

Jack London and Korea

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INTRODUCTION

The news that Jack London visited Korea in the first decade of the 20th century is neither very fresh nor appealing. Hired by William Randolph Hearst as a correspondent for the San Francisco *Examiner* in 1904, he covered the Russo-Japanese War. Known to the Western hemisphere as “the Hermit Kingdom” or “the Land of Morning Calm,” Korea had become, as James L. Haley comments with a culinary metaphor, “a contested hors d’oeuvre for the imperial appetites of Japan and Russia” (2010, 165). Just turned 28 years old, London sailed through the Golden Gate on the S.S. *Siberia*, heading for Yokohama, Japan, and Chemulpo (Incheon), Korea. He then journeyed across the Pacific Ocean, the Korean Straits, and the Yellow Sea under hellish conditions, crossed the rugged, mountainous terrain of Korea and fought Japanese military officers and Korean bureaucrats along the way, which resulted in some jail time. Speaking of London’s role as a war correspondent, Robert L. Dunn, a photographer for *Collier’s Weekly*, stated that London was “just as heroic as any of the characters in his novels” (1904). London was the first correspondent to reach far north into the war zone. He stayed in Korea for approximately five months from February to June, 1904. In mid-June that year, London became so entangled with a Japanese worker that he was detained by the Japanese, and it took the leverage of President Theodore Roosevelt to free him. As a result London was forced to immediately leave Korea. Undoubtedly, his visit to Korea was one of his most fruitful as well as adventurous forays abroad.

What is little known, however, even to scholars – not to mention the general reader – is that London gained grist for his writing from his Korean experience. Upon leaving Yokohama to return to San Francisco, he told his friend and fellow correspondent Dunn, “I wasted five months of my life in this war” (1904). But London’s time in Korea had, in fact, hardly been wasted – at least from a literary perspective. Although immensely disappointing to him personally as well as professionally, the Korean assignment, as Jeanne Campbell Reesman points out, had “a lasting impact on his work” (2009, 89). The influence of London’s experience in Korea on some of his works remains to be explored further.

From his experience in Korea London wrote some important literary pieces of work: a short story entitled “A Nose for the King,” a historical essay “The Yellow Peril,”

and a portion of his brilliant novel *The Star Rover*, which has been considered a classic of psychological depth. His dispatches from the war zone – fragmentary though they are – proved to be among the best journalistic writing of the Russo-Japanese War and read even better than some of his adventure stories. Furthermore, the journal entries, or his letters to Charmian Kittredge, his future wife, concerning his Korean experience, can be hardly dismissed. If one takes into account all these writings, his five-month stay in Korea turned out to be amazingly fruitful. This dispatch explores how some of London's literary pieces of work were inspired from his experience as a war correspondent in Korea. In this article I will discuss his short story, "A Nose for the King," his last novel *The Star Rover*, and his essays "The Yellow Peril" and "If Japan Awakens China." The focus will be on how incorrect and unreliable his depictions of Korea at the turn of the century are on occasion. Special attention will be given to the racist attitudes which London, either wittingly or unwittingly, displayed towards Korea and its people in these works. It is hoped that this article will shed some light not only on the less known works in the London canon but also on the Korean peninsula as the major theatre of the war between rival imperial ambitions at the turn of the century.

"A NOSE FOR THE KING" AS A COMIC FABLE OR BLACK COMEDY

Originally titled "The Nose" and published in *Black Cat* magazine in March 1906, "A Nose for the King" is the story of a notorious public servant of the Joseon dynasty who embezzles more than is normally tolerated and winds up in prison awaiting execution. Yi Chin Ho, the protagonist of the story, is not only outrageous but also very cunning. Through a caper he manages to repay the public purse and goes on to become a court favorite. It is a typical swindler story – and, for that matter, a *fabliau* minus the sexual obscenity. Interestingly enough, "A Nose for the King" is the sole story Jack London wrote in 1904. Considering that in the previous year he had written eleven stories, this is somewhat unusual. Part of the reason for this fallow year for short stories was that London, as stated above, was working as a war correspondent in Korea, among other things.

London owed the material for the story to his particular experience while staying in Sunan, a small town in the Northern Province of Korea. In "Dr. Moffett," which, as King Hendricks and Irving Shepard argue, London "must have written as an article for the *San Francisco Examiner* but apparently did not reach the editor" (1970, 82), London gives a vivid description of a notorious high-ranking official named Pak -Choon-Song [sic]. Pak was described as "a most detestable magistrate (...) a *yang-ban* or nobleman, and a robber" (84). London further states, "Now all *yang-bans* are robbers. The people expect them to rob. They have never known anything else than robbery on the part of their rulers". (84)

A mob of Sunanites visited London and complained to him that Pak had kept seventy percent of all moneys due them for goods sold to the Japanese officers. Requested by Manyoungi, who was acting "like a wrathful angel" (88), London paid a visit to the infamous magistrate. In accepting his request, London is also reminded of Isabella Bird Bishop, an English traveller and writer, who had visited Korea ten

years before, just prior to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War, and published *Korea and Her Neighbours* a few years later. Much unlike Bishop, who had suffered greatly at the hands of inhospitable and insulting Korean officials, London turned the tables on the magistrate with allegations of corruption: “I explained the condition of the poor people to Pak-Choon-Song. I drew harrowing pictures of their poverty and suffering and demonstrated that a squeeze of seventy per cent was more than they could stand” (89). Yi Chin Ho, the protagonist of “A Nose for the King,” is very similar in many ways to Pak.

Otherwise, London may have heard the basic material of the story in the nights he spent in a country inn or a city hotel, or while he travelled on horseback. At the time, London’s entourage consisted of a Japanese interpreter whose name was Yamada, a Korean valet-cum-cook named Manyungi, and the two young Korean *mapus* or grooms who cared for the three packhorses and two saddle horses (2010, 170). In addition to this entourage, there was also another Korean who worked as his interpreter while he was staying in Seoul. According to *The Golden Mountain* by Easurk Emsen Charr, Yong-wha Choi worked as an interpreter when London gave a lecture at the Seoul YMCA. At one point in the book, Charr said, “I wished that I could speak English like him” (70). More accurately, it was not a lecture but a reading – a reading from his *The Call of the Wild* (1903); in early April, London had given a reading from this book that was hot off the press before foreign residents, including Japanese officers, in Seoul.

Less known among the London canon, “A Nose for the King” deserves attention for a variety of reasons. Largely based on a Korean folk tale, it is not entirely his original work but his “remaking” of it. It is in fact not unusual for London to use folk tales for inspiration for his work, as illustrated in “The Water Baby” which uses four different Hawaiian myths. This explains in part that London was highly vulnerable to accusations of plagiarism, not only due to his fame as a writer but also due to his methods of writing. In this vein, this story can hardly be seen as original, even if it was not plagiaristic. In a letter to Elwyn Hoffman, London wrote that “expression with me is far easier than invention. It is with the latter I have the greatest trouble, and work the hardest” (1998, 194). It is well known by now that London not only used incidents from newspaper and magazine clippings and historical events as materials for his writing but also “borrowed” plots rather freely from other writers. *The Iron Heel* provides an excellent example because it was heavily influenced by the works of such writers as H.G. Wells and Edward Bellamy, among others, and by historical occurrences such as the Chicago Haymarket Massacre of 1886.

Much like typical folk tales, “A Nose for the King” is not tightly constructed but rather loosely patterned. True to the oral tradition, a very rich tradition in Korea, the story is told in a somewhat leisurely manner:

In the morning calm of Korea, when its peace and tranquility truly merited its ancient name, “Cho-sen” (Joseon), there lived a politician by name Yi Chin Ho. He was a man of parts, and – who shall say? – perhaps in no wise worse than politicians the world over. (1993, 64)

It is interesting to note that London calls Korea – more accurately, the Kingdom of

Joseon – the nation of “the morning calm.” As he states, that epithet is derived from the fact that the original meaning of the name of the kingdom refers to morning calm or freshness. Percival Lowell, an American businessman who once served as a foreign secretary and counsellor for a special Korean diplomatic mission to the United States, published a book about Korea entitled *Chosön: The Land of the Morning Calm* in 1886. Since then, Korea has often been called by this nickname, together with “the Hermit Kingdom” or “the Hermit Nation,” as mentioned earlier.

“A Nose for the King” follows the literary tradition of a comic fable. It is little wonder that London included this story in his *When God Laughs and Other Stories*. As the title of this collection of stories clearly indicates, this story is humorous – so much so that even God might laugh at it. Furthermore, the story can be seen as a black comedy. There is something of gallows humour in it, as it deals with death: the impending death of the protagonist Yi Chin Ho and the threatened death of the age-old father of Park Chung Chang duped by Yi. This can be considered one of London’s best darkly humorous tales.

More important, “A Nose for the King” is an excellent work for revealing London’s attitudes towards Korea and its people. As Jeanne Campbell Reesman cogently argues, London’s racism is not as simple as it seems at first sight, but quite nuanced (2009, 89–93). On the one hand, London was very interested in the Asian Other and the oppressed lives of East Asian people; on the other hand, he sometimes revealed his anti-Asian prejudices and racist views at the same time. Reesman claims that while staying in Korea “London personally learned that his white race was one among others and that it was not ‘superior’ at all” (89). Contrary to this, however, there is ample evidence, internal as well as external, that shows London to be an anti-Korean racist in particular and anti-Asian racist in general.

A closer examination of the story clearly reveals that London depicts the Koreans quite negatively – with his anti-Asian racist prejudices. In the first place, Korean government officials, from a jailer to the governor or magistrate of a district or province, are described as being completely corrupt and inefficient. Yi convinces his jailer to release him so that he can make arrangements to repay the embezzled cash of the amount of ten thousand strings of cash by seeking out a nose, “a certain kind of nose” (2007, 967). As a reward, Yi gives the jailer a promise to make him the director of all the prisons in the kingdom. On a higher level, Yi, a former government official, is totally immoral to the core. An accomplice of Yi, the governor is offered a far better position in the central government in the capital city. Pak Chung Chang, head man of the local city, is described as very foolish and gullible to the point of surrendering a large sum of money to the imposter.

Somewhat ironically, Yi Chin Ho is described as being “a man of parts” (2007, 964) – that is, a man who is talented in multiple areas of life, as understood in the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, particularly in England (Jane Austen used the exactly same terms in *Pride and Prejudice*). However, Yi is not only a convicted embezzler but is also an outrageous confidence man who deceives the jailer, the governor, and then Pak Chung Chang, a wealthy man living in the Eastern Sea country. Pretending to be on King’s business, Yi tells Pak that the King suffers from a terrible affliction

and that the only remedy is a certain kind of nose. Yi's cunning escape plan from the jail is successful only at the expense of Pak. Unlike the other characters who obtained far better stations in life, Pak "fell into a melancholy, and ever after he shook his head sadly, with tears in his eyes, whenever he regarded the expensive nose of his ancient and very-much-to-be-respected ancestor" (968). Pak repeats what Yi said to him when Yi tells him that he needs horses and guardsmen to carry the treasure: "There are robbers abroad in the road" (968). The implication is that Yi is one of the robbers abroad in the road.

London's view of the outrageous corruption prevalent among Korean officials can be found in his war correspondence. In "Americans Praise Japan's Army," the article he wrote in *Ping Yang* (Pyongyang) in March 1904, London recounts the Korean officials' misappropriation of funds paid by the Japanese military authorities. "The Oriental term of [misappropriation] is 'squeeze,' he states. "Centuries of practice have reduced it to a science, and in Korea there are but two classes – the squeezers and the squeezees" (1970, 51). In this article, as in "A Nose for the King," London seems to be guilty of exaggeration.

Furthermore, London blames the Koreans for paying too much attention to filial respect and ancestor worship. The main reason why Yi succeeds in his bogus scheme is that he takes advantage of Pak's filial respect for his elderly father. Showing the sham drawing of a nose, Yi tells Pak, "You know it is your father's nose. Bring him before me that I may strike it off and be gone" (967). At that, Pak asks Yi to save his old father, saying, "He cannot go down without his nose to the grave" (967). At one point in *The Star Rover*, London states that "[t]he people of Cho-Sen are *fanatical* ancestor-worshippers" (*The Star Rover* 157; italics added). There is no denying the fact that the Koreans, influenced so long by Confucianism, venerate their ancestors living or dead. The word "fanatical" in this context, however, not only amounts to racism but is also inappropriate in terms of cultural relativism.

INCARNATION OF KOREAN INCIDENTS IN *THE STAR ROVER*

Jack London's Korean experiences also became the subject of his fantasy adventure novel *The Star Rover*, which was the last of his fifty books. The novel recounts partly the reported revelations of Darrell Standing, who experiences a dissociation of mind and body under torture in San Quentin prison. Parts of the revelations were also indebted to London's own experience in Korea at the turn of the century. Serialized in the *Los Angeles Examiner: American Sunday Monthly Magazine* from February to October in 1914 and then published as *The Jacket* in book form in England, the novel came out in the United States in 1915. London's working title for this book was "The Shirt without a Collar," which, like the British title, refers to the straightjacket in which its protagonist, Darrell Standing, is tortured. Joan London, the writer's daughter, claimed that he hoarded material for many years to write this novel:

The Star Rover, which was completed shortly before he went to Mexico in 1914, was Jack's last attempt at a serious work. Into this extraordinary and little-known book he flung with prodigal hand riches which he had hoarded for years, and compressed into brilliant episodes notes originally intended for full-length books. Of all his later work, only portions of

this novel and a few short stories reveal the fulfillment of the artistic promise so evident in his early writings. After *The Star Rover* he made no further effort to write well. (1939, 362)

In this “extraordinary and little-known” novel, London tells the tale of an intellectual, a professor of agronomy serving a life sentence for murdering a colleague. After a jailbreak conspiracy is discovered, he is tortured and locked into a straitjacket for days at a time. During these jacketed periods, Darrell Standing is incarnated as Adam Strang, an English sailor shipwrecked in 16th-century Korea. In a dreamlike trance, he recounts tales of astral travel by inhabiting former lives in history. Among other things, for instance, the protagonist-narrator becomes a Parisian count killed in a duel; an eight-year-old boy enduring the hardships of the wagon train in the American West; an observer in ancient Rome witnessing crucifixion; and a man lost in the Arctic sea trapped on an iceberg. Undoubtedly, the novel is one of his most magnificent experiments in the tradition of psychological fiction, fantasy, or science fiction.

True to his writing methods, London not only mines his own experience in Korea but also borrows heavily from other sources. Just as Darrell Standing travels through time and space as he lies strapped in a straitjacket awaiting execution, so London travelled widely from Fusan (now Busan), the southernmost city, via Chemulpo (now Incheon) to Wiju (Euiju), the border city on the Yalu River near Manchuria – not to mention his travel in Japan and China.

In the novel, London makes extensive use of what he witnessed and heard during these travels – so much so that he even copied some passages from his own letters to Charmian Kittredge, the journals, and an article like “Small Boat Sailings” almost *verbatim* into the novel. No better illustration of this can be found than the scene in which London describes his shipwreck on the way from the Strait of Korea or Japan to the Yellow Sea. In one of his journals dated Saturday 13 February 1904, he writes, “Still wilder, but can hardly say so ‘gorgeous,’ unless landscapes and seascapes, seen between driving snow squalls, be gorgeous. (...) A gale of wind, with driving snow—you can imagine how cold it was” (1970, 161). Compare this journal entry to the following passage in which he describes the shipwreck of the *Sparwehr* near Jeju Island in the novel:

We drifted in upon the land in the chill light of a stormy dawn across a heartless cross-sea mountain high. It was dead of winter, and between smoking snow-squalls we could glimpse the forbidding coast, if coast it might be called, so broken was it. There were grim rock isles and islets beyond counting, dim snow-covered ranges beyond, and everywhere upstanding cliffs too steep for snow, outjuts of headlands, and pinnacles and slivers of rock upthrust from the boiling sea. (2003, 137)

In addition to his own experiences in Korea, London rather freely appropriates works by other writers in *The Star Rover*. The first source is the real life story of Hendrick Hamel, a Dutch sailor, who was shipwrecked along with thirty-five crewmates on Jeju Island off the southern coast of the Korean peninsula in 1653 and lived in captivity for thirteen years in Korea before escaping back to the Netherlands. Later Hamel wrote a book about his experience in Korea entitled *Hamel's Journal and a Description of the Kingdom of Korea, 1653–1666*, which is considered to be the first written account of Korea through the eyes of a Westerner.

In *The Star Rover*, London makes extensive use of Hamel's story, and even includes Hamel as a minor character. In his hallucinating mind, London's own *persona* Adam Strang and the historical figure Hamel are more often than not surprisingly mixed up with each other, thus perplexing the reader. Even the name of the ship (the *Sparwehr*) is similar to that of the ship Hamel and his crewmates manned (*De Sperwer*, meaning "Sparrowhawk"). The narrator of the novel states, "Hendrik [sic] Hamel was supercargo and part owner of the Sparwehr adventure" (136). The mirroring of *Hamel's Journal* in the novel is so obvious that the fantasy or science fiction quality sometimes fades into historical account. London only uses, however, Hamel's written account as a starting point for beginning his apparently preposterous story and then turns to his imagination to create a plot of complex political intrigue and revenge in the Korean royal palace.

The second source to which London was heavily indebted for *The Star Rover* is a book by Homer B. Hulbert, an American missionary, journalist, and political activist who advocated the independence of Korea. It is Richard Rutt who first pointed out that London had borrowed the so-called Oppert Affair from Hulbert (1970). The affair refers to the scandalous incident in which the German merchant Ernst Oppert raided the tomb of Heungseon Daewongun (Yi Ha-eung), King Gojong's father, in a desperate attempt to force Joseon to open its doors to foreign trade in 1867. At one point in the novel, London describes Johannes Maartens, the captain of the *Sparwehr*, together with some of his crewmen looting the tomb in Kyongju, the ancient capital city of the Kingdom of Silla. London blames the failure of its looting on the thick fog on that day. He states, "That cursed fog! A song was made of it, that I heard and hated through all Cho-Sen to my dying day" (2003, 142). And then he quotes two lines of it: "*Yanggukeni chajin anga / Wheanpong Tora deunda. / The thick fog / of the Westerners / Broods over Whean peak*" (142). Interestingly, this fragment of a song or a lyric poem is collected in Section C (Poetry in Jack London's Writing Attributed to Others) of *The Complete Poetry of London* (2007, 108).

In *The Passing of Korea*, Hulbert depicts the Oppert Affair. He does not, however, accept the general opinion that the German merchant vandalized the grave of the father of the Regent Prince (Heungseon Daewongun) in revenge but instead suggests that the expedition was for a purely predatory purpose. To prove his argument Hulbert even produced testimony to it:

The writer [of this book] had a conversation in 1887 with an old man in Nagasaki who had formed one of th[ese] expedition[s], and he corroborated the statement of the Koreans that a heavy and unusual fog hung over the country on that day and prevented the carrying out of the plan. Such a powerful impression did this outrage make upon the Koreans that they composed a popular song about it which says:

Yanggukeui chajin angä
Wheanpong tora deunda.
The thick fog of the Westerners
Broods over Whean Peak. (1906, 299)

It is worth noting that London even repeats Hulbert's own mistakes or simply typographical errors. Both *Yanggukeni* in London's quotation and *Yanggukeui* in

Hulbert's quotation are incorrect as far as the Korean language is concerned. Both Korean words should be read as *Yangguieui*, meaning "of foreign devils" or "of Western ghosts." *Yanggui* or *Yangkui* was what Koreans often called people from foreign countries, particularly Western missionaries in the late 19th and early 20th century. The final "-eui" is not a part of the noun at all but just a postposition, a sort of suffix for possessiveness. Incidentally, in the northern part of China, the term *Yanguizi* was widely used to refer to white people or Westerners. On the other hand, the Cantonese word *Gweilo* (or *Gwailo*) has been a common pejorative slang term for foreigners. In the novel, London takes Hulbert's translation directly from Chapter 21 of *The Passing of Korea*.

Interestingly, in *The Star Rover* London introduced the Korean way of life – in terms of food, shelter, housing and other material matters. Of the staple of the Koreans, for example, he commented that "[t]heir rice was brown as chocolate" (138–139). Most likely he had either barley or sorghum, not rice, in his mind when he made this statement. London's descriptions of Korean drinks, however, are as accurate as they are captivating. He states that "there was a warm, sourish, milky-looking drink, heady only when taken in enormous doses" (139). Here London perfectly defines a farmer's drink called *makgeolli*, made from a mixture of wheat and rice. He also says that "there was drink, real drink, not milky slush, but white, biting stuff distilled from rice, a pint of which would kill a weakling and make a strong man mad and merry" (139). Undoubtedly, this describes another popular drink called *soju*, which is a distilled alcohol beverage native to Korea. Of the clothes and hair style, London explains, "The men were clad entirely in dirt white, with their long hair done up in a curious knot on their pates – the marriage knot as I was afterward to learn" (138). Of the typical Korean houses, London has this to say: "Their houses were earthen-walled and straw-thatched. Under the floors ran flues through which the kitchen smoke escaped, warming the sleeping-room in its passage" (139). In the latter part of the sentence, he describes an *ondol*, a very unique heating system that has been used in traditional Korean rooms for thousands of years and still remains the most common system in modern buildings.

Besides, London's descriptions of the social classes in Korea are in the main accurate but a little stretched. The *yangban*, the traditional ruling class of the Joseon dynasty, is often notorious for the harassment of the populace. Regarding an official named Kwan Yung-jin, he comments that "[He] was a *yangban*, or noble; also, he was what might be called magistrate or governor of the district or province. This means that his office was appointive and that he was a tithe-squeezer or tax-farmer" (140). A few years earlier, Isabella Bird Bishop, in her book *Korea and Her Neighbours*, called the Korean *yangban* aristocrats "licensed vampires of the country" (1898, 449). Clearly, London shared the same sentiments about the ruling class as Bishop.

In particular, London's depiction of *kimchi*, indisputably one of Korea's most famous foods, deserves special attention. He says of *kimchi*: "the pickles ungodly hot but which one learns to like exceeding well" (144). He continues later, "It is a sort of sauerkraut. When it is spoiled it stinks to heaven. I tell you, when I was Adam Strang, I ate kimchi thousands of times. I know good kimchi, bad kimchi, rotten kimchi.

I know the best kimchi is made by the women of Wonsan” (2003, 167). This is one of the most appropriate descriptions of the national food of Korea.

Incidentally, London’s hatred of Korean food can be earlier found in one of his letters to Charmian Kittredge just after he landed in the Korean peninsula in February 1904. In the letter he complained to her about what he called “native chow,” meaning Korean food. Since he was short of his own “foreign food” he said he was compelled to begin eating Korean dishes. He stated, “I hope my stomach will forgive me some of the things I have thrust upon it – filth, dirt, indescribable, and the worst of it is that I can’t help thinking of the filth and dirt as I take each mouthful” (1970, 11). Calling the food of other country “filth and dirt” is somewhat preposterous, to say the least.

London’s descriptions of Korea and its people are sometimes inaccurate and therefore contain unreliable information about the country. One is reminded of Adam Strang’s words that “[i]t has been a great regret to me (...) that I had not been a more thorough student of history” (133). Strang, or for that matter London, is sometimes flagrantly ignorant of Korean history. For instance, Fusan (Busan) is described as being located on the Yellow Sea even though London travelled to Chemulpo (Incheon) via Busan and the Yellow Sea in 1904. Hanyang (Seoul), the capital city, is called Keijo, which is the Japanese way of pronouncing Gyeongseong, another name referring to Seoul in the late 19th and early 20th century. Furthermore, London calls Korea not “Joseon” or “Chosun,” but “Cho-sen,” which is also the Japanese way of pronouncing the country.

Despite its fantasy and grotesqueness, *The Star Rover* is still a vast patchwork of preposterous and far-fetched historical figures and events. Half-baked scraps of Korean history, as well as impossible jumbles of historical figures and events, include Chong Mong-ju and Yi Sun-sin, the royal tiger-hunters and the Peddlers’ Guild. Chong, one of the great scholars and patriots of the late Goryeo dynasty, appears as a villain who is eventually strangled by Strang. The same thing can be said of Yi who appears in the novel as one of the local magistrates and Chong’s adherent. Highly respected for his exemplary conduct on and off the naval battlefield, Yi was a Korean naval commander famed for his victories in the Imjin War, the Japanese invasion of the land of the Joseon dynasty in the 16th century. London’s introduction of Adam Strang, alias Yi Yong-ik, provides an excellent illustration of this anachronism:

But I must hasten, for my narrative is not of Adam Strang the shipwrecked sea-cuny on a coral isle, but of Adam Strang later named Yi Yong-ik, the Mighty One, who was one time favourite of the powerful Yunsan, who was lover and husband of the Lady Om of the princely house of Min, and who was long time beggar and pariah in all the villages of all the coasts and roads of Cho-Sen. (135–36)

Known as “the Mighty One,” as Strang comments, Yi Yong-ik was Chief of the Bureau of Currency during the Korean Empire. A pro-Russian politician and reformer, Yi played a pivotal role in modernizing and Westernizing Korea. The tenth king of the Joseon dynasty, Yunsan – more accurately, Yeonsangun – was often considered to be the worst tyrant in Korean history. Surprisingly, in the novel the tyrant king appears as a royal Buddhist monk. Thoroughly dominated by Confucianism, the Joseon dynasty firmly excluded Buddhism from the court. The Lady Om, who was

consort of Emperor Gojong, could never have been the lover and wife of Yunsan, who lived from the late 15th century to the early 16th century. Furthermore, the Lady Om had nothing to do with “the princely house of Min,” which was a totally different clan from the Om family. The wife of Emperor Gojong, Queen Min (later called Empress Myeonseong) gained complete control over the court, placing her family into high court positions.

Besides this, the man who is described as being a “long time beggar and pariah in all the villages” could not have been Yunsan but Heungseon Daewongun, Yi Ha-eung. As Prince Regent of the Joseon dynasty during the minority of King Gojong in the 1860s, he was indisputably a key political figure until his death. In serious political conflict with his daughter-in-law, Queen Min, he was partly responsible for the assassination of her by the Japanese who wanted to strengthen their control over the Korean government. In the story, Adam Strang, incarnated as Yi Yong-ik, preposterously has a love affair, ending in marriage, with the Lady Om. After his encounter with the Korean aristocrats, Yi’s fortunes take an unexpected turn, as he and his wife are exiled to the Korean hinterlands and forced to live as beggars and laborers. Finally, she is strangled by Yunsan – another example of an anachronistic account.

Richard Rutt is quite right when he argues that some of the mistakes in *The Star Rover* are definitely deliberate. True, London did not intend to write a story that would tell the historical truth about Korea; rather, he was writing a fantasy and psychological extravaganza. Other than that, one should also bear in mind the fact that in the novel London describes the straight-jacketed Strang suffering hallucinations in a state of trance. Even so, *The Star Rover* undoubtedly goes too far. In short, London’s descriptions of Korea are so amazingly ridiculous and absurd that Western readers would have been given a false impression of Korea.

On the other hand, London calls Korea “an uncharted, God-forgotten land” (139), which slightly reminds one of the title of the book by the German merchant Ernst Oppert, *A Forbidden Land: Voyages to the Corea*. London’s statement that “[t]he Asiatic is a cruel beast, and delights in spectacles of human suffering” (142) not only rings hollow, but also is tainted with racism. It is especially so when one thinks that *The Star Rover* is in fact a severe indictment of the injustices and shortcomings of the American penal system. In particular, London as an impassioned socialist denounces capital punishment since it is closely related to capitalist society. As Hendricks and Shepard claim, London “hated man’s injustice to man as he hated man’s cruelty to animal” (1970, vii).

“THE YELLOW PERIL” AND “IF JAPAN AWAKENS CHINA”

Jack London not only obtained material from his Korean experiences for fiction such as “A Nose for the King” and *The Star Rover* but also for non-fiction works as “The Yellow Peril” and “If Japan Awakens China,” both of which were collected in *Revolution and Other Essays*. The first essay is more famous, or notorious, than the second. Coined by the German Kaiser Wilhelm II, the terms “Yellow Peril” or the “Yellow Terror” refer to the concern that the “civilized” world was in danger of being overrun by a yellow-skinned race such as the Chinese or the Japanese. The term soon

became more inclusive and referred not merely to the Chinese but also to all Asians of East and Southeast Asian descent. The fear was certainly based on the assumption that the mass immigration of Asians would threaten white wages and standards of living, eventually taking over and destroying their way of life and values.

A very influential journalist as well as a popular writer in the early 1900s, London was largely responsible not only for the dissemination of the term “the Yellow Peril” but also for the fixation on it. After his return to the United States from Korea, he was regarded as one of the authorities on the subject. As Jeanne Campbell Reesman, Sara S. Hodson, and Philip Adam argue, “[London] was celebrated as someone to be consulted about ‘the Yellow Peril’” (2010, 63). In a letter to Charmian Kittredge dated May 22, 1904, London classified “the Yellow Peril” into roughly two categories: “the Economic Yellow Peril” and “the Militant Yellow Peril” (1970, 24). In addition, he subdivided “the Peril” into the “Yellow Peril” relating to China and “the Brown Peril” with regard to Japan. More than a century has passed since he expounded this idea. In the light of today’s international situation and events, London’s idea seems almost prophetic.

In “The Yellow Peril,” London mainly deals with “the Economic Yellow Peril.” Aside from the idea of the Asian menace to the Western world, his criticism of Korea and its people is not so favorable. London begins with his straightforward statement, “War is to-day the final arbiter in the affairs of men, and it is as yet the final test of the worthwhileness of peoples. Tested thus, the Korean fails” (341). London complains, for instance, that he was not able to procure even a horseshoe or a horseshoe nail from any Koreans – by neither money nor force. All he hears from them whenever he asks for something is the “cursed word” *upsō*, meaning that they have nothing to give. This experience leads somewhat hastily London to conclude that Korea was a “nerveless, forsaken (...) land” (341), while he calls China “the land of Canaan” – the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey.

There is a significant difference between the two countries located either side of the Yalu River as far as their national ethos is concerned. According to London, a Korean is a shiftless idler while a Chinese is “an indefatigable worker.” In short, the Chinese are the opposite of the Koreans in almost every respect. London sees inefficiency, among other things, as the Koreans’ most outrageous shortcoming. He finds the Koreans lounging and smoking yard-long pipes and chattering without doing any kind of work.

The Korean is the perfect type of inefficiency – of utter worthlessness. The Chinese is the perfect type of industry. For sheer work no worker in the world can compare with him. Work is the breath of his nostrils. It is his solution of existence. It is to him what wandering and fighting in far lands and spiritual adventure have been to other peoples. (343)

In sharp contrast to Chinese industry and efficiency are Korean sloth and inefficiency. The worthlessness of the Koreans is further substantiated by their wanderings into the mountains to escape from foreign soldiers. Of a refugee from the war, London states, “The few goods and chattels he may have managed to accumulate he puts on his back, along with his doors and windows, and away he heads for his mountain fastnesses” (341). Later impelled by curiosity for a “look see,” they return

to their village. But it is just “curiosity merely—a timid, deerlike curiosity” (341) so that he is insatiably prepared to bound away on his long legs at the first hint of danger or trouble. On the other hand, war or foreign invasion does not disturb the Chinese in any meaningful way. They stay just where they are and work even when they are in the thick of war. Earlier in one of the war dispatches, “Royal Road a Sea of Mud,” dated March 5, 1904, London expressed a similar view. To him the Koreans were “spiritless”:

The Korean has finer features, but the vital lack in his face is strength. He is soft and effeminate when compared with the strong breeds, and whatever strength has been his in the past has been worked out of him by centuries of corrupt government. He is certainly *the most inefficient* of human creatures, lacking all initiative and achievement, the only thing in which he shines is the carrying of burdens on his back. As *a draught animal and packhorse* he is a success. (44, italics added)

In the above passage the Japanese and the Chinese, not to mention Western people, belong to the strong breeds. It was customary for Americans to say such things with some reservations. But London made a definite statement, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the Korean “is certainly the most inefficient” – not *one* of the most inefficient – human creatures. His view of the Koreans as successful draught animals and packhorses in the last sentence seems to be too much to swallow. In the same dispatch article, London even commented that a white traveller on Korean soil would be compelled to either “kill Koreans” or “commit suicide” (47), saying that he would prefer the first.

It should be noted, however, that in evaluating Korea London neglects the unique situation she finds herself in at the turn of the century. Historically, Korea differs significantly from China and, for that matter, from Japan. Geopolitically situated between China and Japan, Korea has been most vulnerable to foreign invasion. It has long suffered aggression by foreign powers. Its history, in a sense, is a history of invasion from those two neighboring countries. In the essay London complains that the Koreans shamefully lack the courage to remain in their village when a strange army crosses their land. As he comments, the Koreans “have splendid vigor and fine bodies, but they are accustomed to being beaten and robbed without protest or resistance by every chance foreigner who enters their country” (341). It seems to be too much, however, to tell the Koreans to act otherwise. In *Ewa: A Tale of Korea*, Arthur W. Noble, an American missionary who worked in Korea, depicts the Korean refugees from the Sino-Japanese War in like manner:

The people had taken panic and were fleeing. At each gate [of Pyongyang] there was a jam, people surging through with loads on the backs, hastening to get away from the city before the army should arrive. (1906, 152)

Clearly, the historical essay “The Yellow Peril” reveals London’s deep-rooted racist prejudices towards Korea and its people. In this essay, as in his fiction like “A Nose for the King” and *The Star Rover*, there is no denying the fact that London is a racist. Considering that he was an advocate of socialism, his anti-Korean views are slightly surprising. In this connection, Jeanne Campbell Reesman claims that “[London] was

anything but an advocate of the racist yellow peril writing” (1999, 30). But her argument is slightly strained and thus hard to swallow, all things considered. One should, of course, take into account the fact that London wrote in the early 20th century, not the 21st century. One expects some of his stories or essays to be offensive to modern sensibilities about race or ethnicity. Even so, his depictions of Korea indicate that he is not quite innocent of racial discrimination.

If “The Yellow Peril” is closely related to “the Economic Yellow Peril,” the Peril relevant particularly to China and its people, “If Japan Awakens China” is identified with what London called “the Brown Peril” and “the Militant Yellow Peril” – in short, “the Japanese Peril” – the Peril pertaining to Japan and its people. From his years as a war correspondent in Korea, London was haunted by the ruthless efficiency of the Japanese war machine and the formidable threat it would pose for world peace. This led to him to publish the article, “If Japan Awakens China,” almost a sequel to “The Yellow Peril,” in *Sunset Magazine* in 1909.

London begins “If Japan Awakens China” with a rather chilling warning, reminding us of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*: “It is a weakness of man to believe that all the rest of mankind is moulded in his own image” (358). Then he further states that “it is a weakness of the white race to believe that the Japanese think as we think, are moved to action as we are moved and have points of view similar to our own” (358). The implication is too obvious; the Japanese are totally different breeds not only from Western people but also from other Asians like the Chinese and the Koreans. To support his argument, London quotes Lafcadio Hearn, an American known also by the Japanese name Koizumi Yakumo, who identified himself with the Japanese, even renouncing his own country and becoming a Japanese citizen. In the foreword to his last book entitled *Japan: An Interpretation*, Hearn confessed that “he had taken all those years to find out that he knew nothing of the Japanese” (359).

What London feared most was the Japanese ability to imitate the material achievement of the Western world:

Japan is the one unique Asiatic race, in that alone among the races of Asia, she has been able to borrow from us and equip herself with all our material achievement. Our machinery of warfare, of commerce, and of industry, she has made hers. (361)

London also feared the demographical imbalance between those two countries and the Western hemisphere. The combination of the forty-five million Japanese and the over four hundred million Chinese would outnumber the whole population of the Western nations put together, thus posing a far more intimidating menace to the Western world. Other than that, London asked, what might happen if Japan awakens the sleeping China “not to our dream, if you please, but to her dream, to Japan’s dream” (361).

London’s negative views of Korea are more oblique in “If Japan Awakens China” than “The Yellow Peril.” He did not agree with the opinion of an American woman who had lived in Japan and concluded that the Japanese had no souls; rather, he was very positive that the Japanese were just as much possessed of soul and further that theirs might be even superior to the Western soul. Moreover, London never tired of speaking highly of Japan and China and their people: “The Chinese and Japanese are

thrifty and industrious” (361). London’s praise of the Japanese as well as the Chinese is very common. On the way to Chemulpo (Incheon) from Kunsan on a *sampan* (a small open boat), he was glad that he had Japanese, not Korean, sailors: “[The Japanese] are braver and cooler and more daring than Koreans” (10). Of the strictness, orderliness, and seriousness of Japanese soldiers, London said that “it is very hard to find any equals in the world” (13). What he tried to imply was hardly mistaken; in comparison with these excellent qualities of both the Japanese and the Chinese, the Koreans paled into insignificance. In London’s view, the Koreans were soulless, lazy, inefficient, worthless, too apathetic to carve their way to fortune.

CONCLUSION

Jack London once said that he had made his living by turning journalism into literature. In his work, the boundary between fiction and non-fiction often blurs – so much so that the distinction sometimes loses its precise meaning. This is true when one thinks of his career as a war correspondent in the Russo-Japanese War. His five-month stay in Korea at the turn of the century proved to be very fruitful to his writing career, not only as a journalist but also as a fiction writer. His war dispatches are remarkable for their lucid reportage of what really occurred on the battlefield, as well as for his predictions of the future events in East Asian countries. More important, such fictional works as “A Nose for the King” and *The Star Rover*, along with his war dispatches and articles, could never have been written unless London had had his Korean experience.

These works reveal how London’s imagination worked at the time. He used whatever was available for his fiction; to him, in fact, virtually anything could be used as material for his writing. “A Nose for the King” was indebted to a Korean folk tale which someone told him somewhere on his sojourn in Korea. In writing *The Star Rover*, London drew on his extensive readings of the books about Korea as well as his own personal experiences. His essays, “The Yellow Peril” and “If Japan Awakens China,” were products of his eye-witness observations of what happened during the turbulent period of East Asian history in China and Japan as well as Korea.

It is in these works that London’s anti-Korean racist prejudices are most prominent. A decade earlier, in his first published stories he had displayed a more positive view of Asians. Compared to some Americans who held racist beliefs about Asians in the late 19th century, London had then expressed more liberal views. His racial prejudices, however, increased and reached their peak in the first and second decade of the 20th century, culminating in his fiction and his essay about Korea in particular and East Asia in general. In sum, his works about Korea as well as China and Japan are not only indispensable for gaining a better understanding of the London canon but also for obtaining a better knowledge of the development of his racial prejudice towards East Asians.

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Jack London and Korea

Jack London. Korea. Joseon dynasty. “A Nose for the King”. “The Star Rover”. “The Yellow Peril”.

Broadly historical in its approach, this article explores the extent to which Jack London obtained material for his writing from the experiences he had while serving as a correspondent covering the Russo-Japanese War in Korea. It argues that from this material London wrote such literary works as the short story “A Nose for the King” (1906), the historical essay “The Yellow Peril” (1904), and some portion of his memorable fantasy novel, *The Star Rover* (1915). This article claims further that in these works London not only revealed his racist prejudices towards Korea and its people, but also that information on Korea is sometimes inaccurate and unreliable.

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