

# TRAVEL ACCOUNTS OF A KOREAN ENVOY IN LONDON: YI CHONGŬNG'S *SŎYU KYŎNMUNROK*

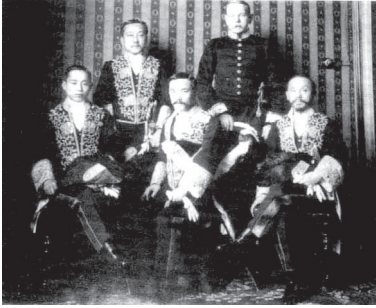
KIM SEUNG-U

## Introduction

This study introduces the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* (西遊見聞錄 'Records of a Journey to the West', 1902), a work which consists of a *kasa* (歌辭, a traditional Korean vernacular verse form) of approximately 400 verses. Moreover, efforts are made herein to analyse the general characteristics of this particular work. The *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* was compiled by Yi Chongŭng (1853–1920), an individual who was dispatched by the Taehan Empire (1897–1910) in 1902 to take part in a diplomatic mission to London. Up until very recently, this manuscript had remained in the possession of Yi's descendants. However, the decision on their part to release his work, along with two related pictures, in conjunction with Queen Elizabeth's visit to Korea in April 1999, has resulted in Yi's works finally coming to the attention of scholars. The great interest which the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* has attracted can be traced back to the fact that it represents a first-hand account of the experiences while in the West of a man who was both a government official and a member of the literati elite.

## Yi Chongŭng's experiences as a member of the diplomatic mission and the background to the compilation of the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok*

Yi Chongŭng, who could trace his ancestry back 11 generations to King Chungjong (1488–1544), began to serve as a high-level official in the Sijongwŏn (侍從院, Chamberlain's Court) in 1896, a period which coincided with the reign of King Kojong (1852–1919).<sup>1</sup> The Sijongwŏn was the office in charge of preparing the king's costumes, meals, and medicines. It was around this period that Queen Victoria (1819–1901) of England passed away while in her 64<sup>th</sup> year on the throne, and was subsequently replaced by her first son who became known as Edward VII. Having established diplomatic relations with Great Britain in November 1883, the government of the Taehan Empire decided to dispatch a condolence mission to attend Queen



The congratulatory mission for the enthronement of Edward VII in 1902.

Back row: Kim Chohyŏn, H. Goffe.

Front row: Ko Huigyŏng, Yi Chaegak, Yi Chongŭng.

Victoria's funeral and a congratulatory mission to the enthronement ceremony for Edward VII.

King Kojong appointed Yi Chaegak (1873–?), a 4th-generation descendant of Prince Sado (1735–1762), to lead the mission, and selected Yi Chongŭng to serve as his assistant. Meanwhile, Ko Huigyŏng and Kim Chohyŏn were chosen to act as interpreters. As H. Goffe of the British Legation in Inch'ŏn expressed his desire to accompany the group in an advisory capacity, the mission eventually came to consist of five people. Although the official date of the enthronement announced by the British government was 26 June 1902, the mission, aware of the long voyage across the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans that awaited them, left for London on 7th April.

From the moment he was selected to take part in the mission, Yi Chongŭng began to compile records of all the matters related to the congratulatory mission in Chinese characters. To this end, he went to great lengths to ensure that he left behind detailed records of the process through which the mission was organized, the objectives of the diplomatic mission, the customs and landscapes of the various countries which the mission passed through on their way to London, his various observations while in London, and of the return journey to Seoul. The diplomatic mission returned to Seoul on 20 August 1902. On 1 September 1902 some 10 days after their return, Yi Chongŭng produced a summary of the records he had compiled during his 140-day journey, which he called the *Sŏsarok* (西槎錄) or records of a sea voyage to the West.

The *Sŏsarok* represents a valuable material with which to analyse the diplomatic relations of the Taehan Empire. However, the document which has most attracted the interest of researchers in the field of literature is the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok*, compiled shortly after the *Sŏsarok*. On 29th September, roughly one month after the completion of the *Sŏsarok*, Yi sat down and began to write the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok*, which constitutes an account of his experience as a royal envoy to London written in *kasa* form. Although the two documents essentially deal with identical contents, each has its own characteristics in terms of the language style utilized and the mood

which is conveyed. The *Sōsarok*, which was written in a Chinese prose style, was compiled in order to convey Yi's journey to London and his observations during the journey in an exact and realistic manner. Meanwhile, the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok*, written in vernacular Korean (*hangŭl*), represents a summary of specific elements of this long journey and an account of the author's personal thoughts and impressions. These differing characteristics are also evidenced in the following statement found at the end of the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok*:

In terms of the coronation of the British King in the West, I have merely *summarized what I saw and heard* while I was presenting our emperor (Kojong)'s royal edict. If I had *described what I saw and heard in a detailed manner*, this would have amounted for the most part to hearsay. Only one out of ten accounts perhaps has been properly and truthfully recounted. Although certain clerical errors may be found, the focus when reading this book should be on the general meaning which I was trying to convey.<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added by the author of this paper)

As we can see from the above quotation, the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok* represents a 'summary of what he saw and heard'. Meanwhile, the reference to the 'description of what I saw and heard in a detailed manner' found in the next sentence is more reminiscent of the *Sōsarok*. Although the compiling of records in the manner of the *Sōsarok* may have represented an effective method to convey information in a factual manner, this method would have resulted in a certain degree of miscellaneousness in the way the words were rendered, which in turn would have resulted in a high likelihood that the reader would be left with a sense that he was hearing an unreliable account (hearsay). To this end, Yi appears to have felt that a brief summary of the contents which he regarded as being important was necessary. In short, the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok* was written in order to recount his own experiences in a shorter form while describing matters in an open-hearted manner.



Yi Chonggŭng in official attire.

In fact, it was quite common for royal envoys dispatched to China and Japan during the middle and late Chosŏn periods to leave behind records of their journeys in the form of a journal written in traditional Chinese or as a *kasa*. As we can see from Yi Chongŭng's example, there were also some instances in which both styles were in fact utilized. The *kasa* works which contain the experiences of those who took part in royal missions have been regarded as falling under the category of earlier *sahaeng kasa* (使行歌辭), and heated debates have been held over the characteristics of such works.<sup>3</sup> While the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* can be regarded as a work whose roots are grounded in the *sahaeng kasa* produced during the Chosŏn dynasty, the mere fact that this particular account deals with a *sahaeng* to the faraway nation of Great Britain in Western Europe rather than to the traditional adjacent nations in East Asia makes this work one with a unique significance. While the presence of numerous ancient documents and other forms of literature pertaining to China and Japan meant that much was known about these countries, as late as 1902 very little was known in Chosŏn about Western European nations, including Great Britain, with the notable exception of the fragments of information provided by intellectuals from the Enlightenment Group. As such, the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* has drawn attention because it not only exhibits the last ebbing of the Chosŏn-era *sahaeng kasa*, but also constitutes a description of a Taehan Empire diplomatic mission's experiences in the West.

### **The composition of the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* and the descriptions found therein**

According to the *Sŏsarok*, the diplomatic mission which participated in the coronation of Edward VII set sail from Inch'ŏn across the Pacific Ocean, before eventually reaching the American continent. Thereafter, they traversed the Atlantic Ocean before finally arriving in Great Britain. Their return voyage to Chosŏn was effected through southern Europe and across the Suez Canal and Red Sea, before making the trek home across the Indian Ocean.

As this diplomatic mission essentially became a trip around the world, the conclusion can be reached that various matters and situations were experienced. The *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* represents a rapid glossing over of this trip around the world. As can be seen in the table, with the notable exceptions of the short description of the author's thoughts and impressions with regards to his dispatch as a royal envoy to London found in the introductory section, and another section on his thoughts and impressions after having returned to Chosŏn, the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* consists of a pattern of 'journey–observations–journey–observations'. In terms of volume, Yi tends to focus less on the journey aspect than on the descriptions of his observations. Metaphorically speaking, the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* is characterized by a hectic cycle in

Verses	Number of verses	Main contents
1–10	10	The background to his dispatch to London as a royal envoy
11–30	20	Departure from Inch'ŏn
31–37	7	Journey to Japan
38–52	15	Observations in Japan
53–61	9	Journey to Canada
62–94	33	Observations in Canada and the United States
95–99	5	Journey to Great Britain
100–291	192	Observations in Great Britain (London)
292–341	50	Return journey to Chosŏn and observations 1 (France–Italy–Egypt–Ferghana)
342–407	66	Return journey to Chosŏn and observations 2 (Sri Lanka–Singapore–Hong Kong–China–Japan)
408–422	15	Thoughts and impressions after returning to Chosŏn

which the reader must scamper from one place to another, only to stop and look around for a moment before taking off again, with this pattern being most pronounced in the section dealing with the author's observations in London (verses 100–291). This kind of descriptive method was designed to include in a compressed fashion the tedious aspects of the journey itself alongside the landscapes and panoramas of the places which the mission travelled through. This is precisely why the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* is conveyed to its readers at what appears to be a breakneck pace. In addition, this breakneck pace is further augmented by the narrative tone and literary expressions utilized by the author.

Waterfalls in this valley/waterfalls in that valley  
 Waterfalls in ten different valleys/combined in a flowing main valley  
 Cracking here cracking there/from the sky to the earth  
 A banging sound hits the opposite shore/spreading out over the mountains and valleys  
 A new world of divine landscapes/is finally witnessed today. (verses 73–77)

The above passage is a description of a mountainous landscape which the author gazed upon while travelling by train across the American West. It comes from *Yusan'ga* (遊山歌), a song about mountain excursions that was very popular at that time. Although the mountainous landscapes of the United States did not mesh entirely with the emotions conveyed in the *Yusan'ga*, which transmitted a free-wheeling and passionate feeling of amusement, Yi's work appears to have incorporated this sense of excitement and delight. The other sections of the *Sŏyu kyŏnmunrok* are also filled with instances in which memorable locutions and pleasant emotions are conveyed in lieu of elaborate descriptions of the landscapes of foreign countries and in-depth

analysis of their situations. This trait is most evident in the author's descriptions of his observations while in London.

According to the *Sōsarok*, the diplomatic mission arrived in Liverpool on 5th June, before heading for London where they stayed for about a month. Having had various experiences in the capital city, they began their journey back home, leaving England via Dover on 7th July. After meeting Edward VII at Buckingham Palace, the members of the diplomatic mission participated in an official welcoming reception and enjoyed dinner with the monarch on two separate occasions. Some of the other activities in which they partook while in London included a sightseeing tour of downtown London and visits to the zoo, a circus, and Madame Tussauds. They were also able to get a first-hand look at the advanced institutions and administrative system on which England's state organizations and government agencies were founded, through visits to places such as the British Houses of Parliament, the Bank of England, a prison, and fire stations. However, the sections of the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok* dealing with this period are limited to descriptions of the welcoming reception and dinners hosted by the British royal family, and of the entertainment facilities in downtown London. This omission of the observations made while touring in state organizations and government agencies almost makes it appear as if the members of the diplomatic mission limited themselves to touring the palace area and downtown London. To this end, while observations related to state organizations and government agencies should be described in an analytical manner, scenes such as the palace and downtown London lend themselves better to the use of a more improvised and sensuous descriptive style. This can be regarded as the reason for Yi's adoption of a selective approach to the observations used in his work. Meanwhile, the observations described in the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok* are rendered in a pleasant and convivial tone.

Roads are paved with stones/trees are planted along the streets  
 Not even an ounce of dirt is found/this is the world we have dreamed of  
 People coming and going/rubbing elbows along the way  
 Double-horse carriages and single-horse carriages/endlessly coming and going.  
 (verses 144–147)

Five and six hundred beauties/bloom their flowers  
 They must be from fairy tales/or queens of *yaochiyuan* (瑤池淵)  
 Their beautiful scents stimulate noses/and astonish the eye  
 At the doors of the rooms on each floor/thunderous music springs out  
 Magnificence and splendour/can this be heaven on earth? (vv. 212–216)

The first passage refers to the scene on the streets when Yi first arrived in London. The deep impression which the well-organized roads and vivid districts made on him is clearly evident in this passage. Yi was so smitten with the scenery of London from the moment he first laid eyes on it that he described its clean streets, which

he regarded as not having an ounce of dirt, as an example of ‘the world we have dreamed of.’ In the second passage, which describes the reception at Buckingham Palace, a similarly extravagant description is employed. While the British ladies he met during the dinner reception were compared to figures from fairy tales and legends, Buckingham Palace is expressed as heaven on earth.

The use of such a pace and exaggerated rhetoric can be regarded as the structural and descriptive characteristics of the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok*.

## Conclusion

As can be gleaned from the analysis presented above, the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok* does not contain or reveal any deep understanding or analysis of the West. Three years after Yi’s visit to London, the diplomatic sovereignty of the Taehan Empire was stripped away as a result of the signing of the Protectorate Treaty of 1905, which was followed a mere five years later by the loss of national sovereignty at the hands of imperial Japan. Yi Chongŭng’s work has been criticised in some quarters for having omitted to conduct a proper analysis of the Western imperialist powers in the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok* or to raise his concern about his fatherland at a time when its very survival was in question. However, in order for such criticisms to be more persuasive, detailed and in-depth studies on the background and contents of Yi’s work should be conducted, with a comparative analysis of the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok* and *Sōsarok* being of prime importance. The advent of studies on this work conducted from the above standpoint will contribute to revealing the characteristics of not only the *Sōyu kyōnmunrok*, but also of related genres such as the poems and songs, and *sahaeng kasa* written during the modern Enlightenment period. In this regard, some aspects of the analysis carried out in the present study have been carried out as part of an effort to achieve these goals. To this end, more in-depth analysis will be required in the future.

## Notes

1. For more on the genealogy of Yi Chongŭng’s family and the British-Chosŏn diplomatic relationship, please refer to Kim Wŏnmo, ‘The dispatch of the Congratulatory Diplomatic Mission to London and the Chosŏn-British diplomatic relationship (*Han’gukŭi yŏngguk ch’ukha sajŏldan p’agyŏn’gwa hanyŏng oegyŏ kwan’gye*)’, *Tongyanghak*, Vol. 32, 2006. Dankook University Institute of Oriental Studies.
2. *Syōyu kyōnmunrok* (西游見聞錄), *T’ongjŏng* (通情).
3. These various characteristics were discussed in Ch’oe Kanghyŏn, *Korean Travel Literature (Han’guk kihaeng munhak yŏn’gu)*. Ilchisa, 1982.