A Forum for All Scholars

IEKAS

The Information Exchange for Korean-American Scholars

ISSN 1092-6232, Founded November 7, 1996

A forum for all overseas Korean scholars - opinions, news, announcements and any other information exchanges. IEKAS is an electronic biweekly newsletter published by the Society of Korean-American Scholars (SKAS) and is posted on its homepage (http://www.skas.org).

To Inform, Enlighten and Empower

Issue 12-19 (No.610) September 19, 2012

1. SYNGMAN RHEE’S FIRST LOVE

2. CHINESE FEMALE NUTCRACKER
1. SYNGMAN RHEE’S FIRST LOVE

Syngman Rhee’s spurned matrimonial overtures that could have changed history

Dr. Marn J. Cha
Professor Emeritus of Political Science
California State University, Fresno, California
President, Central California Korean Historical Society
A Managing Editor of SKAS

South Korea’s founding president Syngman Rhee was born in 1875 in what is now southern part of North Korea, Pyeong San, Hwang Hae Province. He hails from Jeon Ju Lee clan, a clan that produced Yi dynasty’s kings. Syngman Rhee was an offspring of 17th generation of the Yi Dynasty’s third King, Tae Jong’s first royal prince, Yang Yeong. Syngman Rhee’s father was one of well-known Confucian literati, who never earned much money but loved drink. Syngman Rhee moved to Seoul with his parents when he was 3.

Synman Rhee turns out a bright boy who masters the first one thousand Chinese characters when he was six, an extraordinary feat for a six year old. He was held up as a potential grand passer of tough civil service exam, then, the only way open to social mobility for young people. But a misfortune strikes young Rhee. At age 9, a smallpox epidemic turns him virtually blind. His parents were desperate. They treated him with all herbal medicines they knew of, to no avail. Someone suggested that they try Western medicine.

Out of reluctance, nonetheless, not to regret that they have not tried everything, they took the boy to an American medical missionary. He was Horace Allen, MD. Allen gave Rhee liquid eye drops to drop it in once a day. On third day Rhee was able to see. His father was so grateful that he took his boy to Allen to thank him. The father took with him a thatch-wrapped ten eggs and offered it to Allen as his token of indebtedness. Allen gave it back saying that the young boy may need it more than he does.
With his sights restored, Syngman Rhee intensifies his effort to study Chinese classics to challenge the civil service exam, but with an onslaught of demand for political reform in the late 19th century Korea, the Korean court repeals the centuries-old tradition of the civil service exam. Rhee loses his life’s goal. Instead of languishing himself aimlessly, he thought it might be a good idea to learn English at a brand new missionary run school, the Pai Chai Academy. His enrollment at Pai Chai got him reconnected with missionaries after ten years passed since he met the first missionary Horace Allen.

Syngman Rhee turns out a student with an extraordinary talent for language. After six months, he began to teach English to his fellow schoolmates. Rhee graduates from Pai Chai after two and half years of study. That was 1897. About this time, his parents arrange his marriage to a bit older woman, an older but, according to one biographer, a woman of “an unusual strength of intellect and character.” This marriage begets him a son. For next two years, Rhee either supports or takes leadership of progressive political causes of which joining the Independence Club was the most fatal.

The Independence Club was a hotbed of radical reformers. It challenged inter alia the Korean monarchy’s absolutism, demanding a constitutional monarchy modeled after the British. For a while King Gojong appeared responsive to reform. The King felt, however, that the reformers’ ultimate goal was to rid of the monarchy. That he could not tolerate. Consequently, he orders to round up the Independence Club agitators and lock them up.

Rhee is arrested and thrown into prison. His charge: a conspiracy to overthrow the Kingship. He receives life imprisonment and undergoes a severe torture and punishment. By the time he was released from prison in 1904, Rhee served five years and seven months of his life term. Absolutely harrowing as his imprisoned life was, nonetheless, his incarceration served him to grow intellectually and religiously.

While bearing physical torture in prison, Rhee experiences a spiritual awakening and becomes a Christian. Afterward, his effort to proselytize Christianity produces forty inmate Christian converts. Rhee’s missionary friends provided him with a string of English books, magazines and journals. He read them all. It helped him improve his English and broaden his knowledge of politics, history, world civilization and geography.

Rhee’s release from prison had to do with aftermath of Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. With Japan’s victory, the Korean monarchy’s demise was foregone. This made no sense of holding political prisoners. To save his country from extinction, the King decides to appeal to U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt to fend Korea from Japan, when the latter mediates peace terms between Russia and Japan. To serve to this end as a part of a sub-rosa delegation to go to America, the King selects Syngman Rhee of aristocratic pedigree just out of prison but known for a reputable command of English.

It was December 1904 when Rhee arrived in Washington D.C. via Hawaii and West Coast. His mission runs into difficulty, however. Japanese intervention coupled with Roosevelt’s favoritism towards Japan fail Rhee and his party to make it to the Portsmouth Conference. The whole effort fizzles out. Since he was in America anyway, the country he badly wanted to see and experience, Rhee figures the most productive use of his sojourn was to try an American education.
With his missionary friends’ help, at age 30, he enrolls at George Washington University to pursue his undergraduate education. He earns his Bachelor of Arts degree from George Washington in 1907. He moves on to Harvard and earns his Master’s degree from Harvard in 1908. From Harvard, he goes on to Princeton to pursue his doctorate and earns his Ph.D. from Princeton in 1910. While he was studying Rhee sends for his son to come to America and join him. He does but dies shortly after his arrival of acute diarrhea at age 9 in Philadelphia.

As the first Korean who earned all his three degrees from the U.S., a rare feat for anyone, Rhee’s fame spread fast across the American Korean immigrant community as well as inside Korea. Rhee returns home in 1911, tours the country giving lectures at schools and churches. His mother died while he was in prison. His father was still living, and his wife fulfilled her filial duty by keeping the household and looking after her aging father-in-law. But Rhee stayed at YMCA, with no inclination to return to his wife. His friends and father attempted to reconcile the two, but to no avail. Rhee’s reported complaint: his wife had a mole on her face.

After a year stay in Korea, Rhee returns to the United States to attend a quadrennial Methodist conference in Minneapolis as a Korean delegate. From this point on until he returns to Korea and assumes South Korea’s founding presidency in 1948, Rhee spends some 36 years as a political exile mostly in the United States. Following the Korean masses’ eruption of resistance against Japanese colonialism in 1919, the Korean political exiles organize a provisional government in Shanghai, China. Dissidents inside Korea establish an underground Han Seong regime. Both entities claimed Syngman Rhee as the head of their respective organization.

Especially, Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai had a broad support from the Korean immigrant community in America. On the back of this support, Rhee opened the Korean Commission to North America and Europe in Washington D.C. to represent Korean Provisional Government in China as well as to conduct his diplomatic effort to win the Korean independence. He was known in Washington diplomatic circle as the president of Korean Provisional Government, Republic of Korea.

Of Rhee’s many diplomatic ventures, the League of Nations Conference he attended in Geneva, Switzerland in 1933 may have been the most memorable, in fact, his life changing event. For Geneva was where he met his future wife (or more accurately his second wife). Happenstance occurred this way. In one evening when he showed up to eat his meal at the hotel restaurant where he was staying, he finds that all seats ran out. So, the maitre d’hotel seated Rhee at a table where mother and daughter were seated.
While striking up conversation with his tablemates, Rhee learns that the daughter knew quite a bit about him through newspaper accounts of his activity she has read. Her name was Francesca Donner, an Austrian in her early 30. Rhee and Donner become fast friends. Their friendship flourishes into romance that leads to a promise of marriage.

Francesca Donner joins Rhee in New York on October 4, 1933. Four days later Dr. John Haynes Holmes in English and Rev. Yoon, Pyong Koo in Korean officiated at the marriage of Francesca Donner and Syngman Rhee at the Hotel Montclair in New York. Donner was 34 and Rhee 59. Before this marriage, Syngman Rhee asked for a hand of a Korean woman by a third party feeler. It was Mary Kim, the first daughter of Harry S. Kim, a Korean agri-businessman who made a fortune by growing innovative ‘fuzzless’ nectarine in Reedley, California.

Harry S. Kim’s wife was Daisy (in Korean, Han Deok-se), the first graduate of Ewha Academy. At Ewha, she studied voice with a considerable skill at playing piano, too. Harry and Daisy were a jet-setter of the town as their wealth afforded them to do things most poor Koreans couldn’t ever dare do. Their daughters took after their mother’s musical talent. To everyone’s envy, Harry and Daisy enrolled Mary in an expensive private music school, the Peabody Institute of Music in Baltimore, Maryland. Like her mother, Mary majored in voice at the Peabody. Besides, she was a budding beauty.

In one day, a middleman representing Dr. Syngman Rhee’s interest broached Harry and Daisy Kim with a suggestion that despite age difference, they might consider marrying off their daughter, Mary, to Dr. Syngman Rhee, the putative head of the Korean government in exile and a man of a blue blood. Whenever Dr. Rhee visited Reedley to raise money from fellow Koreans to fund his independence movement, Daisy spearheaded to give Dr. Rhee the best possible reception.

Now, she agonized over how she ought to respond to this overture from a man whom she admired and respected so much. Harry and Daisy asked. He has fame, education and pedigree. He is revered, though, a divisive figure. What will he amount to given Japan’s tight grip over the Korean peninsula, which appears not going to end anytime soon?
He lives off contributions. Can he support a family? For her daughter in the early 20s and him in the late 50s marrying would be scandalous! Though it happens among Americans, Koreans?

The Kims’ decision: spurn the whole idea. After some time passed since this incident, Syngman Rhee swings by Reedley on his way to visit California Korean enclaves to solicit to fund his political activity. Like any other times, he stopped by Daisy’s house first. Daisy warmly welcomed him, but this time he appeared fidgety. So, Daisy asked, Dr. Rhee, are you going to tell or show me something?xxviii

At that point, Rhee appeared turning back motioning something to come forward invisible to Daisy as it was behind his and his secretary’s back. The figure stepped forward, and it was a petite blond lady. And Dr. Rhee said, Mrs. Kim, I would like to introduce my wife. Barely a second passed. Daisy snapped at him. Dr. Rhee! You are a traitor. How could you breach your own words? You said to us many times how we should marry inside our race. Now, look at you. You are a hypocrite!

Syngman Rhee was taken aback so much by Daisy’s cruel and untoward reaction that he sequestered himself in his hotel room and refused to eat unless Daisy came to apologize for her uncalled for remark. Daisy, just as stubborn, was not going to relent. Her neighbors came around and pleaded that Daisy express her regret. They implored: Dr. Rhee, whom they revered as a sovereign figure, ought to eat. Stalemate between Daisy and Rhee reportedly went on for days.xxix

Since then, eighteen years pass. Syngman Rhee emerges as South Korea’s founding president. Harry and Daisy regretted over how their daughter could have become the first lady of the Republic of Korea had they not spurned Rhee’s overtures eighteen years ago. History could have changed if Korea had as its founding first lady a full-blooded Korean. Mary Kim (in Korean Dong Ok) died in New York City at age 98 on June 24, 2009.xxx

1 Lee Joo Young, Wu Nam Rhee Syngman Nu Gu In-ga? (Syngman Rhee, Who is he?) (Seoul, Korea: Pai Jai Alumni Association, 2008), 41.
2 Ibid., 42.
3 Robert T. Oliver, Syngman Rhee: The Man Behind a Myth, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1954), 7
4 Ibid., 13.
5 Ibid., 9; Lee, Wu Nam, 42.
6 Oliver, Rhee, 10-11; Richard C. Allen, Korea’s Syngman Rhee: An Unauthorized Portrait, (Rutland, Vermont & Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1960), 21. There is a conflicting story on this incident. Both Oliver and Allen, Rhee’s English biographers, say that it was Horace Allen whom young Rhee went to see his eye illness, whereas another source says that it was Japanese who was trained in Western medicine whom he went, Lee, Wu Nam, 42.
7 Oliver, Rhee, 12.
8 Lee, Wu Nam, 43.
9 Allen, Syngman Rhee, 22.
10 Lee, Wu Namn, 43.
11 Oliver, Rhee, 52.
12 For example, the King Kojong allowed for creation of a Privy Council, a handpicked representative body to advise the court, where Syngman Rhee himself served briefly. Ibid., 26, 43, 320.
13 Lee, Wu Nam, 52-53.
14 Ibid., 55.
15 Ibid., 52.
16 Oliver, Rhee, 69-70.
17 Ibid.
19 Oliver, Rhee, 52.
20 Kim, the Writings, 179; Kim says here that son accompanied Rhee on his way to Portsmouth Conference in 1904 but this appears false. Son joined him while he was studying in the U.S.
21 Ibid., 187.
22 Leo Song, _Song Cheol Hoe Go Rok (Song Cheol’s Memoir)_ , Edited by Lee Sang Soo (Los Angeles, Ca: Keys Printing, 1985), 177-185; Kim, the Writings, 197.
23 Oliver, Rhee, 163.
24 Ibid., 164.
26 Ibid., 81, 82, 93
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., and Kim, the Writings, 243.
30 Marilyn Kim, e-mail to author, July 27, 2012 (Marilyn is Mary Kim’s daughter living in NY).

2. CHINESE FEMALE NUTCRACKER

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3cbMLeeV1ww&feature=youtu.be

Issue 12-19 (No. 610) September 19, 2012