

# TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF TWO BRITONS IN CHOSŎN KOREA: A.E.J. CAVENDISH'S *KOREA AND THE SACRED WHITE MOUNTAIN*

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## **Cavendish and Goold-Adams' voyage to Chosŏn**

The late 19th century saw a marked increase in the interest in Chosŏn displayed not only amongst its neighbours such as Japan and China, but also in certain Western countries as well. The subsequent expansion in the number of Westerners who visited Chosŏn to experience first-hand this Asian nation was occasioned not only by the national political interests linked to Chosŏn's opening of its doors, but also to the other various opportunities, i.e. missionary work, business, and travel, which this decision made possible. This marked increase in the number of foreign visitors compared to the 18th century resulted in the introduction of more in-depth descriptions of Chosŏn, and of the impressions thereof, than had been the case in the past.

This study analyses British Captain Alfred Edward John Cavendish and his companions' descriptions of Chosŏn and its people during the late 19th century. To this end, his work *Korea and the Sacred White Mountain* (1893)<sup>1</sup> naturally serves as the main source of information on which this paper is based. This particular book not only describes various aspects of Chosŏn society and traditions as experienced by the author during his voyage, but also sheds some light on the lifestyles and perceptions of the people of Chosŏn as viewed through the eyes of a Westerner.

In 1891 Cavendish travelled to Chosŏn along with another British Captain named H.E. Goold-Adams. Having set sail from Hong Kong, they travelled through Shanghai before arriving at the Chosŏn port of Chemulp'o. Even prior to his departure, Cavendish was already aware of the time-frame within which his voyage to Chosŏn would have to unfold, a voyage which was ostensibly intended to achieve the goal of climbing Mt. Paektu. To this end, Cavendish had in effect promised his superior that he would return to Hong Kong within a certain pre-established period of time. Finding himself unable to climb Mt. Paektu within the time at his disposal, Cavendish contented himself with accompanying Goold-Adams as far as the town

of Poch'ŏn at its foot, thus leaving the task of completing the scaling of the sacred mountain to his partner. Cavendish subsequently made his way to the port city of Wŏnsan, where he boarded a ship and returned to his initial starting point of Hong Kong via Pusan and Yokohama.

Cavendish, having been forced by time limitations to abandon his goal of climbing Mt. Paektu, supplemented his own narrative of his voyage to Chosŏn by transcribing in exact detail Goold-Adams' account of his trek up the mountain. Cavendish's account also included references to the documents and records compiled by the British consul stationed in China, Charles W. Campbell, during the latter's own voyage to Mt. Paektu in 1889. In order to complement his descriptions of his journey, Cavendish also included pictures taken by Campbell, British Consul General in Seoul Walter C. Hillier, and a customs officer in Wŏnsan by the name of Brazier. What's more, he also inserted several genre paintings by a contemporary Chosŏn artist in order to help readers gain some insight into Chosŏn's culture and traditions.

Cavendish's journey to Mt. Paektu and back, which took him from Seoul to the foot of Mt. Paektu, and then on to the port of Wŏnsan from which he exited Chosŏn, unfolded over a period of 40 days, or more precisely from 5 September to 15 October 1891.<sup>2</sup> As travellers' progress was slowed greatly by the fact that the only way to proceed was on foot or by pony, the author most likely had the opportunity to experience various aspects of Chosŏn during his long trek to Mt. Paektu. However, the main goal of Cavendish's journey was that of climbing a mountain long regarded as being sacred by the people of Chosŏn. Thus, while planning to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the information collected by Cavendish pertaining to Chosŏn culture, customs, and history at a later date, I would like to analyse herein the aspects of Cavendish and Goold-Adams' Korean experiences that are directly linked to their journey to Mt. Paektu. To this end, an analysis of their hunting activities in Chosŏn, which stands out as the most cherished aspect of their journey, will be conducted. Moreover, through a review of their journey to the heretofore little-known—at least in the Western world—site of Mt. Paektu, an attempt will also be made to examine how these two British nationals described Chosŏn and its people.

## **Hunting experiences**

Chosŏn's literati class continuously compiled minute records of the contexts surrounding their journeys to mountains. Such experiences were usually left behind for posterity in collections of travel records such as the *Wayurok* (臥遊錄 'Collection of Travel Descriptions').<sup>3</sup> The travels of the Chosŏn literati class were focused on the cultivation of a broad-minded spirit and powers of meditation. However, from the outset of their voyage to Chosŏn for the purpose of climbing Mt. Paektu, Cavendish and Goold-Adams' main goal had been that of engaging in hunting. Amongst their

most valued targets was that of snaring wild game such as tigers and leopards. With their weapons always at the ready, the travellers were prepared to engage in hunting whenever possible. Cavendish appears to have been aware of the fact that their journey was fundamentally different from the travels or climbing expeditions traditionally taken by Chosŏn people. He had heard that along their journey Chosŏn men liked to stop and enjoy nature and various sceneries, a practice which had resulted in the bestowing of names such as *p'algyŏng* (八景 'eight scenic sites') on spots which were deemed of exquisite beauty while engaging in treks to famous mountains such as the Kŭmgang mountains.<sup>4</sup> Cavendish and his companion's interest in hunting can to some degree be explained by their military background.

Cavendish and his companion were not the only foreigners who had a keen interest in Chosŏn's tigers and leopards and other wild game. In his account, Cavendish makes reference to the fact that an important number of pelts and live tigers were officially exported through maritime routes in 1890.<sup>5</sup> Although his ardent desire to catch tigers is evident in his writings, he and his companion never came across any actual tigers or leopards during their journey. While he heard stories relating to the sudden appearance of tigers and leopards from several different quarters during his journey,<sup>6</sup> his goal of hunting these fierce animals eventually proved to be a failure. The following passage offers insight into the author's general impression of his journey to Chosŏn, for which the possibility of hunting fierce animals had been a major incentive:

Our original object in going to Korea was to shoot tigers or leopards, for the tales we heard of their number, size, and ferocity, and of the beauty of their fur, made our mouths water; but the mysterious White Mountain lured us on to hasten to make its acquaintance, and partly on that account the shooting was somewhat of a failure.

Without doubt there is a great quantity of game in Korea, but there is only one way to get at tigers or leopards, and that is to let them come to you, and not you to go to them. The natives are so lazy, untruthful, and afraid of these animals, that no persuasion will induce them to act as beaters. In vain did we offer at length extravagant prices for the beasts. Even fifty dollars, with the bones and carcase thrown in, for each tiger we shot, would not tempt them. The bones and part of the body are greatly prized by the Chinese physicians, as imparting youthful vigour to old or worn-out constitutions. We also offered twenty-five dollars for a shot at a tiger, and ten dollars for the mere sight of one, but equally in vain. Although the people at Pochŏn strenuously denied the death of anyone there from tigers, and even the very existence of these beasts, yet Mr. Campbell, when he visited that village in 1889, was told that in the last year eighteen people had been killed by them, and that three tigers, one a confirmed man-eater, infested the district...<sup>7</sup>

Cavendish's deep sense of disappointment is clearly evident in the above passage. Campbell's account of the presence of numerous tigers in Chosŏn had been the main

factor which had motivated Cavendish's decision to travel to Chosŏn. However, he soon found himself hard-pressed to secure the cooperation of the local residents in tracking down these wild animals. He ascribed this situation to the fact that the local residents were 'too lazy, untruthful, and afraid of these animals.'

The local residents were not only unwilling to accompany the foreigners on their search for tigers, but also refused to provide them with any information pertaining to the great beasts. Whenever it appeared that Cavendish and his company were about to launch an actual search for the prized creature, the locals would suddenly decline to even discuss stories related to tigers. This can be regarded as the reason why the author stressed the 'untruthful' nature of the local residents. The episode which occurred when the group stopped near Anbyŏn on their way from Seoul to Wŏnsan can be regarded as a salient example of this phenomenon. During his sojourn in the area, the author heard first-hand accounts of tigers while accompanying local residents hunting for pheasants. Nevertheless, in the end, the local residents refused to provide any further evidence relating to the presence of tigers in the area:

They even pointed out the place to us, a low sandy hill partially covered with pine-trees; but when we announced our intention of going to look for the animal, they began to prevaricate, saying they were not sure on which hill or when it was last seen, and finally refused to come with us.<sup>8</sup>

Although the local residents' general fear of tigers was a factor in explaining their refusal to go hunting with the author and his companion, their decision to not provide the foreigners with any precise information pertaining to the great beasts was in part motivated by their awareness of the monetary value of tigers. This failure to kill any tigers was also related to the period of the year in which the journey took place. As Cavendish himself was also well aware, tigers usually descended from the mountains into the villages to get food during the winter season.<sup>9</sup> However, as his trek had to come to an end before the onset of winter if he and his group were to achieve their other goal of climbing Mt. Paektu, there was a very real possibility from the outset that their attempt to hunt tigers would end in futility.

The author and his companions also attempted during their journey to engage in the relatively easier task of hunting birds. However, this endeavour also proved to be less than fruitful. The group regularly hunted pheasants, a relatively more common form of game, near the sites of the encampments or inns in which they stayed.<sup>10</sup> However, these attempts also failed to yield many tangible results. This fact is clearly evidenced by the in-depth manner in which Cavendish described Goold-Adams' killing of two teal near Orich'un while on their way to Changjin, a mundane occurrence which he depicted as if it were an extraordinary feat.<sup>11</sup>

On his way back to Wŏnsan after having successfully scaled Mt. Paektu, Goold-Adams encountered much easier-to-hunt flocks of birds while in Pukch'ŏng. At that

time, he was able to catch a glimpse of various birds such as swans, geese, and ducks that were concentrated on eating the remnants of the harvest in paddy fields.

Cavendish and his companion failed to snare any tigers. However, having decided to stay in Changjin for one more night in order to allow additional ponies to be delivered to them, they were nevertheless able to have one interesting hunting experience. At that time, the governor of Changjin informed the group that while there were tigers in the Changjin area and hunters could be found to hunt the great beasts, the general fear that such tigers instilled in these hunters made the holding of a deer-drive a more appealing and plausible option. For Cavendish, deer-driving proved to be a hunting experience that was unique to Chosŏn.

His suggestion to have a deer-drive in the afternoon delighted us, in the absence of anything more exciting, and gratefully accepting it, we sent him off again, while we had our luncheon in peace. What a drive it was! Outside the town we were met by six hunters with 'tiger-guns'; one of whom had a new one (there is a manufactory of these here), which he tried then and there by firing across the river in the direction of the town at a stone about a foot in diameter, which lay at the water's edge at a distance of sixty yards, and, amidst exclamations of admiration of his skill, he hit the mark. ... Climbing a thousand feet up the mountain above the Chang-gé road, we were posted some distance apart, and, after waiting half-an-hour, we saw the Prefect come out in his chair and take up a position to watch the sport in a field in the valley below. As I had seen quite fresh tracks of deer leading into a large patch of thin wood between us and the town, we anticipated at least the sight of an animal. Now began the beating of a gong and the blowing of the Yamen trumpet in the direction of the wood, and the two performers on these instruments constituted the beaters, though they did not enter the wood. After waiting two hours in vain, we were told the drive was over, and we gladly returned home to dinner.<sup>12</sup>

This deer-drive in Changjin proved to be Cavendish's most pleasant experience during his journey. His account does not contain any descriptions of the encounters with the people of Chosŏn he experienced during his journey which are more positive in nature than this particular one. Although this hunt ended without any animals being captured, Cavendish appears to have attached great significance to the fact that he was able, with the help of the governor of Changjin, to experience an organized hunt from the beginning to the end. The participants in the hunt implemented set procedures that included the appearance of hunters with 'tiger-guns' and the participation of beaters with gongs and trumpets in the deer-drive. For someone like Cavendish who had a marked preference for established formalities and refined matters, such an experience must indeed have been a pleasant one.<sup>13</sup>

Although Cavendish and his companion's journey to Mt. Paektu did yield some satisfactory experiences related to hunting, their failure to snare ferocious wild beasts such as tigers and leopards meant that one of the main objectives of their trek had

failed to be secured. Nevertheless, Cavendish went to great lengths to describe the hunting methods used in Chosŏn and the means through which traps were installed.<sup>14</sup> In the annex to his account, Cavendish recorded the sorts of game available in Chosŏn, as well as the names and characteristics of the live game or pelts he had seen while on his journey.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, this account, in which the author's strong interest in hunting comes through very clearly, represents a salient source of information about animal ecology and hunting during the Chosŏn era.

### **Mt. Paektu: The gap between sacredness and superstition**

The descriptions of the features and characteristics of Mt. Paektu include the thoughts and experiences of both Cavendish and Goold-Adams. Unable to travel past the towns of Poch'ŏn and Karim situated at the foot of Mt. Paektu before having to head back to Hong Kong via Wŏnsan because of a tight schedule, Cavendish had to satisfy himself with looking at Mt. Paektu from afar. In order to ensure that the contents reflected the title of his account, *Korea and the Sacred White Mountain*, Cavendish borrowed the records compiled by Goold-Adams, who actually reached the summit (*Ch'ŏnji* 天池) of the mountain.

The ultimate goal of Cavendish and his companion was that of climbing Mt. Paektu. We can see from the title of his account that the author identified 'sacredness' as its most prominent attribute. Although Cavendish and Goold-Adams' main objective in travelling there was to hunt tigers, they naturally began to focus increasingly on the mountain's features as they drew closer to it. Considering the fact that tigers were more prominent in this area than in others, Mt. Paektu can be regarded as holding a special allure that distinguished it from other mountains. However, for Cavendish and his companion, Mt. Paektu's sacredness did not stem from the fact that tigers resided on its slopes. Rather, it was the varied scenery created by the magnificent geographical features of the mountain that allowed these individuals to experience its extraordinary uniqueness and transcendental nature. The reaction of the Chosŏn aides who accompanied Cavendish and Goold-Adams on their trek was a genuine fear that they had stepped inside the sacred realm of Mt. Paektu imprudently.

The records compiled by Cavendish and Goold-Adams not only reflect Chosŏn aides' perceptions of Mt. Paektu, but also those of the inhabitants who lived in the area around the sacred mountain. For his part, Cavendish believed that Chosŏn people's perception of Paektu as a sacred mountain was essentially rooted in the aura of mystery that hung over its features. To this end, Cavendish argued that the mysterious aura which the people of Chosŏn attributed to it emanated from its permanently white features. Chosŏn people clung to the strong belief that the white features of Mt. Paektu were the result of the fact that the mountain was covered with snow the year around.<sup>16</sup> This sense of sacredness was further enhanced by the belief

that the snow in effect meant that the mountain never revealed its true features. For this reason, they might not have wanted to imagine a Mt. Paektu which was *not* covered with snow. For his part, Cavendish gazed upon Mt. Paektu from a distance of 33 miles away. Though he was able to discern that Mt. Paektu's white appearance was rooted in the presence of numerous pumice and ash trees, he realized that this would not change Chosŏn people's age-old notion that the mountain was permanently white with snow.

Fear was another factor that served to enhance the sacredness of Mt. Paektu in the eyes of the people of Chosŏn. This sudden sense of fear at the unknown world opening up before their eyes may have been a common emotion for those attempting to climb the mountain. Believing that entering its realm was akin to invading a sacred space, many Chosŏn people were afraid to go there altogether. The presence of numerous aides too frightened to enter the mountain's realm greatly complicated Goold-Adams' efforts to climb it. The records compiled by Cavendish and Goold-Adams include references to some of the steps taken to assuage the genuine fear which those aides experienced at the mere thought of climbing the mountain. Although one by the name of Yeung who also acted as an interpreter for these two British travellers was a relatively young and intelligent man of approximately 25 years of age, he nevertheless showed himself greatly fearful at the thought of ascending the peak.

The interpreter Yeung was evidently in a desperate fright at going to the mountain, accounting for it by saying there was no joss-house on the top, and that although once upon a time a Korean did get to the top, yet the Spirit was so offended at his presumption, that he caused his neck (other accounts say his leg) to grow a yard longer! Yeung gave me a farewell letter to his wife to take down-country, thinking his last days were come, and his bones would be left on the "White Mountain." This letter I sent on to Mr. Stripling at Soul from Won-san, but I never heard if Mrs. Yeung received it.<sup>17</sup>

Yeung's desire to convey a farewell letter to his wife in Seoul through Cavendish sheds some light on the degree of fear which regular Chosŏn people must have felt when confronted with the thought of climbing Mt. Paektu. The story of the Spirit's taking umbrage at the fact that someone had dared invade the mountain's sanctuary was no longer a mere legend for Yeung. As such, he reacted with fear at the thought of abusing the mountain's inviolable sacredness.

Before taking leave of Goold-Adams in a village called Karim situated at the foot of Mt. Paektu, Cavendish saw his (Goold-Adams') aides gladly purchase some rice at an over-inflated price. This action in effect represented one of the measures which the Koreans took to overcome the fear emanating from the mere thought of climbing Mt. Paektu. They believed that the smell of the rice which they planned to offer the mountain would assuage the rage of its Spirit.<sup>18</sup> A detailed description of the ceremony dedicated to the Spirit of Mt. Paektu can be found in Goold-Adams' records:

Before, however, we could sit down to our magnificent repast, the spirit whose domains we were invading had to be propitiated; for this purpose the rice had been brought. A miserable little pinch was cooked, spread out on the trunk of a fallen tree, and allowed to remain there for a quarter of an hour or so, until half cold; my men in the meantime (though professed Buddhists) standing in front, muttering, shaking their hands in Chinese fashion, and now and then expectorating. Their incantations finished, the rice was brought back to the fireside and solemnly eaten. They explained to me that the Spirit being such, could not eat rice, and only required the smell, so there could be no harm in their consuming this tiny luxury.<sup>19</sup>

This ceremony was performed by Chosŏn people because it would to some degree help mitigate the fear they would feel when they entered the world of the unknown.

Nevertheless, the fear felt by the aides became increasingly palpable as they drew closer to Mt. Paektu. To a man, those who accompanied Goold-Adams believed that bad luck would befall them if they invaded its sacred space. Goold-Adams soon realized that even the relatively better-educated Yeung shared the other porters' sentiment. Goold-Adams grew increasingly disgusted with Chosŏn people's perception when he heard one of his porters say, "you have seen the mountain, and surely that is enough; you cannot possibly want to go to the very top."<sup>20</sup> In his mind, these people's fears of Mt. Paektu were rooted in silly superstitions.<sup>21</sup>

Meanwhile, Cavendish was once again reminded of Mt. Paektu's mysteriousness when he had the opportunity to view it from afar on his way from Poch'ŏn to Wŏnsan.<sup>22</sup> In his opinion, the sacredness of Mt. Paektu, which he believed flowed effusively from its slopes, had led to the creation of numerous legends and myths, and had also motivated those who worshipped nature to seek residence around its slopes. On his way back to Wŏnsan, Cavendish came across three different shrines. While visiting them, he realized that on 4 August of every year royal envoys dispatched by the Chosŏn king performed ritual ceremonies for the mountain god and to secure the influence of their monarch. He also learned that the mythical ancestor of Chosŏn had originated from Mt. Paektu. As such, this represented a good opportunity for Cavendish to reconfirm the sacredness of Mt. Paektu, and to gain some insight as to why this mountain so dominated the people of Chosŏn.

For the people of Chosŏn, Mt. Paektu was a divine and sacred space that remained outside the realm of humans. Its sacredness was further strengthened by the awe with which they approached the thought of invading its Spirit's realm. However, for Europeans such as Cavendish and Goold-Adams, Mt. Paektu was a natural force which humans could interact with and even incorporate. Looking at the fear expressed by Chosŏn people, these two British officers must have thought that they had been captured by superstition. However, their superstitious behaviour, as witnessed by the two Britons, can also be viewed as another element of Koreans' humbleness before nature.



## Conclusion

Cavendish and Goold-Adams' accounts may be utilized as good sources with which to analyse how Europeans viewed hunting and climbing in Chosŏn during the final period of the 19th century. Although unable to capture the game they had originally sought, the catch and Chosŏn hunting methods recorded by these two British nationals represent a unique account. In addition, this book makes it evident that the magnificent and solemn atmosphere of Mt. Paektu overwhelmed all travellers, regardless of whether they were from the Orient or the Western world. However, it also exposes differences between the British and the people of Chosŏn in the manner in which they approached the mountain itself. This can be interpreted as a reflection of the differences between Chosŏn and Britain, or even East Asia and Europe, in terms of their perceptions of nature.

Cavendish's account includes observations about the history and folk customs of Chosŏn. In this regard, there is a need to conduct studies on how, and from which standpoint, he and his companions viewed the features of Chosŏn society at the end of the 19th century.

## Notes

1. The official title and bibliographical information for this book is as follows: Captain A. E. Cavendish, F.R.G.S., 1894. *Korea and the Sacred White Mountain: Being a Brief Account of a Journey in Korea in 1891, together with an Account of an Ascent of the White Mountain by Captain H. E. Goold-Adams, R.A. with forty original illustrations and two specially prepared maps*. London: George Philip & Son.
2. The journey of Goold-Adams, who successfully climbed Mt. Paektu, was longer than that of Cavendish. Goold-Adams had originally planned to take a steamship from Wŏnsan to Tianjin. However, violent storms at sea forced him to head back to Seoul via an overland route. He arrived in Seoul on 19 November.
3. Here, the materials housed in the Changsŏgak (Jangseogak) Library of the Academy of Korean Studies and Seoul National University's Kyujanggak Royal Library can be regarded as representative examples.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
5. According to Cavendish, 104 leopard and tiger hides, as well as three actual tigers, were exported in 1890. Cavendish, 1894, pp. 97–98.
6. The book includes several examples of this. For instance, he was told that tigers and leopards were often trapped during the winter season in the plains that separated Anbyŏn from Wŏnsan (*ibid.*, p. 97); that a tiger had devoured some of the chickens belonging to Brazier, the customs officer stationed in Wŏnsan (p. 98); while on his way to Seoul from Wŏnsan, a Russian traveller had shot a tiger who was chasing after an old lady in a snowy field; and that officials from the Russian Embassy in Seoul sometimes saw leopards during the winter season (p. 203).

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 202–3.
8. *Ibid.*, 1894, p. 77.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 203.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 67, p. 77.
11. ‘Next morning at 1 a.m. it began to rain, and a steady downpour continued all day until 8 p.m. G.-A. shot two teal (?Baikal teal), large handsome birds, male and female; steel-blue bodies, wings dark blue lightening to azure blue, with the two longest feathers tipped with 1½ inches of white, breasts white, and beaks scarlet; the male had a chestnut crest, the female’s head was steel-blue without a crest’ (*ibid.*, p.114).
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–9.
13. Cavendish described his encounters with Chosŏn commoners and their lifestyles as being unpleasant. He also tended to view the behaviour and thought of the Chosŏn people who accompanied him in a most negative of lights. In this regard, the formal cultural experience that made the most profound impression on him was far and away the deer-drive in Changjin.
14. *Ibid.*, p.100.
15. Cavendish recorded 43 kinds of animals which he had seen in pelt or other form, as well as 26 other kinds of animals whose existence he had been able to confirm. *Ibid.*, pp. 205–6.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 153.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 153–4.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 156.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 163.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 166, p. 173. Consequently, while Yeung and a hunter followed Goold-Adams to the summit, the others stayed in a Chinese dugout on the way to the top.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 185.