INTRODUCTION

The original motivation behind this biographical study of the late Chosŏn official Min Yong-hwan came from an interest in Min’s aunt Queen Myŏngsŏng (Queen Min), the consort of King Kojong. Even a casual visitor to Seoul is likely to visit Kyŏngbok Palace and come across the site of her miserable death on 8 October 1895. In the precincts of this royal palace she was brutally murdered by a band of Japanese sōshi and their Korean collaborators under the direction of the Japanese minister in Seoul, Miura Gorô. Her violent death under cover of darkness at the hands of a foreign aggressor with the collaboration of her own people remains a potent symbol of Korea’s own loss of sovereignty, which occurred just a decade after her death with the signing of the Ülsa Treaty of Protection (Ülsa poho choyak) in 1905.

Queen Myŏngsŏng, however, has been an ambivalent figure in Korean historiography. Although her contemporaries and subsequent generations of Koreans have expressed outrage at her assassination at the hands of the Japanese, the queen herself has generally been viewed as a reactionary force in the politics of the period. In particular, she has been blamed for obstructing the reform programs of members of the Enlightenment party (Kaehwadang) such as Kim Ok-kyun and Pak Yong-hyo. Furthermore, according to her critics, she manipulated her weak husband, King Kojong, ensuring that the reins of power were firmly held by leading members of the Min clan such as Min Yong-hwan’s paternal uncle Min Sŭng-ho and his own father, Min Kyŏm-ho. The queen was also accused by the contemporary diarist Hwang Hyŏn of being involved in various violent intrigues in the court, including the death of Wanhwagun,
Kojong’s son by a concubine, who threatened the position of her own son as crown prince.\textsuperscript{2}

The ambivalent attitudes of Korean historians to Queen Myŏngsŏng, therefore, appear to have their origins in the queen’s own Machiavellian struggle for survival within the intrigues of the Korean court, which for the first ten years of her husband’s reign was dominated by her hostile father-in-law, the Taewŏn’-gun. Such attitudes may also be based on the supposed incompatibility of strong women with Confucian traditions or in the undoubted fact that members of the Min clan who held official posts were viewed by their contemporary critics as being irredeemably corrupt. Furthermore, as a staunch opponent of Japanese policy in Korea until her death, Queen Myŏngsŏng also received biased treatment from Japanese historians who sought to belittle her: for example, by referring to her by the informal term “Min шибка” rather than by her posthumous title Myŏngsŏng.

Western contemporary observers of the Korean scene who met Queen Myŏngsŏng, however, appear to be in agreement that she was a woman of outstanding intelligence and ability. As women were more freely, although not exclusively, permitted to have interviews with the queen in person, it is to the accounts of Western women in Seoul that we must mainly look for an idea of the impression that she made on the foreign community. The following is an account of the queen by her personal physician, the missionary nurse Annie Ellers Bunker:

To me the face of the Queen, especially when she smiles, is full of beauty. She is a superior woman and she impressed one as having a strong will and great force of character, with much kindliness of heart. I have always received the kindest words and treatment from her and I have much admiration and respect for her.\textsuperscript{3}

This account of the queen is corroborated in every respect by other accounts of personal interviews by Lillias Horton Underwood, the wife of one of the most prominent American missionaries in Seoul, Horace G. Underwood, and Isabella Bird Bishop, an intrepid British travel writer, who made four visits to Korea between 1894 and 1897.\textsuperscript{4}

In addition to these accounts by Westerners is an account by a contemporary Korean observer of the political scene in Seoul, Yun Ch’i-ho. Yun, as a fringe member of the reform party, was a severe critic of the Korean court and members of the Min clan in particular, including the queen. Nevertheless, he sympathetically recorded in his diary an account of the queen related to him by her nephew Min Yong-hwan himself:

\textsuperscript{2} introduction

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She was a wonderful woman. Mr. Min told me that ever since the violent death of her brother about twenty years ago, she had not been able to sleep in the night. When she rose in the morning about eleven, after a rest of a few hours, her hours were taken up in reading and writing private letters, in examining all state papers, in transacting all the state business, from the appointment of a “seuri” [sŏri] or a clerk to the negotiations of foreign treaties. She could not only read the Chinese classics but knew by heart their principal passages. She was well up in the Corean and Chinese histories.

The fact remains, however, that in Korean historiography the queen and almost all the members of the Min clan are generally portrayed in a poor light as conservatives bound to the outmoded forms of Confucianism, subservient to the Qing, and above all grasping and selfish in office. Some Korean historians, however, have argued that this negative perception of Queen Myŏngsŏng and the Min clan is largely a result of the distortions imposed on Korean history by Japanese historians during the colonial period. Dalchoong Kim, for example, points to the pre-1945 Japanese historians of Korea such as Kikuchi Kenjō and Okudaira Takehirō as blaming the failure of Korea to modernize on “the backward, egocentric, reactionary, and factional nature of Korean political leadership, in particular of the Min clan and their political associates.”

Reformers such as Kim Ok-kyun, Pak Yong-hyo, and Sŏ Chae-p’il, on the other hand, have generally received more sympathetic treatment at the hands of Korean and American historians despite the brutality and political folly of their coup of 4 December 1884 (Kapsin chŏngbyŏn). This venture, far from furthering the cause of reform in Korea, merely provided the excuse for increased interference in Korea’s domestic and foreign affairs by both China and Japan, while at the same time presenting an unfavorable image of a politically volatile Korea to influential Western observers in the Far East. The British minister in Beijing, Sir Harry Parkes, for example, was personally acquainted with Kim Ok-kyun and appears to have had a relatively favorable view of him and other members of the reform party. On hearing news of the coup, however, he commented, “What a bloody villain Kim Ok Kiun [sic] must be! . . . He certainly ought to be brought to the gallows.”

The analysis of the late-nineteenth-century political scene by Japanese historians during the colonial period tended to emphasize its polarization into a pro-Chinese group, the Min clan and its associates, and a progressive group that drew its inspiration from the example of the Meiji Restoration in Japan. This group was centered on Kim Ok-kyun, Pak Yong-hyo, Sŏ Chae-p’il, and other members of the Kachwadang. According to Dalchoong Kim, “The qual-
ity of Korean political leadership was judged simply on whether it was cooperative toward Japan and held political objectives identical with Japan’s. One of the main purposes of this study, therefore, is to correct the distortion of such a polarized interpretation and to show that the political scene in late Chosŏn Korea should not be viewed as a simple dichotomy of progressive reformers pitted against conservative reactionaries.

Regardless of the accuracy of the impression that the royal in-laws were irredeemably tainted by corruption, Min Yong-hwan, the subject of this biographical study, appears to have been an exception in that both Koreans and Westerners alike considered him to be a man of integrity. Furthermore, despite being a powerful noble with the same vested interests as other members of the Min clan, he was, nevertheless, deeply concerned about the modernization and reform of his country. An impartial and unsentimental observer of the late Chosŏn court, the American adviser William Franklin Sands, testifies to this view. In Undiplomatic Memories, his candid account of his experiences in Korea in the years immediately preceding the Ŭlsa Treaty of Protection, Sands wrote,

In addition to my staff there were several men in the palace who were real friends. Min Yong Whan [sic], Min Sang Ho and their cousin Prince Min Yong Ki all members of the late queen’s clan, had the interests of Korea very much at heart.

The two former had lived abroad; all three were powerful nobles at home. . . . Min Yong Whan . . . is honoured by Koreans as a great martyr and patriot.10

In addition, evidence of Min’s integrity in the eyes of his Korean contemporaries is provided by Chŏng Kyo, a leading figure in the Independence Club (Tongnip hyŏphoe), who memorialized King Kojong to appoint Min to the post of minister of military affairs (kunbu taesin) and chief of police (kyŏng-musa) because Min was considered to be the only official in the Chosŏn administration, apart from his political ally Han Kyu-sŏl, whom the Korean people trusted.11 Further evidence of the general support that Min received from the Independence Club, the most important political force outside the Chosŏn court in the late 1890s, may be seen by the fact that he received the second most votes after his relative Min Yong-jun, considered to be the most powerful member of the Min clan, among the eleven officials, including “progressives” such as Yun Ch’i-ho and Sŏ Chae-p’il, elected and proposed by the Independence Club to be Kojong’s policy advisers in December 1898.12

Min Yong-hwan’s reputation as an open-minded and honest official also extended to members of the foreign diplomatic community in Seoul. In a communication with the American secretary of state dated 13 October 1898, Ho-
race N. Allen, the American minister to Seoul, noted with approval the appointment of Min to the Korean cabinet, referring to him as “Min Yung Whan (‘The Good Min’).” More recently an American historian of Korea, Gregory Henderson, described Min in the following glowing terms: “Prince Min Yong-hwan, handsome member of the most powerful of private clans, cousin of the king and nephew of the queen, minister, general, well-educated, liberal of mind, uncorruptible, and observer of the West and its ways, lacked none of the class, personal, or official attributes of Korean leadership.”

Fortunately, unlike Queen Myongsong, who left no known written records, Min Yong-hwan left behind a collection of writings after his death that provide a unique insight into the politics and diplomacy of the late Choson court. Compiled in a single volume from original manuscripts in the possession of Min’s grandson, Min Pyong-gi, by the Kuksa p’yonch’an wiwnhoe (National history compilation committee) under the title Min Chungjéonggong yugo (The posthumous works of Prince Min), the collection comprises five sections (kwon). The first four sections are all written in classical Chinese, the written language used almost exclusively by educated Koreans until the end of the nineteenth century.

Several of the works in the final section, however, are written in a mixed script of the native Korean alphabet (han’gul) and Chinese characters. With the rise of nationalist sentiments in Korea, the use of han’gul was actively promoted by reformers and gained widespread acceptance as a result of its use in Korea’s first popular vernacular newspaper, the Tongnip sinmun (Independent). Its editors, So Chae-p’il and then Yun Chi-ho, chose to use han’gul exclusively in the Korean-language edition of their newspaper as a deliberate expression of Korea’s independence from China and its equality of status as a sovereign nation with its other neighbors, Russia and Japan.

The first section of Min Chungjéonggong yugo comprises a collection of memorials, under the heading Soch’a (Memorials), that Min Yong-hwan presented to the throne from the outset of his official career in 1877 until shortly before his death in 1905. This collection provides important insights into the course of Min’s political career and includes several significant memorials, most notably his early indictments of official corruption in the conduct of the civil service examinations (kwagô) and his last impassioned protests against the Úlsa Treaty of Protection. The majority of these memorials, however, are Min’s polite refusals to accept official appointments or his repeated requests to be relieved from his official duties, reflecting his cautious approach to the byzantine politics of the late Choson court.

The second section, Chonilch’aek (One policy in a thousand), an extensive policy essay written circa June 1894, makes many recommendations for social,
political, and military reform within a traditional Confucian framework and modeled on the policies of early Chinese dynasties. This essay appears to have been incorrectly dated in Korean historiography and, as will be shown, was written well before Min's experiences of the West in 1896 and 1897. This fact undoubtedly accounts for the conservative character of the essay, which nevertheless clearly shows Min's indignation at the apparent indifference of so many of his fellow officials at the Korean court toward the fate of their nation. It could also be argued that Min's extensive use of Chinese precedents for his reform proposals does not necessarily reflect an innate conservatism, but simply a desire to make the proposals more acceptable to the Chosön court, steeped as it was in neo-Confucian ideology and a traditional reverence for China. "Chönich'ae" is an important document in the study of this period both for the light it casts on the problems that the Chosön administration faced at home and abroad and also for the insights it provides into the response to such problems of an important figure in the politically dominant Min clan.

The third section, "Haech'on ch'ubôm" (Sea, sky, autumn voyage), is a daily record of Min's diplomatic mission to Russia in 1896, ostensibly to attend the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II. In fact, this visit was the occasion of critical Russo-Korean negotiations that resulted in the Min-Lobanov Agreement of 1896, which temporarily helped to stem the tide of increasing Japanese influence on the peninsula in the wake of Japan's victory over China in the Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895). The diary also provides a daily record of the mission's journey around the world from Inch'on to Moscow via China, Japan, Canada, the United States, Great Britain, and Europe and from Moscow back to Korea via Siberia. In addition, it contains detailed accounts of the modern institutions and technology that Min and his party encountered on their travels and during their sojourns in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Min's record is also valuable for the unique insights that it provides into the attitude of the Chosön administration toward the Korean immigrant community in the Russian Far East, which Min encountered on his return journey. In conclusion, "Haech'on ch'ubôm" is a seminal document for the study of late Chosön's diplomatic relations with Russia and Europe.

On this pioneering diplomatic mission to Russia, Min was also accompanied by the well-known Korean Protestant intellectual Yun Ch'i-ho. Yun's personal record of this journey in the fourth volume of "Yun Ch'i-ho ilgi" (Diary of Yun Ch'i-ho) also provides invaluable, additional information about Min's negotiations with the Russian foreign minister, Prince Aleksei B. Lobanov-Rostovsky, and the minister of finance, Sergei I. Witte. Furthermore, Yun's franker account fills in many details of the daily life of the members of the mission that are absent from the more official record, "Haech'on ch'ubôm."
The fourth section of Min’s collected works, *Sagu sokch’o* (Additional notes of an envoy to Europe), is a daily record of his second mission to the West to attend the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria’s coronation in London in June 1897 and to take up his post as minister plenipotentiary to Chosŏn’s six treaty partners in Europe—Russia, Great Britain, France, Germany, Austria, and Italy. As the record of the first official Korean diplomatic mission to the United Kingdom, this diary is of unique importance in the study of the history of Anglo-Korean relations.

For political reasons, however, Min abandoned his post without official permission soon after the jubilee celebrations ended. He never visited the other European capitals to which he was accredited, nor did he take up residence in St. Petersburg as he had been instructed. Instead he went to the United States, where he spent one year in Washington in self-imposed exile, only returning to Korea in 1898 after receiving a special pardon from Emperor Kojong. On his return from abroad to the newly founded Taehan Empire (Taehan cheguk; 1897–1910), Min became increasingly aligned with the progressive, reform movement in Seoul, which at that time was centered on the Independence Club. In government he took charge of the military affairs of the Taehan Empire as president of the Department of Military Affairs (Wŏnsubu), encouraged the emigration of impoverished Koreans to Hawaii as vice president of the Bureau of Emigration (Yuminwŏn), and also founded a modern technical school in Seoul, the Hŭnghwa hakkyo.

The fifth section of *Min Ch’ungjŏnggong yugo* comprises a miscellany of writings about Min Yong-hwan, including *Min Ch’ungjŏnggong sillok* (The veritable record of Prince Min), which provides an anonymous, contemporary account of Min’s protest against the Treaty of Protection, his suicide, and his funeral. In addition, the miscellany contains other biographical records such as *Min Ch’ungjŏnggong chinch’ungnok* (A record of Prince Min’s loyalty unto death), *Haengjok* (Biographical record), his posthumous letters (*yusŏ*) to the Korean people and the foreign diplomatic representatives in Seoul, and various articles lamenting his death published in the *Hwanggŏn sinmun* (Capital gazette) and the *Taehan maeil sinbo* (Korea daily news). Together these documents provide a vivid and at times heart-rending account not just of one man’s resistance to the Japanese takeover of Korea but also of the grief of a whole nation as it lost its right to self-determination and came under the control of a colonial overlord.

Several monographs have been written on the activities of Western advisers and diplomats in Korea such as Fred Harvey Harrington’s *God, Mammon, and the Japanese: Dr. Horace N. Allen and Korean-American Relations, 1884–1905*; Robert R. Swartout Jr.’s *Mandarins, Gunboats, and Power Politics: Owen Nick-
erson Denny and the International Rivalries in Korea; and Yur-Bok Lee’s West Goes East: Paul Georg von Möllendorff and Great Power Imperialism in Late Yi Korea. In addition two substantial studies focus on prominent Koreans of the period: Ching Young Choe’s The Rule of the Taewŏn’gun, 1864–1873: Restoration in Yi Korea; and Harold F. Cook’s Korea’s 1884 Incident: Its Background and Kim Ok-kyun’s Elusive Dream.16

The remaining works written in English on this period of Korean history, however, come mainly under the heading of “diplomatic history” and have tended to focus on events and institutions rather than personalities.17 There is, therefore, a necessity for further studies aimed at gaining an understanding of the late Chosŏn political leadership and its efforts to prevent Korea’s loss of independence as it was first made a Japanese protectorate in 1905 and then annexed outright in 1910.

This study examines each section of Min Ch’ungjŏnggong yugo together with supplementary materials from Korean and Western archival and secondary sources to create a coherent political biography of this late Chosŏn-Tae-han official, Min Yŏng-hwan. Special emphasis has been placed on Min’s diplomatic activities of 1896 and 1897 in Russia and Great Britain; these activities not only formed an important turning point in his own career, but also marked significant changes in late-Chosŏn foreign policy as it shifted from its traditional orientation toward China first to Russia and then finally to Great Britain and the United States. As will be seen from this study, largely as a result of Min’s experiences in the West and his close contact with Western diplomats, advisers, missionaries, and their Korean associates in Seoul such as Yun Ch’i-ho and Sŏ Chae-p’il, Min was able to go beyond his neo-Confucian, conservative background to become the most important ally of modernization and reform at the Korean court.

Although Min’s suicide is invariably mentioned in standard Korean histories of this period, ironically perhaps, the efforts that he made during his life for the independence of his nation have been largely overlooked. By providing a substantial portrayal of this important scholar-official, diplomat, and reformer, and the turbulent times in which he lived, this biographical study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the wide range of responses of the late Chosŏn leadership, particularly in the sphere of international diplomacy, to the dual challenges of internal stagnation and external intervention at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.