

Alice Fletcher's Notes on the Earliest Recordings of Korean Music

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In 1998, I had the honor to present a paper at the National Center for Korean Traditional Performing Arts (Kungnip kugagwön 國立國樂院). In that paper I gave preliminary observations about a number of late nineteenth-century Korean musical instruments preserved in the United States and, dating from the same period, a set of six Edison wax cylinder recordings of Korean singing. These recordings are apparently the earliest recordings of Korean music, and it was possible in my lecture to play unedited copies of the cylinders for the audience. Since 1998, however, other academic, administrative, and research projects have prevented me from studying these materials further.

Happily, after nine years, this topic has resurfaced, and due to the diligent and painstaking efforts of Mr. Jung Changkwan 정창관 and the Society for Korean Discology (Han'guk Koūmban Yōn'guhoe 韓國古音盤研究會), an impressive CD recording that reproduces the six cylinder recordings has been published (정창관국악녹음집 10, 2007; CKJCD-010). The published CD contains extensive and informative liner notes, and I am grateful that they (together with numerous Korean newspaper reports about the publication) acknowledge the role I was able to play in bringing the remarkable cylinder recordings to the attention of Korean scholars and public.

The liner notes to the CD include transcriptions of all the commentary spoken by the technician who processed the transfer from old media to digital format, plus a range of catalogue information. However, the actual brief notes scribbled down by Alice Fletcher and included with the cylinders in or on their boxes were not available to Mr. Jung for inclusion in the liner notes, and it is the purpose of this short article to bring those to light, as a supplement to the CD liner information. Alice Fletcher's handwriting, to be frank, was absolutely dreadful, and deciphering her scrawls has been time-consuming and not always convincing.

The six cylinders of Korean music formed an exceptional part of Alice Fletcher's rather large, at least for the late nineteenth century, collection of several hundred such cylinders: virtually all of her cylinders were of native American music.¹⁾ Here is the complete entry from the *Federal Cylinder Project*, volume I:²⁾

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1) *The Federal Cylinder Project: A Guide to Field Cylinder Collections in Federal Agencies*, Volume I: Introduction and Inventory, by Erika Brady, Maria La Vigna, Dorothy Sara Lee, and Thomas Vennum (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, American Folklife Center, 1984), 60-66. I am grateful to the National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, for granting me access to the thirty-three boxes comprising the archive of Alice Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, Manuscript 4558, in August and October 2007.

2) *The Federal Cylinder Project*, I, 63.

No. of cylinders: 6
Actual No. Duplicated: 6

Collector: FLETCHER, Alice Cunningham (1845-1923)
Sponsor: Bureau of American Ethnology
Contents: Korean Music

Date/Place: Recorded 1896
Provenance: Transferred from National Archives, 1948

As a matter of correction, Alice Fletcher was actually born in 1838, not 1845.³⁾

The obvious, logical conclusions hitherto drawn from the Fletcher information are these:

- 1) Since the Fletcher notes state, in nearly every case, the date 24 July 1896, she made the recordings in her Washington, DC residence on that date.
- 2) Three Korean men came to her house that day to make the recordings.
- 3) The presence of a "myth song" on one cylinder reflects the type of materials that Fletcher sought from her native American informants.
- 4) These six cylinders, by virtue of that date, are eleven years earlier than the earliest recordings made in Korea itself (1907).
- 5) It is very surprising that Fletcher would make cylinder recordings of anything other than native American music.

Working with these premises, I found some promising reinforcement and clues toward the identification of the performers in an article in the *Washington Post* newspaper:⁴⁾

Seven Koreans at Howard: Ran Away from Home to be Educated in United States. All are sons of noble families, but do not understand a word of English -- will be kept at expense of the Minister from Korea. ...The history of these youths is somewhat wild and romantic. They all are scions of noble families, and had been established at school in Japan, but instead of remaining there, they took it into their heads to acquire their education in the United States. ... Arrangements were made for them to stay there [at Howard University] for the rest of the term at the minister's personal expense.

... One of the social gatherings of the students took place on the night of their arrival, and they attended in a body, solemn, sedate, and observing. In the course of the evening they were surrounded by a dozen persuasive damsels, who begged them to sing. One, at last, managed to signify that he could not sing in English, but they were assured that that did not matter, and, after more urging, the programme of "Suwanee River" and like songs was diversified by specimens of real Korean melody. It was a unique occasion for everybody concerned, for though the university has had students of nearly every other nationality in the course of its history, this is its first experience with the Korean.

In other words, two and a half months prior to the date of 24 July 1896 in the Fletcher notes, a group of young Korean men arrived in Washington, DC, where few Koreans

3) Many obituaries published after Fletcher's death in 1923 gave the erroneous date 1845. However, it is known that she was born in Havana, Cuba while her parents were in that country, that they returned from Cuba in 1838, and that her father died in 1839. See, for example, the 1839 draft obituary for Fletcher's father, Thomas Gilman Fletcher, in Box 13 of her archives. Confirmation is also to be found in Rebecca Hancock Welch, "Alice Cunningham Fletcher, Anthropologist and Indian Rights Reformer," PhD dissertation, George Washington Univ., 1980, 11.

4) 8 May 1896, page 2.

resided at the time. This would explain both the presence of singers in Washington and their amateurism in music, which is evident from the cylinder recordings. Of considerable interest is the fact that the Minister from Korea, mentioned in the newspaper article, was none other than a very famous leader in the Enlightenment Party (Kaehwadang 開化黨), Sō Kwangbōm 徐光範 (1859-1897).

Sō Kwangbōm had fled Korea for Japan and the United States after the abortive three-day *coup d'état* of December 1884, and he eventually received American citizenship. After the Korean events of 1894, Sō was able to return to Korea and held governmental offices, but in late 1895 he was sent to Washington to serve as minister of the Korean legation. Sō Kwangbōm, however, was ill with chronic tuberculosis at the time, and he died in the United States in 1897. The group of Korean men coming in from Japan, the involvement of a famous statesman, and the existence of the six cylinder recordings beg for a great deal more investigation in archives in the United States, Korea, and Japan. At the time of this writing (October 2007), I have been able to carry out only initial archival investigations.

Unfortunately, this current understanding of the origin of the six cylinders may be almost completely incorrect! There are some striking anomalies:

- 1) Fletcher's personal diary for 24 July 1896 (or any other date near that one) mentions several people she met that day, but makes no mention of any Korean recording (or any other kind of recording).

- 2) Of Fletcher's voluminous correspondence, the archive is limited, of course, almost entirely to incoming correspondence, and as far as I can tell after two fairly careful investigations, Korea is not mentioned in that correspondence. If she told other people about the unique Korean recordings, they did not react to the news.

- 3) In the remainder of Fletcher's large archive, there is virtually no mention of Korea anywhere (with one significant exception) -- if she made those recordings on 24 July 1896, they had almost no effect on her. The archive yields no reason to think that Fletcher had any interest whatever in Korean music.

A great deal of archival and other research remains to be done before anything more definitive may be said about the actual history of those six cylinders, and I plan to do that research as soon as professional life allows. If in fact my new hypothesis about the provenance of the cylinders proves to be correct, then the cylinders were actually made at the Chicago Columbian Exposition of 1893 by the anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942); they passed from him to the composer John Comfort Fillmore (1843-1898) for purposes of making transcriptions; and, finally, after Fillmore's death, they went to his very close friend and professional colleague, Alice Fletcher. But further information on this possible version of events will have to await a great deal of archival research.

In the meantime, the notes almost certainly made by Fletcher herself (whether copied during a recording session or simply recopied from someone else's writing) remain the best source of information we have on the six cylinders. It is to be hoped that the rescript of those notes in the Appendix below will be a useful supplement to the CD liner notes.

Appendix

The notes below are set out in exactly the same format as they appear on the original small pieces of paper, and are simply numbered with Roman numerals I to VI for the six cylinders and subdivided by the pieces of paper, as in "[Note 1]." For some cylinders, there were as many as three pieces of paper, and for cylinder V, only one. Where I have been unable to decipher Fletcher's handwriting, I have indicated "[illegible]," and a few other editorial notes are also given in square brackets.⁵⁾

I. Box 7, No. 10 866
87-16a-c

[Note 1]

Cylinder 81. July 24, 1896. Box 7, no. 10.
Jong Sik Ahn
First record. not less than 500 years
Out of the valley of many mountains,
Stands the P[illegible]
2d record. not less than 500 years
The prayer that all good [illegible] may not grow old
3d record. old song 500.
Patriotic song.
In a fine moonlight night in a great
great Anthem Hail his majesty

[Note 2]

No. 81. Korean Songs. Box 7, No. 10.
Jong Sik Ahn July 24, 1896
2d record. Blooming plum tree
Out of the valley of many mts.
older than present dynasty, which is
500 yrs. and more old.
1st record. Prayer that all good men, etc.
3d
Patriotic Song.
In a fine moonlight night etc.

[Note 3]

Box 7, no 10
1st record. An Introductory Song. Who sings of
the life of some famous [farmers?] king [song?]. Who is
the subject of the Drama. Such a
song as this is sung in introducing the play
Dan-ga - the name.
Pray for good people not to grow old
2d record. Plum tree. Same as Box. 8, no. 3

5) I am very grateful to Melanie Pinkert for casting her perceptive eye over my rescripts of Fletcher's notes and for suggesting a number of convincing corrections.

3d record. Patriotic Song.
The 1st and 3 - record go together
& form one - same meter.

II. Box 7, No. 11 867
87-17a-c

[Note 1]

Cylinder 82. July 24. Jong Sik Ahn.
1st record. A repeat with beat of 3d record.
2d record. Beats to show rhythm after a verse
of a song.
3d. Love song. Son Rong
2 voices. Ahn
He chel - Ye
[erased: Ye He-chel]
Box 7, No. 11

[Note 2]

No 82. Korean Song. Box 7, No 11
Jong Sik Ahn. July 24, 1896
1st record. Repeat of 3d record 81 cyl.
2d " Beats. Showing rhythm of interlude.
3d " "Love Song" really a jovial song.
Sung by Son. Rong & Jong Sik Ahn
2 voices.

[Note 3]

Box 7, no. 11 1st record.
An Introductory Song.
Dan-ga
2nd Clapping hands
3d Ar ra rang - Love song.

III. Box 7, no. 12 868
88-1a-b

[Note 1]

Cylinder 83. July 24, 1896. Box 7, no. 12
1 record. 2 voices - love song
Jong Sik Ahn & He chel Ye
Ararang.

[Note 2]

Box 7, no. 12
1st record. Ararang [illegible] but not the
same as preceding cylinder

IV. Box 8, no. 1 869
88-2

[Note 1]

No. 84 Korean Song. July 24, 1896
Box 8, no. 1.

1st record. Catching the Swallows.
Myth Song --
He. Chel. Ye. Singer.

[Note 2]

Cylinder 84. July 24, 1896.

1st record. He chel Ye.
Catching the Swallows
-- Myth song --
Box 8, no. 1

V. Box 8, no. 2 870
88-3

[Only 1 note]

Cylinder 85. July 24, 1896.
He chel Ye.

1st record.
Little girl's song -
About the moon -
Box 8 no. 2

VI. Box 8, no. 3
88-4

[Note 1]

Cylinder 86. Box. 8. no. 3

Korean Song
Broken Cylinder [illegible]
not good record.

Out of the Valley of Many Mts.
repeated on Cylinder. 81. 1st record.

[Note 2]

Nr. 86. Korean Song Box 8, no. 3.
1st record. Out of the valley of many mts. The
"mile man" song

Broken cylinder.
Sung by Jong Sik Ahn July 24, 1896