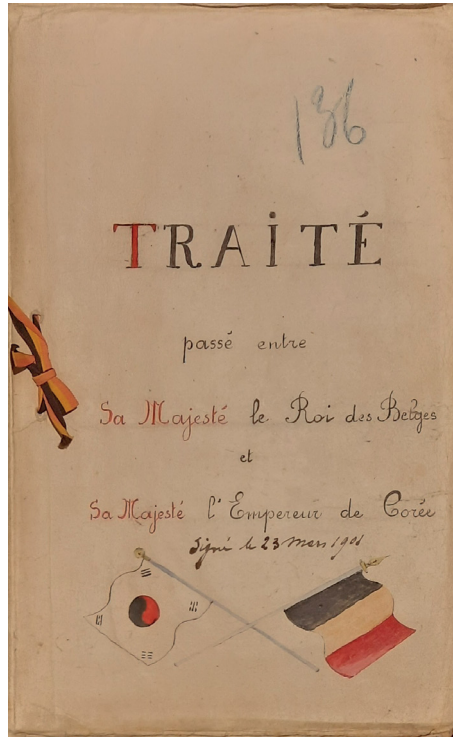


Figure 1
Copy of the Belgium-Korea Treaty
in French (identified as copy 3-F)

was instructed to exchange in Seoul for the one ratified by Kojong,⁸⁹ copy 2-C in Chinese. The ratified copy 2-C and the procès-verbal of the exchange of the instruments of ratification (in both Chinese and French) were entrusted to a Belgian diplomat posted in Beijing who was temporarily staying in Korea while on his way to Belgium.⁹⁰ The Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs acknowledged receipt of this copy in December 1901.⁹¹

Of the four copies (1-F, 2-C, 3-F, 3-C) supposed to be kept by the Belgian side, three (2-C, 3-F, 3-C) can be located. They are all preserved in the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brussels. The copy in French 3-F [fig. 1] bears the signature of Consul General Léon Vincart, the seal of the Belgian consulate general in Seoul, the signature in Chinese characters of Pak Che-Sun and the seal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (*Oebu taesin chi* in 外部大臣之印). Its cover bears

⁸⁹ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 25 May 1901.

⁹⁰ AEB, 3010/II, Vincart to Favereau, 20 October 1901.

⁹¹ AEB, 3010/II, Favereau to Vincart, 27 December 1901.

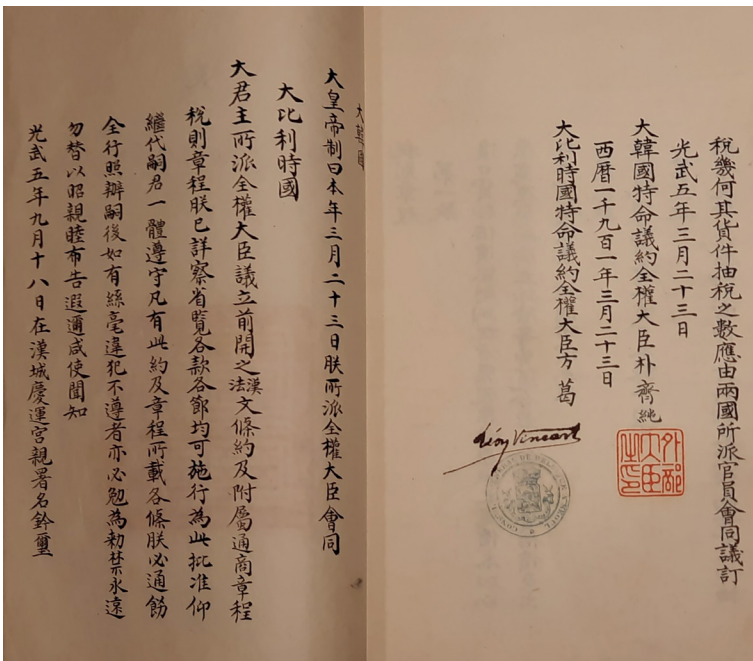


Figure 2 Copies of the Belgium-Korea Treaty in Chinese (identified as copy 2-C and copy 3-C)

Figure 3 Copy 2-C of the Belgium-Korea Treaty with the instrument of ratification (left page)



Figure 4
Great Seal of Korea affixed on the instrument
of ratification contained in copy 2-C
of the Belgium-Korea Treaty

the inscription “Traité passé entre Sa Majesté le Roi des Belges et Sa Majesté l’Empereur de Corée” and an illustration of the two national flags. The two copies in Chinese, 2-C and 3-C [fig. 2], bear the signature of Léon Vincart, the seal of the Belgian consulate general in Seoul, and the seal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Their covers are slightly different: the cover of the ratified copy 2-C bears the inscription “Treaty of Commerce between the Great Korea and the Great Belgium” (*Tae Han’guk Tae Pirisiguk t’ongsang choyak* 大韓國大比利時國 通商條約) whereas that of copy 3-C bears the inscription “Treaty of Commerce between the Great Belgium and the Great Korea” (*Tae Pirisiguk Tae Han’guk t’ongsang choyak* 大比利時國 大韓國通商條約). Furthermore, copy 2-C contains on the last pages of the treaty the instrument of ratification [fig. 3] with the Great Seal of Korea (*Tae Han kuksae* 大韓國璽) [fig. 4] affixed. The French copy 1-F that was supposed to be kept in the Belgian consulate is missing. In 1917, Belgium decided to close its consulate in Seoul and entrust its

interests in Korea to an honorary consul.⁹² Copy 1-F is probably what is listed as “Traité entre la Corée et la Belgique” in the inventory of the archives of the consulate signed in September 1935 by the newly accredited Belgian honorary consul Iwaya Jirō (1885-?) when he took office.⁹³ After Japan’s surrender in 1945, Iwaya, who was a Japanese national, handed over these archives to the Foreign Affairs Section of the Office of the Military Governor of the United States Armed Forces in Korea before his repatriation to Japan.⁹⁴ However, the copy of the treaty is not mentioned in the list of items that he turned over in November 1945.⁹⁵ This suggests that copy 1-F was lost between September 1935 and November 1945 during the mandate of Iwaya Jirō or that the Belgian honorary consul did not hand it over to the American occupation forces.

None of the three copies (1-C, 2-F, 4-F) supposed to be kept by the Korean side has so far been traced.⁹⁶ There is a copy conserved in the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies under the reference “Kyu-23471” (奎 23471) but this is an unsigned transcription (*p’ilsabon* 筆寫本) of the treaty, not the copy 1-C signed by the Belgian and Korean plenipotentiaries in March 1901. No original copies seem to be housed in the Changsōgak either, for the treaty is mentioned neither in the third volume of the *Overview of the Old Documents conserved in the Changsōgak* (Changsōgak 2012), which is dedicated to diplomatic documents, nor in the section “State Administration and Foreign Affairs” of *Jangseogak Archives Masterpieces* (Jangseogak Archives of the Academy of Korean Studies 2017).

⁹² AEB, Pers. ext. 2041, Broqueville to della Faille de Leverghem, 20 November 1917; della Faille de Leverghem to Broqueville, 23 November 1917.

⁹³ AEB, pers. ext. 2041, “Inventaire des archives du consulat de Belgique à Séoul au 2 septembre 1935, date de la prise de possession du poste par M.J. Iwaya, 2 September 1935”, annexed to Bassompierre to Van Zeeland, 19 September 1935.

⁹⁴ AEB, 3414/III, Daufresne de la Chevalerie to Spaak, 8 March 1947.

⁹⁵ AEB, 3414/III, “Headquarters of the United States Armed Forces in Korea, Office of the Military Governor, Foreign Affairs Section, List of properties received from the Belgian Consulate-General, Seoul, Korea”, annexed to Daufresne de la Chevalerie to Spaak, 8 March 1947.

⁹⁶ The author is indebted to Park Soohyun (Embassy of the Republic of Korea to Belgium) for her help to clarify this point.

4 Conclusion

Belgium's idea of establishing official relations with Korea dates back to at least 1875, when Meiji Japan was trying to 'open up' the country. From then on and throughout the nineteenth century, Belgian diplomats posted in China and Japan repeatedly suggested the establishment of such relations. Although the major Western powers signed treaties of amity and commerce with Korea in the 1880s, it was not until 1901 that the Belgian-Korean treaty was concluded. This delay can be explained by several factors. Firstly, although Korea was depicted in diplomatic dispatches as a potential access to resources and an outlet for Belgium's industry, Belgian companies were in general not interested in the Far East until the end of the nineteenth century, their area of expansion being limited to Europe and Russia (Kurgan-Van Hentenryk 1972, 836). Not surprisingly, Korea is not mentioned once in the 91-page report *Tentatives d'expansion belge en Extrême-Orient 1840-1890* attributed to the influential secretary-general of the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs⁹⁷ and recapitulating Belgium's expansion in the Far East. Secondly, the political turmoil that shook Korea - and specifically the 1882 mutiny and the 1884 coup - led Belgium to postpone negotiations with the Chosŏn Court. Thirdly, one can also legitimately assume that the overall negative image of a "barbarian" Korea conveyed by Belgian diplomats in China and Japan throughout the nineteenth century⁹⁸ reinforced Belgium's reserved attitude toward the country. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the conclusion of this treaty was precipitated by the formation of an Anglo-Belgian syndicate in charge of the exploitation of a gold mining concession in Korea with a general manager who was a Belgian. It was to protect the interests of the Belgian financial institutions and individual financiers involved in this syndicate that the decision was taken to expedite negotiations with Korea.

The agreement signed in Seoul on 23 March 1901 after approximately three months of negotiation was fundamentally an unequal treaty to the advantage of Belgium. Similar to those previously concluded with other Western powers, this new treaty consolidated the regime of multilateral imperialism that had taken shape from the 1880s onwards on the Korean peninsula, by legally paving the way for Belgium's activities in the country. Even before the signing of the treaty, the Belgian plenipotentiary Léon Vincart (who was later

⁹⁷ The historian Jean Stengers doubts that Baron Lambertmont wrote this report entirely, although he suggests that he did supervise its writing (Stengers 1955, 11).

⁹⁸ On the eve of the First Sino-Japanese War, Korea was still portrayed as "semi-barbarian" by the Belgian representative in Japan (AEB, CPL: Japon, vol. 2, d'Anethan to Merode Westerloo, 29 June 1894).

officially accredited as consul general) sought to promote Belgium's interests in Seoul's diplomatic circles where, according to his own words, "we spend our time thwarting one another".⁹⁹ From the Belgian diplomatic archives, three important (and chronologically overlapping) dossiers can be identified, to which Vincart devoted most of his efforts during his long stay in Korea (November 1900-November 1909): the conclusion of loans involving Belgian institutions, the appointment of a Belgian advisor to the Korean Court,¹⁰⁰ and the acquisition of a new mining concession for one of his compatriots. Except for the appointment of an advisor (who would then be dismissed by his own government because of his anti-Japanese stance), these endeavours ended in failure.

The treaty negotiations with neutral Belgium – presented on several occasions since 1882 as a potential model for Korea – took place at a time when the Korean emperor was pursuing a policy of neutrality. A few months after the ratification of the treaty, during an audience held in January 1902, Kojong dismissed everyone and asked Vincart whether he would take the initiative in recognizing Korea as a neutral state. The consul general replied that the question was "delicate" and that he could not "promise anything". But he added that in any case Belgium should have an "interest" when initiating a *démarche* of this kind, pointing out that he had not yet obtained the mining concession he had demanded, and that no Belgian officials had thus far been hired.¹⁰¹ Belgian diplomatic archives clearly show that amid fierce competition between accredited powers in Seoul, Belgium's neutrality was an argument frequently raised by Vincart to convince the Korean side to favour his country.¹⁰² They provide, however, no evidence indicating that the Belgian government took any concrete action to initiate the recognition of Korea as a neutral state.

⁹⁹ AEB, 2839/III, Vincart to Favereau, 7 November 1901.

¹⁰⁰ On this question, see our paper "Belgium and the Russo-Japanese War: Focusing on the role of Adhémar Delcoigne, Belgian Advisor to the Chosŏn Court" presented at the Sixteenth International Conference of the European Association for Japanese Studies (Ghent, 28 August 2021).

¹⁰¹ AEB, B 147/II, Vincart to Favereau, 17 January 1902. AEB, 17.183, "Les relations belgo-coréennes avant la Seconde Guerre mondiale", study prepared by René Vanhenten and addressed to Ambassador Gaston Jenebelly, p. 13, annexed to Note from Willequet to Davignon, 8 January 1975.

¹⁰² For an example relating to the nomination of a Belgian advisor, see AEB, 2839. III, Vincart to Favereau, 18 November 1900.

Table 1 Description of the original copies of the Belgium-Korea Treaty of 1901

Set	Copy	Language	Characteristics	Kept by	Current location
1	1-F	French	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signed in Seoul on 23 March 1901 by Léon Vincart and Pak Che-Sun. - Supposed to be conserved in the Belgian Consulate General in Seoul. - Lost between 1935 and 1945? Not handed over by the Belgian honorary consul to the American occupation forces in 1945? 	Belgium	Unknown
	1-C	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signed in Seoul on 23 March 1901 by Léon Vincart and Pak Che-Sun.- Supposed to be conserved in the Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 	Korea	Unknown
2	2-F	French	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signed in Seoul on 23 March 1901 by Léon Vincart and Pak Che-Sun. - Expected to be signed by Emperor Kojong and then exchanged for copy 3-F signed by King Leopold II. 	Korea	Unknown
	2-C	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signed in Seoul on 23 March 1901 by Léon Vincart and Pak Che-Sun- Cover bears the inscription <i>Tae Han'guk Tae Pirisiguk t'ongsang choyak</i> 大韓國 大比利時國 通商條約 ("Treaty of Commerce between the Great Korea and the Great Belgium"). - Bears the signature of Vincart, the seal of the Belgian Consulate General in Seoul, and the seal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (<i>Oebu taesin chi in</i> 外部大臣之印). - Expected to be signed by Emperor Kojong and then exchanged for copy 3-C signed by King Leopold II. - Contains the instrument of ratification with the Great Seal of Korea (<i>Tae Han kuksae</i> 大韓國璽) on the last pages of the treaty. - Exchanged in Seoul on 17 October 1901 for copy 4-F. 	Belgium	Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Brussels)

Set	Copy	Language	Characteristics	Kept by	Current location
3	3-F	French	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signed on 23 March 1901 by Léon Vincart and Pak Che-Sun. - Cover bears the inscription “Traité passé entre Sa Majesté le Roi des Belges Sa Majesté l’Empereur de Corée”. - Bears the signature of Vincart, the seal of the Belgian Consulate General in Seoul, the signature of Pak Che-Sun and the seal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs (<i>Oebu taeshin chi in</i> 外部大臣之印). - Sent to Belgium to be signed by Leopold II and then exchanged for copies 2-F and 2-C (set 2) signed by Emperor Kojong. - Not returned to Korea but instead archived by Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 	Belgium	Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Brussels)
	3-C	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Signed on 23 March 1901 by Léon Vincart and Pak Che-Sun. - Cover bears the inscription <i>Tae Pirishiguk Tae Han’guk t’ongsang choyak</i> 大比利時國大韓國通商條約 (“Treaty of Commerce between the Great Belgium and the Great Korea”). - Bears the signature of Vincart, the Seal of the Belgian Consulate General in Seoul, and the Seal of the Minister of Foreign Affairs <i>Oebu taesin chi in</i> 外部大臣之印. - Sent to Belgium to be signed by Leopold II and then exchanged for copies 2-F and 2-C (set 2) signed by Emperor Kojong. - Not returned to Korea but instead archived by the Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 	Belgium	Belgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Brussels)
4	4-F	French	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Drafted in Brussels in Summer 1901. - Consists of the instrument of ratification signed by King Leopold II with the French text of the treaty inserted. - Exchanged in Seoul on 17 October 1901 for the ratified copy 2-C. 	Korea	Unknown

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