



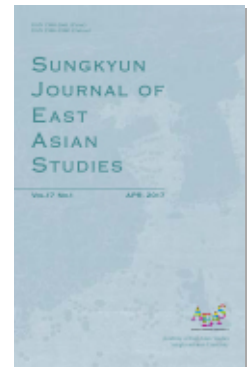
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In the Service of His Korean Majesty: William Nelson Lovatt, the Pusan Customs, and Sino-Korea Relations, 1876–1888 by Wayne Patterson (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Wayne PATTERSON, *In the Service of His Korean Majesty: William Nelson Lovatt, the Pusan Customs, and Sino-Korea Relations, 1876–1888*. (Korea Research Monograph/ Center for Korean Studies, no. 35) Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 2012. 193 Pages. ISBN 978-1-55729-100-4 (Paperback). 20.00 USD.

In the Service of His Korean Majesty is based mostly on the personal papers of British-American William Nelson Lovatt (1838–1904), who served for a short time (1883–1886) as commissioner of the Korean Customs Service in Pusan. In narrating William N. Lovatt's stay in Korea, the author entwines two threads, a personal one and a political one, into a single story. On the personal level, Lovatt had been a close friend of Paul Georg von Möllendorff during their service to the Chinese government, not only professionally, but in such personal affairs as delivering messages to women.

On the policy level, in order to keep Korea out of the hands of the Russians and the Japanese but within the Chinese orbit, China, under Li Hung-chang's initiative, took an increasingly interventionist approach, moving away from the conventional principle of benign neglect that characterized the Qing tributary system. China had taken it upon itself to negotiate a treaty with the United States on behalf of Korea in 1882. In the aftermath of the aborted, Japanese-supported Kapsin Coup in 1884, Li Hung-chang (Li Hongzhang) sought to tighten his country's grip on Korean affairs and counter Japanese influence by placing Western advisors in the Korean court and establishing a customs service based on that of China. Thus, he recommended Möllendorff to be appointed as a foreign advisor to the Korean court. It was also on Li's recommendation that Lovatt came to Korea in September 1883, after having worked for the Chinese government for more than two decades, primarily in the Imperial Chinese Customs Service.

Lovatt was hesitant to accept Möllendorff's offer because it would mean that he would have to give up "a long fruitful career in China," and take up "a hardship post," in Korea, "characterized by poverty, isolation, poor hygienic conditions, poor communication and transportation, little prospect for trade, a weak and faction-riven government, and an official bias against foreigners and Christianity" (30). However, the commissionership and its monthly salary of 300 taels meant a promotion and a raise, and would enable his wife Jennie to come live with him, ending his life as a bachelor. By early October, Lovatt was in Pusan, and he formally launched the customs service early the following month. He was soon joined by his wife and Mabel, their youngest daughter.

Patterson provides a striking account of what the life of an expatriate family was like in Pusan in the early 1880s. The Lovatts were the first and only Western family, residing at a Japanese house in the Japanese quarter of a port city dominated by Japanese traders. Readers are given a full range of information, enough to draw a

detailed picture of the family and community life of the Lovatts: how they obtained food—beef shipped from Nagasaki, game from Lovatt's hunting trips to Chōryōng-do, and fresh fish purchased from Korean fishermen; whom they associated with—predominantly Japanese merchants in their neighborhood and Japanese officials on the occasions of holiday celebrations and friendly yet obligatory dinners; how they spent their time as expatriates with daily lives “characterized by isolation, monotony, boredom, and loneliness, punctuated by occasional diversions in a city dominated by Japanese culture” (74–75)—family picnics, excursions with friends, and hunting trips for Lovatt, reading, sewing, and teaching English to Japanese children for Jennie, and playing with Japanese friends for Mabel.

However, the greatest relief from the fundamentally lonely and isolated life of these expatriate residents was the highly irregular arrival of foreign ships, so that “it was the steamers, already valued for the mail, newspapers, and rumors of the outside world they brought, that assumed the leading role in socializing along Western lines” (65). Pusan was only occasionally serviced by steamers from major port cities in Northeast Asia like Nagasaki, Vladivostok, Shanghai, and Inch'ŏn, bearing mail and cargo, and disembarking a variety of temporary visitors, such as Western sea captains, Western diplomats, missionaries, and at times even Western women. These Western passengers provided not only the opportunity for socializing, but were also sources of much-awaited news from the outside world—political changes and developments, especially domestic conflicts and wars among nations, which allowed Lovatt to grasp the changing domestic and international context in which he worked. Among such visitors were those who brought news and instructions that directly affected Lovatt's official life. For instance, Lovatt had a face-to-face meeting with Möllendorff, who stopped by Pusan on his way back from a Korean apology mission to Japan in the spring of 1885. Möllendorff brought troubling news to Lovatt—the financial deficit at the Inch'ŏn customs office led him to pressure Lovatt to transfer there to replace the incumbent but inefficient commissioner as part of reform measures to resolve “the problem of too many employees and not enough business” (90) faced by the Korean customs, as well as Möllendorff's estrangement from the pro-Chinese faction, imperiling his position at the Korean court, to which the fate of Lovatt was tied. Tension therefore began to develop between the two.

The course of Lovatt's official career took a downward turn when Möllendorff's secret scheme to replace the Chinese with the Russians as the new protectors of Korea became public knowledge. Möllendorff's betrayal of his Chinese superiors deeply angered Li Hung-chang, who pressured the Korean court to relieve him of his dual duties as foreign advisor and head of Korean customs. As a new coterie of agents to exercise Chinese influence over Korea, Li dispatched Henry Merrill to head Korean customs, Owen Denny as foreign advisor, and Yüan Shih-k'ai (Yuan Shikai) as the Chinese “Resident.” Henry Merrill set about implementing a reform program to downsize “superfluous” staff from the Korean customs service to increase efficiency, and to prepare for its eventual absorption into the Chinese customs service in accordance with the secret plan of Robert Hart. All three commissioners at Inch'ŏn, Pusan, and Wönsan were seen as Möllendorff's men

and thus faced imminent dismissal. With his protective cover gone, Lovatt was seemingly left to his fate.

Ironically, it was this woeful state of affairs that revealed Lovatt's character, strengthening the biographical element of this study. Even though he hardly had any power to influence, let alone change, the course of this adverse development, Lovatt nonetheless, through sharp calculations and astute action, managed to make the best of his circumstances. He had managed to learn of Hart's secret plan to absorb the Korean customs service into the Chinese system and that he had masterminded the firing of the Korean customs commissioners. He knew quite well that if he revealed Hart's annexation plan to Western, particularly American, diplomats and the anti-Chinese faction in Seoul then the anti-Chinese elements in Korean politics, now completely on the defensive, would regain strength, thus dealing a severe blow to China's attempt to solidify its influence over Korea. Lovatt realized he possessed "a potent bargaining chip in his quest for a favorable settlement" (144) of his dismissal. Having thus obtained a handsome severance package, Lovatt went quietly to his home in Minnesota, only to realize that he had no interest in farming and a distaste for the harsh winters there. Eventually he managed to return to the Chinese customs service, and though he began again in a lower position, he managed to eventually recover his previous rank of tide surveyor, and died in Hankow in 1904, aged sixty-six.

This monograph on William N. Lovatt is a richly documented biography of a Western expatriate whose life mirrored the changes and transitions taking place in the late nineteenth-century treaty-port settings in China and Korea. This study lucidly illustrates the way domestic and international events in Northeast Asia affected Lovatt and his family. Its detailed account of the everyday life of a Western expatriate family in Pusan in the 1880s is particularly elaborate and gripping. Unfortunately, while Lovatt was charged with a number of duties—ensuring the honest payment and collection of customs dues, enforcing the ban against contraband goods, and developing the ports as safe and efficient venues for international trade, little is actually written on such matters, in contrast to the wealth of information on his personal and family life. This shortcoming might be the result of the sources the author has used—personal correspondence. It will therefore likely be necessary for us to await the discovery and examination of new sources that will shed light on official and business life in the Korean customs house.

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