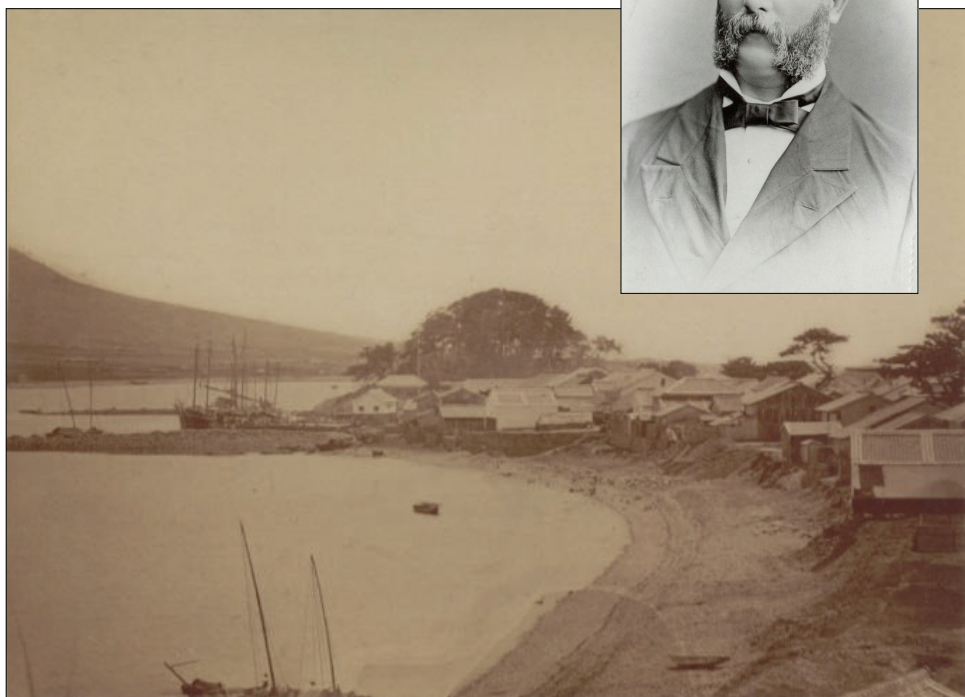
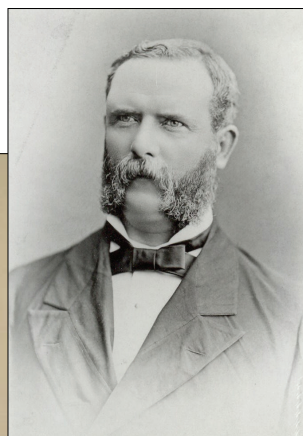


# In the Service of His Korean Majesty

William Nelson Lovatt, the Pusan Customs,  
and Sino-Korean Relations, 1876–1888



Wayne Patterson

## Notes to this edition

This is an electronic edition of the printed book. Minor corrections may have been made within the text; new information and any errata appear on the current page only.

Korea Research Monograph 35

*In the Service of His Korean Majesty: William Nelson Lovatt,  
the Pusan Customs, and Sino-Korean Relations, 1876-1888*  
Wayne Patterson

ISBN-13: 978-1-55729-164-6 (electronic)

ISBN-13: 978-1-55729-100-4 (print)

ISBN-10: 1-55729-100-4 (print)

Please visit the IEAS Publications website at  
<http://ieas.berkeley.edu/publications/>  
for more information and to see our catalogue.

Send correspondence and manuscripts to  
Katherine Lawn Chouta, Managing Editor  
Institute of East Asian Studies  
1995 University Avenue, Suite 510H  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2318 USA  
[ieaseditor@berkeley.edu](mailto:ieaseditor@berkeley.edu)



**Institute of  
East Asian Studies**  
University of California, Berkeley

May 2015



INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA • BERKELEY  
CENTER FOR KOREAN STUDIES

# In the Service of His Korean Majesty

William Nelson Lovatt,  
the Pusan Customs, and  
Sino-Korea Relations, 1876–1888

Wayne Patterson

A publication of the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, Berkeley. Although the institute is responsible for the selection and acceptance of manuscripts in this series, responsibility for the opinions expressed and for the accuracy of statements rests with their authors.

The Korea Research Monograph series is one of several publication series sponsored by the Institute of East Asian Studies in conjunction with its constituent units. The others include the China Research Monograph series, the Japan Research Monograph series, and the Research Papers and Policy Studies series.

Send correspondence and manuscripts to

Katherine Lawn Chouta, Managing Editor  
Institute of East Asian Studies  
2223 Fulton Street, 6th Floor  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2318  
ieaseditor@berkeley.edu

#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Patterson, Wayne, 1946–

In the service of his Korean majesty : William Nelson Lovatt, the Pusan Customs, and Sino-Korea relations, 1876–1888 / Wayne Patterson.

p. cm. — (Korea research monograph / Center For Korean studies ; 35)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

*Summary:* "This book, based upon the correspondence of William Nelson Lovatt, Korea's first commissioner of customs in Pusan, looks at the informal imperialism exercised by China over Korea in the 1880s, as China's increasing interventionism affected Lovatt's hiring, his experiences in Korea, and his eventual termination" — Provided by publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-55729-100-4

ISBN-10: 1-55729-100-4

1. Lovatt, William Nelson, 1838–1904. 2. Customs administration—Korea—History—19th century. 3. China—Foreign economic relations—Korea—History. 4. Korea—Foreign economic relations—China—History. 5. Pusan (Korea)—Social life and customs. I. Title.

HJ7069.5.A6P38 2011

382'.7092—dc23 [B]

2011044105

Copyright © 2012 by the Regents of the University of California.

Printed in the United States of America.

All rights reserved.

Front cover image: William Nelson Lovatt and a view of Pusan harbor.  
All illustrations are courtesy of the de Carbonel family unless otherwise noted.

# Contents

Preface	vii
A Note on Romanization, Name Order, and Citation	xiii
PART ONE	
1. Introduction	3
2. Möllendorff and Lovatt: The Early Years	10
3. Establishment of the Korean Customs Service	19
4. To Go or Not To Go to Korea?	25
PART TWO	
5. Life in Pusan	39
6. War and a Coup	76
7. The Beginning of Trouble and Jennie's Departure	89
PART THREE	
8. Merrill in Charge	111
9. End Game	137
10. Departure from Korea	155
PART FOUR	
11. Epilogue	163
12. Conclusion	176
Glossary	183
Bibliography	185
Index	190

# Preface

William Nelson Lovatt (1838–1904), a British American, served the Korean government as its first commissioner of customs in Pusan from 1883 until 1886. Although Lovatt cannot be considered a major historical figure, and has not been very well known to historians of Korea, his journals, correspondence, and photographs, recently discovered, nonetheless significantly advance our knowledge of this critical time in the late Chosŏn period.

A number of scholars have looked at Korea in the 1880s, including Kim Dalchoong, Martina Deuchler, Lee Yur-Bok, Kirk Larsen, Robert Swartout, Lew Young Ick, Koh Byong-ik, and Kim Key-hiuk, among others. Much of their attention is focused on the activities of Yüan Shih-k'ai (Yuan Shikai) in Seoul as the most visible manifestation of China's policy toward Korea during what is generally known as Korea's "Chinese decade" before the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). Attracting less attention is the fledgling maritime customs service of Korea and its relationship to the larger issue of China's policy toward Korea. The Lovatt papers allow us to supplement these earlier studies by providing an unprecedented inner history of this important period that decenters our attention and refocuses it away from Seoul and Yüan and demonstrates that China's policies had consequences beyond the immediate environs of the capital.

The central and overarching theme in this study is the transformation of China's policy toward Korea from the ritualistic hands-off and largely benevolent policy expressed in Korean as *sadae* (Chinese: *shida*), or "serving the superior [China]," before 1880, to an increasingly interventionist policy in the first half of the 1880s, and, finally, by the second half of the decade, to a policy that has been variously termed as "indirect," "informal," or "secondary" imperialism. A key bellwether in this transformation can be found in the customs service. Lovatt's arrival in Korea in 1883 as commissioner of customs in Pusan was a result of China's despatch of Paul Georg von Möllendorff the previous year to establish a customs service and to advise Korea on foreign affairs to the advantage of China. Lovatt's

forced departure from Korea three years later was similarly a result of the increasingly harsh measures China imposed upon its smaller neighbor.

The two events that triggered the more draconian measures in the second half of the decade, which included Lovatt's termination, were the abortive pro-Japanese Kapsin Coup of late 1884 and Möllendorff's efforts in early 1885 to replace China's influence with that of Russia. In the wake of these two events, Möllendorff was replaced by Henry F. Merrill as head of customs, Owen Nickerson Denny was summoned to provide pro-Chinese foreign policy advice to Korea, the Taewŏn'gun was returned to Korea to guard against any further pro-Russian proclivities, and Yüan Shih-k'ai was dispatched to Seoul as the Chinese "resident." Overseeing these more forceful measures was China's *de facto* foreign minister Li Hung-chang (Li Hongzhang), who aimed to prevent Korea from falling under Japanese or Russian influence and posing a threat to China's security. And yet despite these increasingly interventionist moves, China never converted Korea into an outright colony. Although there was broad agreement in China that Korea needed to be kept on a tight rein, there were disagreements on the means to be employed to attain that end. As a result, this study will show that China's policy and actions were by no means uniform or consistent. Moreover, the key players—nations, institutions, individuals, and factions—were often at odds, allowing conspiracies of silence, threats of blackmail, personal rivalries, and shifting allegiances to color the relationship between the two countries. In all of these, both Lovatt and Korea found themselves at the center of this maelstrom being dragged down by an increasingly imperialistic China. As a result, Lovatt eventually lost his job, and Korea, stifled in its attempt to modernize and strengthen itself, ultimately lost its independence.

Within the framework of Sino-Korea relations and the role of Lovatt and the customs in that relationship, the Lovatt papers are rich and diverse enough to allow an in-depth exploration of four related aspects of the late Chosŏn period. One of these is a fresh look at conditions in Korea generally and Pusan in particular soon after its "opening" in 1876. Although it might be argued that Lovatt's observations are superficial because he was not a Korea expert, did not venture much beyond Pusan except for one month in Seoul, had limited contact with ordinary Koreans, and did not read and could barely speak the language, it is important to remember that, with the possible exception of George Clayton Foulk, there *were* no Western experts on Korea at that time. In fact, Lovatt lived in three Asian countries (India, China, and Korea) for nearly three decades and was fluent in Chinese after his nearly quarter of a century in that country, so he was already a seasoned observer of Asia by the time he arrived in Pusan. Indeed, the conditions that Lovatt describe are not inconsistent with other

contemporary observations of late nineteenth-century Korea. At the same time, given Lovatt's somewhat insulated existence, the lack of Korean agency will be readily apparent.

Second, Lovatt provides a glimpse of the inner workings of the Korean Customs Service during this early "open port period" (*kaehang sidae*). Unlike accounts that look at the customs service from the top down and concentrate on trade or economic considerations, Lovatt's internal perspective from the bottom up emphasizes instead the social, political, and international troubles that the customs confronted in its formative years. He was able to form this view in part because of his close friendship with Möllendorff, the first chief commissioner of Korean customs, and in part because Henry Merrill, Möllendorff's successor, was committed to reforming that institution, one consequence of which was Lovatt's termination. In providing heretofore unknown details, the Lovatt papers serve to complement the existing literature on the Korean Customs Service.

Third, since Lovatt, with his wife and youngest daughter, represented the first and only Western family to reside in Pusan during the first decade of Korea's opening, we are provided with an intimate view of expatriate life in that southeastern port city. The Lovatt papers paint a picture of loneliness, boredom, and isolation, with the family depending upon the infrequent passenger steamers or warships for mail, newspapers, gossip, and the occasional visitor from the outside. But mostly, the Lovatts were left to their own devices as they tried to carve out a modicum of normal family and social life in what they regarded as a hardship post. And because they lived in the Japanese section of the city, much of their day-to-day existence consisted of shopping in Japanese establishments and socializing with their Japanese neighbors.

Fourth, and finally, the Lovatt papers shed new light on the actions and attitudes of some of the more important figures who were influential in late nineteenth-century China and Korea. These include, among others, Li Hung-chang, Sir Robert Hart, Henry F. Merrill, and Paul Georg von Möllendorff, all of whom held differing, and sometimes opposing, views on how the relationship between the two nations should be constructed.

This project had its origins in the early 1980s, when I led a student trip to China and had the good fortune to meet Lina Sharp, who was touring China at the time. Upon learning my occupation, she mentioned that she had in her possession the correspondence of a man who had worked in East Asia in the late nineteenth century, given to her by a friend before he died. When she asked if I would be interested in the letters, I replied in the affirmative. The letters were those of William Nelson Lovatt and his wife, Jennie. Although some letters are missing, incomplete, or lacking in dates, leaving gaps in the documentation, the collection is complete



enough to allow one to flesh out the four themes identified previously. Because I was working on the history of the first immigration from Korea to the United States when I first received the letters, I had to put the project aside for nearly two decades before starting work on it. Although this book rests largely upon the foundation of Lovatt's correspondence, I undertook additional research on three continents to gain a more complete picture. At each location, I was aided immeasurably by many institutions and individuals.

Work on the project began in earnest in 1999 when I went to Harvard University, first as a visiting scholar and then as a visiting professor of Korean history, enabling me to make use of that university's fine library and archival collections, in particular the Harvard-Yenching Library, the Pusey Library, and, finally, the Houghton Library, which contains the correspondence of Hart and Merrill. My gratitude goes to the Korea Institute there, including Susan Lee Lawrence, Carter Eckert, David McCann, and Edward Baker, as well as the students in my graduate seminar in Korean history. I was able to return to Harvard in 2008 for additional research, thanks to a grant from the China and Inner Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies, which I gratefully acknowledge. While I was at Harvard I also began to track down the descendants of Lovatt and his wife for additional information. Many of them I met at a Lovatt family reunion in Minnesota in 2004, the centennial year of his death, and several of them had additional letters and photographs that they were kind enough to share with me.

At the University of California, Berkeley, in 2009 and 2010, simultaneous appointments as visiting professor of Asian Studies and visiting scholar at the Institute of East Asian Studies gave me the opportunity to write the manuscript and to locate, at the Bancroft Library, Lovatt's photo album and journal donated by his grandson, Henri de Carbonel. Many thanks go to John Lie, Clare You, Martin Backstrom, Cathy Lenfestey, Aaron Miller, Kenneth Wells, Wen-hsin Yeh, Minja Lee, and Joanne Sandstrom, who helped make my stay there a productive one. Special thanks go to Kate Lawn Chouta, the editor who shepherded the manuscript to its final book form. Thanks go also to her two outside readers of the manuscript, Kirk Larsen and Don Baker, who made many helpful suggestions. Also in the San Francisco Bay area was a fourth-generation descendant of Lovatt, Frank de Carbonel, who provided additional letters and photographs.

Other research locations in the United States included Nevada, Arizona, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. In Nevada, two fourth-generation descendants of Lovatt, Bill de Carbonel and Susan de Carbonel Shultz, shared additional letters and photographs and were always gracious with their hospitality. Also in Nevada was Lina Sharp, who originally provided me

with the bulk of the Lovatt correspondence. Dorothy Shaw Gillette of Arizona, a descendant of Lovatt's wife, shared additional correspondence and photos. The Minnesota State Historical Society in St. Paul and the Stillwater (Minnesota) Historical Society helped me locate the site of Lovatt's house and that of his in-laws, the Lovatts' marriage license, and the graves of Jennie and Mabel Lovatt. In Wisconsin, at my home institution of St. Norbert College, I am indebted to the Faculty Personnel Committee for a sabbatical leave, the Faculty Development Committee for several summer grants to conduct additional follow-up research, Dean Jeff Frick for a grant from the Faculty Publications Fund, and Stacey Wanta, who assisted with the photographs and illustrations. My greatest thanks, however, go to Peggy Schlapman, former Humanities and Fine Arts Division secretary, who spent long hours conscientiously and painstakingly transcribing Lovatt's difficult handwriting. Without her invaluable assistance, this study would not have been possible.

Research for this project also took me to Europe. In Andorra, I interviewed Michael Lovatt, Lovatt's only surviving grandson. In England, the Public Records Office in Kew Gardens and the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London yielded valuable information. I was able to access Robert Hart's nearly indecipherable diaries in the Special Collections of the Queen's University, Belfast, Ireland, where the curator, Deirdre Wildy, assisted me and extended her hospitality. In France, Regine Thiriez of the Ricci Institute in Paris and Charles Blackburn supplied me with the correspondence and photographs, respectively, of Theophile Piry, Lovatt's successor in Pusan.

Finally, my research took me to Korea. In Seoul, the Kyujanggak Institute at Seoul National University yielded the correspondence between Merrill and the Korean Foreign Office. Robert Neff assisted me on numerous points regarding Westerners in late Chosŏn. E. J. Kim of the Korean Customs Service in Seoul provided a rare copy of one of Möllendorff's letter books. During a Fulbright Fellowship at Yonsei University in 2006, I was aided by Professors Lew Young Ick, Oh In-Hwan, Kim Hyuk-rae, and Samuel Hawley, as well as the students in my Korean history seminar. I am grateful to the Fulbright Commission, particularly its director, Shim Jae-Ok, for making my affiliation there possible. In Taegu, Michael Finch of Keimyung University kindly read an earlier draft and made many helpful suggestions. In Pusan, I received the expert assistance of Chung Dae-Hwa of Pusan National University and Kim Jae-Seung of the Korea Maritime Institute. At the Pusan Customs Museum (Pusan segwan pangmulgwan), I was assisted by its curator, Lee Yong-deuk. My research in Pusan was funded in part by a grant from the Northeast Asia Council of the Association for Asian Studies, whose support I gratefully acknowledge.

Final thanks go to my wife, Marlene, for her support throughout and for letting me use this project as an excuse to avoid housework. And my canine and feline research assistants, Montgomery and Cecil, were always eager to help. Although I would like to blame them for any errors of fact or interpretation, in the end, I am solely responsible.

## A Note on Romanization, Name Order, and Citation

To maintain the flavor of the late nineteenth century, I have opted not to employ the more recent pinyin rendering of Chinese names, nor have I altered the spelling or romanization in Lovatt's letters, journals, or other English-language primary documents. Thus, Korea often appears as "Corea," and most place-names follow the postal, Wade-Giles, or Lovatt's own idiosyncratic rendering of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean words. For example, Inch'ön, Jenchuan, Jinsen, and Chemulp'o are often used interchangeably. Wönsan is sometimes referred to as Yuensan or Gensan, and Pusan as well as Fusan appears, reflecting not only the Korean and the Japanese pronunciation but also the dual nature of the city. Otherwise, Korean names and places are rendered using McCune-Reischauer romanization, except for Seoul. Japanese words are romanized using the modified Hepburn system, and familiar place-names, such as Tokyo, are given without macrons. Following standard practice, Asian family names are given first, followed by the given names. Lovatt's letters to his wife make up the vast majority of the correspondence and are cited simply as "WNL to JSL." In all other cases, the writer and the recipient are identified in the usual way, but only abbreviated citations are given in the notes (e.g., *Merrill Letters*). For complete bibliographic information, see the bibliography herein. In the interest of economy, citations normally appear only at the ends of paragraphs.

## Introduction

After the devastating incursions into the Korean peninsula of Hideyoshi and his Japanese forces in the late sixteenth century were repelled with assistance from Korea's Chinese "big brother," the relationship between Japan and Korea was regularized in 1609 along the lines of *kyorin*, or "neighboring relations." Missions from Korea went to Edo (present-day Tokyo), the capital of the Tokugawa shogunate, and trade was carried out between the two nations through the intermediary of the Tsushima domain. To facilitate that trade, the Korean government allowed the Japanese to set up a facility in Pusan known as the Waegwan, or "Japan House." Pusan thus became Korea's first "treaty port," and Japanese took up residence there. Korea also traded with China by means of trade fairs on the border and via tribute missions that traveled overland to Peking (Beijing), one aspect of the Korean policy of *sadae* (Chinese: *shida*), or "serving the superior." None of the three countries, which were dominated by a Confucian philosophy that minimized the role of trade and commerce, attempted to expand upon the trade. This system, more political and ritualistic than commercial, remained relatively unchanged for more than two hundred years, until the Opium Wars in China in the middle of the nineteenth century. Among the soldiers in that conflict was a young William Nelson Lovatt (1838–1904).<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> For more on the relationship between Japan and Korea between 1609 and 1876, see James B. Lewis, *Frontier Contact between Chosŏn Korea and Tokugawa Japan*, as well as his 1994 dissertation, titled "The Pusan Japan House (Waegwan) and Chosŏn Korea: Early-Modern Korean Views of Japan through Economic, Political, and Social Connections." Trade between China and Korea is discussed in Chun Hae-jong (Chŏn Hae-jong), "Sino-Korean Tributary Relations during the Ch'ing Period," 90–111. Prior to the Hideyoshi invasions, there were three ports authorized for trade with Japan after 1426: Tongnae (Pusan), Ŭngch'ŏn, and Ulsan. Thus, the establishment of the Waegwan after 1609 represented a reduction in the scope of Korean-Japanese interactions and trade.

The road that took Lovatt to China was a long one, on which he had considerable international exposure. Born in 1838 in Southampton, England, William enlisted in the British army in 1853 at the age of fifteen and was attached to an artillery unit. His first overseas posting, to Bermuda, was for the most part routine. But when he was sent to India in 1857 as part of the British response to the Sepoy Mutiny, he saw combat for the first time. After nearly three years in India, during which he won two medals and attained the rank of sergeant in the Royal Artillery, his unit was ordered to China, where the Second Opium War was raging. Shipping out from Calcutta, with stops in Singapore and Hong Kong, he finally disembarked southeast of Tientsin (Tianjin).

Lovatt's initial foray into China was marked by combat. After participating in the taking of the massive forts at Taku (Dagu), Lovatt and the British army, in concert with the French, marched through Tientsin and on to Peking, 90 miles away, and secured the final capitulation of the Chinese government in the summer of 1860. His stay in the capital proved to be short lived, as he was soon transferred to Shanghai, where he found himself engaged in combat once again, this time in support of the Ch'ing (Qing) dynasty against the Taiping rebels who were menacing that city. Fighting with him was the fabled Colonel Charles "Chinese" Gordon and his "Ever-Victorious Army."

After two years in Shanghai, Lovatt decided on a career change. Mustering out of the British military, he signed on with the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service under the inspector generalship of the Irishman Robert Hart and was posted to the newly opened treaty port of Hankow (Hankou) in early 1863 as a tidewaiter. From there, he was subsequently transferred to two other Yangtze (Yangzi) River treaty ports before arriving in Tientsin in the mid-1860s, now at the rank of tidesurveyor.<sup>2</sup>

A few years before Lovatt arrived in China with British forces, Japan became the second East Asian country to experience Western encroachment, when Commodore Matthew C. Perry arrived in 1853. Although the shock of the Opium Wars had not been enough to topple the Ch'ing dynasty in China, Perry's intrusion did contribute to the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate fifteen years later, in 1868, giving rise to a new political system named after the new emperor, Meiji. This new government was eager to emulate the West to strengthen itself and was particularly interested in expanding trade, not only with the West but also with its neighbor, Korea. This

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information on the early years of the Chinese Customs Service, see Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast*. Tidewaiters boarded ships searching for smuggled goods and determined how much and what cargo a ship was carrying in order to levy the appropriate customs duty. Tidesurveyors supervised tidewaiters and calculated the duty to be levied. Oftentimes, tidesurveyors simultaneously served as harbormasters.

## TWO

# Möllendorff and Lovatt: The Early Years

Paul Georg von Möllendorff first arrived in China in 1869 at the age of twenty-two as an assistant secretary in the customs service with an understanding from the German government that after five years he would be given an appointment in the German diplomatic service in China. In 1871, he was posted to Kiukiang, where William and Jennie Lovatt had arrived the previous year. According to the biography of Möllendorff written by his wife, William Nelson and Paul Georg soon became good friends. Jennie, meanwhile, bore two more children—John and Ida—and in the summer of 1875 returned to Minnesota with all three children.<sup>1</sup>

In 1874, Möllendorff left Kiukiang and the Chinese Customs Service to become the German vice-consul in Tientsin, but he and Lovatt kept up a regular correspondence. So close were they that they shared confidences of a highly personal nature. For example, Lovatt found himself in the uncomfortable position of intermediary in a romance between Möllendorff and a missionary, Lucy Hoag. Möllendorff had courted her when they had been together in Kiukiang, but the affair had been put on hold when Möllendorff departed. As her friend, Lovatt knew that she really loved Möllendorff and thought she “would be very glad to give up mission work for a house of her own.” When Hoag learned that her former lover would be in Shanghai in the summer of 1876, she asked Lovatt “to write and tell him she would [also] be in Shanghai.” Lovatt did so, but “doubt[ed] if there was any depth to his love for her,” and that “what little he had [had] long since evaporated.” As Hoag sailed downriver, Lovatt guessed that “Möellendorff will call and see her, but that will be all.” And if Möllendorff were not to call on her, “she will feel very bad indeed.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Möllendorff, *P. G. von Möllendorff*, 22–23. This book would form the basis for Koh Byong-ik's “Mok In-dök ŭi sugi.” See also his “Mok In-dök ŭi kobing kwa kŭ paegyŏng.” Lee, *West Goes East*, 43.

<sup>2</sup> WNL to JSL, October 10, 1875, and March 19, 1876. Möllendorff's love interest may have been Dr. Lucy H. Hoag of the American Methodist Episcopal Mission, although at times in

### THREE

## Establishment of the Korean Customs Service

Upon docking in Inch'ŏn, Möllendorff traveled the nearly 30 miles overland to Seoul and arrived there in mid-December 1882, becoming the first Westerner permitted to set foot on Korean soil and the first Westerner to meet Kojong. At that first audience with the king he was made a noble and appointed councillor (*ch'amŭi samu*) to the newly created Office of Foreign Affairs. Five months later, in May, he was made vice-minister of that office and inspector general of the Korean Customs Service [Haegwan ch'ong semusa]. In effect, Möllendorff wore two hats—as head of customs and principal foreign affairs adviser.<sup>1</sup>

Möllendorff had to create the Korean Customs Service almost ex nihilo. Determining that Korea did not have enough start-up money, Möllendorff organized a fund-raising trip to China soon after his arrival in Seoul, and, together with Min Yŏng-ik, departed for Tientsin in late January 1883. Using Korean mines and anticipated customs revenue as collateral, and with assistance from Li and T'ang T'ing-shu (Tang Tingshu), the director of the Chinese Steam Navigation Company, Möllendorff hoped to receive a loan of half a million taels. While back in Tientsin, he looked in on his pregnant wife and his daughter and anticipated linking up with Lovatt to persuade him to accept the earlier offer of a commissionership. But Möllendorff was unsuccessful on both counts. Lovatt was away on a month-long hunting trip in Mongolia, and Möllendorff was able to raise only 200,000 taels, a shortfall that did not bode well for the future financial stability of the Korean Customs Service. From Tientsin, the delegation proceeded to Shanghai.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Lee, *West Goes East*, 47–48; Larsen, “From Suzerainty to Commerce,” 64, 350. In mid-January 1883, he was also named vice-minister of the Office of Revenue and Port Administration (Chonggaksa), at a rank of 3a. He took the name of Mok In-dŏk and was known as Mok ch'amp'an (Möllendorff, vice-minister). His title as head of customs was also known variously as chief commissioner or commissioner general.

<sup>2</sup> *Pusansisa*, 1:800; Lee, *West Goes East*, 50–52; WNL to JSL, January 1, 1883; and Larsen, *Tradition*, 143. Tang is often also referred to by the Cantonese pronunciation of his name:



## FOUR

# To Go or Not To Go to Korea?

"Personally, I am not in favour of going to Corea unless it is an awful good thing, but it is no use bothering oneself about that." Lovatt penned these words to his wife in early 1883, still unsure whether to accept Möllendorff's unofficial offer of a commissionership in Korea. In the process of deciding, Lovatt had to weigh several factors, and most of these pointed toward rejecting the offer.<sup>1</sup>

One factor was the sheer weight of inertia that militated against change. Lovatt was loath to abandon "a comfortable situation in the extreme, fairly well paid, and a pretty secure position" spanning more than two decades, adding, "It is such an important step to leave the service after so many years." He was familiar with China, its language, and its customs routine; Korea represented the unknown: "The more I think of Corea, the less I think of going there, for after all, it is a very insignificant country compared with China and I don't like the idea of giving up my comfortable easy berth in the Customs for pioneering in such a little country as Corea." Moreover, Tientsin represented a very favorable posting: "I would like to live here and you [Jennie] with me five years and be as saving as possible. The climate is the best I have been in in China." And if he remained in the Chinese service, there was always the admittedly slim possibility of moving up in rank: "I am *hoping* the I.G. may offer me something to stop in the [Chinese] service and not go to Corea, but again, promotion has been and is so slow in the service."<sup>2</sup>

It also remained an open question whether Möllendorff could actually establish a customs service on a solid footing. After all, Lovatt could not

---

<sup>1</sup> WNL to JSL, March 16, 1883.

<sup>2</sup> WNL to JSL, April 10 and 20, June 2, and July 17 and 20, 1883. Emphasis in the original. To convince his wife that he valued family togetherness over rising in the ranks, he averred that "if the I.G. asks me (which is very unlikely) what I should like, I shall decline everything in the way of promotion, and ask for two years leave of absence. I prefer to be with you to everything else."

## FIVE

# Life in Pusan

When Lovatt reached Seoul in early September 1883 he was reunited with his old friend—and now his new boss—Paul Georg von Möllendorff, at whose house in Pak-dong he stayed. Being new to the country, Lovatt was about to interact on a continuing basis with Koreans and Japanese for the first time. Did he harbor prejudice toward those of another race? The record is mixed. On the one hand, his view of Africa and blacks was not atypical of prevailing white attitudes in the late nineteenth century: “Africa will have to be opened up, and the niggers must go—this will have to be a white man’s world after all.” On the other hand, he had lived in China for nearly a quarter of a century and possessed by all accounts a modicum of respect for the Chinese people and culture at the same time that his adopted country—the United States—was enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act. Regarding the Japanese, seven years before he arrived in Korea he seemed to disparage them: “Deep will be my maledictions on the Japanese, that light, trivial, and, alas, not overly virtuous people.” But he also compared the Japanese city of Kobe favorably to Chefoo and averred that “there is more sociability amongst the Japanese. They are not so stuck up as the Chinese, and are much better in many respects.” In short, while not free of bias, Lovatt did not denigrate Asians out of hand, and he showed that he could hold a reasonably objective view of Korea and its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup>

Since he was about to assume a position based upon the premise of trade, capitalism, and the free flow of commerce, his views on these topics are also instructive. They indicate that he was a firm believer in the Hobsonian view that the efficiency of modern production techniques resulted

---

<sup>1</sup> WNL to JSL, June 23 and August 19, 1876, and March 3, 1886. Möllendorff’s house was large, newly remodeled, attractive, and not far from the royal palace. It was also rumored to be haunted inasmuch as it had belonged to Min Kyöm-ho, who had been killed the previous year in the Imo Mutiny, and it had remained vacant since then. Möllendorff, however, laughed at the rumor and was more than happy to make the house his residence (Lee, *West Goes East*, 51).

## War and a Coup

Less than a year after Lovatt arrived in Pusan, a series of problems arose that threatened his position as commissioner. The first was the Sino-French War. Rumors that China and France might resort to war first arrived in Pusan late in the summer of 1884: "The steamer that brought the mail also brought us news that China and France are likely to fight after all." A subsequent steamer from Japan confirmed it: "We hear that China and France are at war. I am so glad we are not in China now." Knowing that their family back in Minnesota was unfamiliar with East Asian geography, they reassured them: "You must not worry about us, for the war is not likely to come here."<sup>1</sup>

Having worked for the Chinese government for more than two decades, Lovatt felt a certain sympathy for the Chinese: "Poor France seems to have a great deal of trouble. She will have all she can do to attend to the Chinese. The Chinese have such vast numbers of men and they are now much better armed than they were before." And perhaps recalling the Tientsin Massacre that occurred when he was in Kiukiang in 1870, he averred that the Chinese would "fight the French with the greatest dispatch, for they have always hated the French." Although Lovatt spoke some French, he was certainly no Francophile, lambasting the French for destroying the very Foochow (Fuzhou) Shipyard that they themselves had helped to construct in 1866 and that the Frenchman Prosper Giquel had headed: "The French ought to be ashamed of the way in which they conduct the war." But whatever pro-Chinese and anti-French sentiments Lovatt entertained were trumped by the issue of foreign privilege in China. Many of the Lovatts' Western friends lived and worked in China, and there was always the possibility that they themselves might eventually return to China. A French victory would ensure the continuation of foreign privilege: "I hope

---

<sup>1</sup> JSL to Nellie Lovatt, August 16 and September 4, 1884; JSL to Bessie Shaw, August 23, 1884.

## SEVEN

# The Beginning of Trouble and Jennie's Departure

After only a short time in office, Lovatt began to realize that the Korean Customs Service had problems more serious than merchants trying to weasel out of paying their assessed duty. The low volume of trade that had threatened to reduce scheduled steamer service also made it increasingly apparent that the service as a whole was overstaffed in relation to the amount of business it conducted. When one of Lovatt's former Chinese customs colleagues wrote him to ask if there were any openings, Lovatt had to respond that there was nothing in Korea for him: "The Customs House has now more officers than they need and the money is not so plentiful as might be desired to pay who they have here."<sup>1</sup>

If reforms were not initiated, there were two possible outcomes. One was that the three customhouses in Pusan, Wönsan, and Inch'ön would be closed, and Lovatt would be out of a job: "Papa is afraid the Customs will not be able to go on unless things improve." The other possibility was that, if the customs remained functioning, "downsizing" might be in order. The man in charge, Möllendorff, found himself handcuffed, holding down two full-time jobs and, as his successor acknowledged, having little leeway in the way of resources: "[Reforms initiated by Möllendorff] all suffered for lack of funds, though the Customs Revenue, which was entirely under von Möllendorff's control, was largely drawn upon for their support." Lovatt characterized his own experience in Korea as "a large staff, little money." Nonetheless, Lovatt ran an efficient operation and always managed to meet his payroll. As George Foulk recorded in his diary, "[Charles] Krebs [a customs official under Lovatt] says customs is flourishing here well; they only take dollars now as duty; that Pusan is busy and doing well; and that so far during the Korean month they had taken in \$1400, of which \$1200 per month is required to pay the salaries of the

---

<sup>1</sup> JSL to Nellie Lovatt, March 11, 1884.

## EIGHT

# Merrill in Charge

The first hint of the events that would ultimately force Lovatt from Korea was a seemingly innocuous request in one of his letters home in mid-October 1885: "I can't find my official letters that I brought from China or the one Moellendorff sent me appointing me to the Customs. Did you take them home? If so, never mind." The letters he was searching for contained the legal fine print in his five-year contract as commissioner. But why would he feel a need for these documents? The answer was in letters he had just received from Seoul conveying the shocking news that Paul Georg von Möllendorff had just been fired.<sup>1</sup>

Möllendorff's downfall came when his secret initiative to persuade Russia to become Korea's protector in China's stead became public knowledge in the summer of 1885. Under pressure from China, the Korean government, dominated by the Mins, decided that Möllendorff would have to go. On July 27, he was relieved of his position as vice-minister of the Office of Foreign Affairs, and five weeks later, on September 5, he lost his position as chief commissioner of the Korean Customs Service. Lovatt had long feared that his friend's quirky personality would get him into some sort of diplomatic imbroglio, and his prediction had now proven to be accurate. No doubt recalling Möllendorff's cryptic reference to "difficulties" with the Chinese and the Korean governments and the appearance of the mysterious Russian prince in Möllendorff's entourage when he had transited Pusan earlier that spring, Lovatt could now connect the dots to conclude that Möllendorff had betrayed Li Hung-chang's trust. To replace Möllendorff, Kojong asked Li to send him an American. Unlike three years earlier, when he had appointed Möllendorff over Hart's

---

<sup>1</sup> WNL to JSL, October 14, 17, and 29, 1885. The letters came from Hutchinson, Parker, and Wright. The documents Lovatt was searching for turned up five weeks later: "Hsiung found my dispatch and letters in the drawer of that old desk that stood in the Hall, and now I remember distinctly you telling me they were there" (WNL to JSL, November 17, 1885).

## End Game

Up to this point, China had taken a number of steps to bind Korea closer to itself in the wake of the Kapsin Coup and Möllendorff's approach to the Russians, most notably returning the king's father, dispatching Yüan Shih-k'ai, and sending for Owen Denny. Regarding the customs specifically, Li and Hart had engineered the removal of Möllendorff as chief commissioner and had replaced him with Merrill after being convinced that Merrill would not champion Korea's independence from China. Subsequently, preparing to annex the Korean customs, Hart had arrogated unto himself the publication of Korea's trade statistics and kept Merrill on the Chinese customs payroll. In Korea, Merrill undertook a five-step process to make the Korean customs more efficient and to bring the Chinese and Korean customs services closer together with a view to an eventual merger, including the cancellation of all promotions, the dismissal of superfluous Western staffers, the filling of some of the resulting vacancies with less expensive Chinese and Koreans, and the standardization of reporting procedures. The only step remaining was to dismiss the three commissioners Möllendorff had appointed. Whereas that decision in principle had already been made, primarily by Hart, Merrill had been reluctant to carry it out because he was not completely convinced that the three commissioners, particularly Lovatt, deserved to be fired, because he did not have replacement commissioners from China, and because he could not offer them what he considered to be an adequate severance package. But after Hart obliquely criticized Lovatt, promised to send replacements for all three, and offered 2,000 taels to augment their severance packages, Merrill decided in mid-February to ask them formally for their resignations.

In a coincidence, on the same day that Lovatt learned of the birth of his son, Merrill penned the fateful termination letter:

I have a very disagreeable thing to say and find it hard to say it. You may not be altogether unprepared to learn, however, that a change of

## Departure from Korea

Although Lovatt got neither a commissionership in China nor his fallback position of eighteen month's leave at half pay at the rank of tidesurveyor from Hart, he had nonetheless negotiated a generous retiring allowance of nearly 6,000 dollars, a six-month leave of absence at half salary, an additional year of unpaid leave, a strong letter of recommendation, resignation rather than outright dismissal, and an offer of a job in the Chinese Customs Service if he chose not to be unemployed. With most of his demands having been met, and his negotiations with Hart and Merrill behind him, Lovatt prepared the customs books for the last time: "I have written to Merrill, Hunt, and [illegible] and have sent up the quarterly returns of trade." Ironically, now that he was about to leave, the renovations that he had ordered for the customs house—white plastering, paper ceiling, and foreign doors and windows—had just been completed, rendering it "brighter and far more pleasant." Only the construction of the sea wall remained, scheduled for completion the following January.<sup>1</sup>

By this time in the spring of 1886, the foreign community in Pusan had dwindled even further. Whereas most of the departures were Lovatt's subordinates, they also included members of the small diplomatic and official community. One of these was "Old" Ch'en, the Chinese consul, who had joined Lovatt at many official functions and meals: "The Admiral [Kim] came in here yesterday. The officials have come in to say Goodbye to the Chinese Consul." Of course, Lovatt's position required that he maintain the same routine with Ch'en's replacement: "I am going to tiffin with the [new] Chinese Consul [Liu] at noon when all the officials will assemble there." That routine also included inviting the new consul to dinner: "I had Mr. Liu in to dinner. We had a combination dinner—half the dishes

---

<sup>1</sup> WNL to JSL, March 1 and April 9, 19, and 23, 1886; Piry to Merrill, December 4, 1886, *Theophile Piry Letter Book 1, 1879–1891* (hereafter *Piry Letter Book*).

## Epilogue

In the eighteen months after returning from Korea, Lovatt remained in Minnesota with his family. But as his year of unpaid leave expired and his resignation from the Korean customs took effect at the end of 1887, Lovatt began to reconsider his refusal to return to the Chinese customs. One reason was his continued distaste for the harsh climate, and with a second consecutive winter season looming, the thought of more of the same did not appeal to him. Referring to “those two awful winters of 86–87, 87–88,” Lovatt swore that “I certainly do not wish ever to put in another winter in Minnesota—summers yes, winters no.” A second reason was a marked deterioration in the Lovatts’ finances. He had dabbled in real estate in nearby St. Paul, but those investments proved unsuccessful, such that “everything was going out and nothing was coming in.” Underscoring the seriousness of the problem, he told his wife, “I think if you are led to doubt the wisdom of my coming out [to Asia] again, a glance at that book containing our monthly expenditures will convince you we could not possibly go on in that way much longer.” For these reasons, Lovatt swallowed his pride and sought reemployment in China under Sir Robert Hart, a step he had earlier sworn he would never take.<sup>1</sup>

Lovatt faced a potential snag, however, in his attempt to rejoin the Chinese service. Hart’s offer of employment had been effective only at the time of his forced resignation from the Korean customs in June 1886 and only if Lovatt would accept \$1,500 in severance pay. There was no guarantee that Hart would honor that commitment now, almost two years later, particularly after Lovatt had accepted four times that amount in severance pay. So Lovatt in December 1887 decided to send a formal application for

---

<sup>1</sup> WNL to JSL, May 18 and 31, 1888, and February 28, 1890. In 1887, Jennie’s father, Joseph Shaw, was sixty-eight and her mother, Jane, was sixty. Jennie’s brother John was thirty-one, her sister Bessie A. Nesbitt was twenty-three, and her husband, John W. Nesbitt, was thirty-four. As for the Lovatts’ five children, Nellie was seventeen, John was fifteen, Ida was thirteen, Mabel was eight, and William was two. See the Minnesota State Census Records.



## TWELVE

# Conclusion

The origins of the Korean Customs Service can be traced to 1876, when Korea was forced open by Japan to diplomatic and economic intercourse on a scale unprecedented in its history, and three Korean ports were opened for trade. As trade increased, the Korean government saw the possibility of deriving revenue from it, just as its “big brother” China had been doing for decades under Sir Robert Hart, the inspector general of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service. Korea consequently asked China for advice and assistance at the same time that China was revising its traditional hands-off policy of *sadae* toward its neighbor in favor of a more interventionist approach.

William Nelson Lovatt’s entry into Korea came as a direct result of this revised Chinese policy toward that country. To respond to Korea’s request for help with its customs service as well as to keep Korea within the Chinese orbit and out of the hands of the Japanese and the Russians, Viceroy Li Hung-chang sent Paul Georg von Möllendorff to Korea in 1882 to provide advice on foreign affairs and to create a customs service. Möllendorff in turn offered his friend Lovatt the post of customs commissioner in Pusan. This was not a position that Lovatt coveted, and he initially doubted that his friend could actually get such a service up and running. Indeed, Lovatt took nearly a year to accept the offer, hoping up to the last minute that Hart would promote him to commissioner in the Chinese Customs Service, where he had been serving for twenty years. When that promotion was not forthcoming, the lure of a higher rank and salary carried the day, and in 1883 Lovatt became one of the first Westerners to step foot in late Chosŏn Korea and also one of its first Western employees.

Lovatt quickly took to his new job and his life in Pusan, in part because his wife and youngest child joined him soon after his arrival, making them the first Western family to reside in Pusan and setting him apart from the few other Western men, mostly his subordinates, who lived as bachelors. While Lovatt was occupied by his customs duties and frequent hunting

# Glossary

William Nelson LOVATT (魯富, 廬外樞, 로외주) — British; Commissioner of Customs in Pusan, 1883–1886; formerly (and subsequently) Tidesurveyor in the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service under Sir Robert Hart; fired by Merrill

Jennie Shaw LOVATT — American; Lovatt's wife from Stillwater, Minnesota, joined him in Korea from 1883 to 1885

Paul Georg von MÖLLENDORFF (穆麟德, 목인덕) — German; first Chief Commissioner of the Korean Customs Service and Vice-Minister of the Korean Foreign Office; appointed by Li Hung-chang over the objections of Sir Robert Hart in 1882; fired in 1885 by Kim Yun-sik and Li; known as Mok In-dök

Sir Robert HART (赫德) — British; Inspector General of the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service, 1863–1908; appointed Merrill to replace Möllendorff as head of the Korean Customs Service

Henry F. MERRILL (墨賢理, 목현리) — American; appointed by Hart and Li to replace Möllendorff as Chief Commissioner of the Korean Customs Service in 1885; fired Lovatt; known as Muk Hyön-ri

LI Hung-chang 李鴻章, 이홍장 — De facto Foreign Minister of China, based in Tientsin; appointed, then fired, Möllendorff; appointed Merrill to replace him as head of the Korean Customs Service in 1885

YÜAN Shih-k'ai 袁世凱, 원세개 — Li Hung-chang's subordinate and China's "Resident" in Seoul, 1885–1895

# Bibliography

- Allen, Horace N. *Korea: Fact and Fancy, Being a Republication of Two Books Entitled "Korean Tales" and "A Chronological Index."* Seoul: Methodist Publishing House, 1904.
- Altman, Albert A. "Korea's First Newspaper: The Japanese *Chosen Shinpo*." *Journal of Asian Studies* 43, no. 4 (August 1984): 685–696.
- Bae, Sung-zin. "Further Remarks on William Nelson Lovatt and the Korean Maritime Customs." *Kukje muyŏk yŏn'gu* [Research on international trade] 10, no. 1 (2004): 1–20.
- Bishop, Isabella L. Bird. *Korea and Her Neighbours: A Narrative of Travel with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Condition of the Country*. London: John Murray, 1898. Reprinted, Seoul: Yonsei University Press, 1970.
- Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service. *Service Lists*. Shanghai, 1875–1948. Maritime Customs Service Archive. Second Historical Archives of China. Nanjing, China.
- Cho Jun. *Pusan segwan paengnyŏn* [A century of Pusan customs]. Pusan: Taehwa ch'ulp'ansa, 1984.
- Ch'oe T'ae-ho. *Kaehang chŏn'gi ŭi Han'guk kwanse chedo* [The Korean customs system in the former period of port opening]. Seoul: Han'guk yŏn'guwŏn, 1976.
- Chŏn Hae-jong. *Han'guk kŭnse taeoe kwan'gye munhŏn piyo* [Manual of Korean foreign relations, 1876–1910]. Studies on the Kyujanggak Archives 1. Seoul: Institute of Asian Studies, Seoul National University, 1966.
- [Chŏn Hae-jong] Chun, Hae-jong. "Sino-Korean Tributary Relations during the Ch'ing Period." In *The Chinese World Order*, ed. John K. Fairbank. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972.
- Ch'onggwan kongmun* [Communications from the Foreign Office to Henry F. Merrill]. Vol. 1. Kyujanggak Archives, Seoul National University.
- Ch'onggwan naesin* [Communications from Henry F. Merrill to the Foreign Office]. Vol. 1. Kyujanggak Archives, Seoul National University.

# Index

- Amador, Amalia C., 68  
 Appenzeller, Ella Dodge, 94–95  
 Appenzeller, Henry G., 94–95  
 Aston, William George, 68  
 Baber, E. Colborne, 144  
 Baird, William and Annie, 44  
 Brandt, Max von, 12, 16n  
*ch'ameui samu* 차미사무 參議事務, 19  
*Ch'ao-hsien ts'e-lüeh* 朝鮮策略, 9  
 Chemulp'o, see Inch'ön  
 Ch'en Shu-t'ang (Chen Shutang), 91, 105, 155  
 Chinese Steam Navigation Company, 19  
 Ch'ingliutang (Qingliudang 清流黨, or Purist Party), 112  
 Cho Yöng-ha, 16, 86  
 Cholera, in Pusan, 52  
 Chölyöng-do (Deer Island), 44n, 50, 62, 63, 68, 80, 96, 103, 104, 107, 119, 130  
*Chōsen shinpo*, 47  
 Chou Fu (Zhou Fu), 12, 16  
 Chungking (Chongqing), 172, 174  
*City of Rio de Janiero* steamship, 99  
 Creagh, E. F., 139  
 Daiichi kokuritsu ginko (First National Bank of Japan), 47  
 Davydov, A. P., 93  
 Denny, Owen Nickerson, viii, 112–113, 115, 137, 140, 150, 151, 170, 178–179, 181  
 Deuchler, Martina, vii, 9n  
 Drew, Edward B., 134, 143  
 Duncan, Chesney, 42, 115n, 124–125, 169  
 Foote, Lucius, 29n, 32, 48n, 68, 86n, 123n  
 Foote, Rose, 68  
 Foulk, George Clayton, viii, 48n, 70, 89, 95, 123, 127, 134, 144, 178–179  
*General Sherman* incident, 5, 40n  
 Gordon, Sir Charles “Chinese,” 4, 64  
 Griffis, William Elliot, 45  
 Haegwan ch'ong semusa 해관총세무사, 19  
 Hankow, 4, 11, 114, 130, 174, 175  
*Hann* steamship, 93, 94  
 Hart, Sir Robert (赫德), ix, 8; promises to Möllendorf, 13; prefers other candidates over Möllendorf, 16; relationship with Lovatt, 21–22; wants to bind Korea closer to China, 112–113; plans to annex Korean Customs Service, 113–115; refuses to retain Lovatt, 133–134; Korean resistance to merger plan, 139; continues to favor merger, 148; offers Lovatt employment, 165; progress and limitations of the merger, 172–173; impact of Hart's policies, 177–180  
*Hever* steamship, 94