

*21st Century Question:*

*Why would Thomas play the role of interpreter  
for the aggressive Western Empire?*

The question is often raised as to why Thomas would act as interpreter for Admiral Rosé since he would be aligning himself with the imperialistic West. But surely this is asking a 21st century question of one living in the 19th century, one whose mind was embedded in centuries of Western thought and one who certainly looked upon the death of nine missionaries along with thousands of Korean Catholic converts as a barbarous act.

Thomas was no doubt progressive for his day—he wore native costume—he desired to learn the language of the indigenous—yet he could not help but inhabit the mindset of a 19th century British citizen who was more closely linked with Europe than Asia. His duty would cause him to take the gospel to every land and his duty would include trying to stop the barbarous killing of Christians.

Away from their homelands, occidentals were inextricably linked through their history, and through the practical need for closeness and security. For example, in the situation in Chefoo, the British were acting as consuls for the French, promoting their commerce and protecting its citizens. Those whose

cultures had been inextricably linked over centuries within Europe would find the need to work together in this foreign land to gain economic strength and greater security. In Thomas' mind, going with Admiral Rose would accomplish much: it would help the French quell the rising tide of persecution; it would offer him safety to continue his work of acquiring the language; and last but not least, it would give him ample opportunity to distribute the Chinese Scriptures to those hungering for the Word of God.

This is not the Thomas of old who would make impetuous decisions without consulting the missionary board. In a later letter written to Thomas' father, Madame Morache explicitly states that Robert would not make the decision to leave for Corea without consulting the Missionary Board.

On August 1st, 1866 prior to departing from Chefoo for Corea, Thomas would write to the London Board explaining his purpose and plans. He adds that he has the blessing of Edkins who would later deny this. But in earlier correspondence Edkins mentions that he had he sent a Chinese student with Thomas, which must surely mean that he was in agreement at the time. In hindsight he would perhaps regret this decision.

It is not certain that Edkins knew which boat Thomas would be sailing on. We do know that Thomas had some reservations about the vessel as he tells his close friend, Madame Morache:

*You'll excuse me if I don't tell you by what ship I am sailing.*<sup>43</sup>

Madame Morache presumes that Thomas had found a smuggling boat since this was a common practice at the time. But little did she realize that he had embarked upon a heavily armed merchant vessel, which would easily appear as a hostile sight to those waiting on the Corean shores. Since the killing of the priests and Catholic converts, the Corean authorities were on the offensive and very much aware that the French were about to retaliate for the recent massacre. Thomas' departure on such a boat would cause much concern for his

friends and colleagues.

In a letter to Thomas' father Morache offers an example of a former missionary's plight who was eventually eulogized for such behavior.

*The well known Chinese missionary, Gutschlaff, has been taking advantage in his time of opium vessels...when the Captain and crew went on shore [to do] their business, he did his,...distributing the Scriptures and preaching the Gospel.<sup>44</sup>*

The tributary relationship between Korea and China was seldom profitable but despite a prohibition of trade, smuggling and an active black market continued despite the warnings from the government. As far back as the 15th century the Confucian ideology encouraged distaste for commerce and attempted to limit it, e.g. during King T'aejong's reign foreign ships were restricted to two ports, Tongnae and Ungch'on on the southern coast.<sup>45</sup>

On July 10th, 1866 a month prior to Thomas leaving Chefoo, the Taewongun, or regent, had decreed the following:

*Recently, many strange Western vessels appeared very often along the coast of our country. No one will be allowed to contact them. Especially the governors of P'yongan and Hwanghae Proviinces must check their defensive preparation against the Western vessels along the coast. If anyone suspicious appears, he must be captured, examined and executed for a warning.<sup>46</sup>*

On July 13th 1866 Monsieur de Bellonet, French Charge d'affaires in Peking, who had requested Thomas to act as interpreter for Admiral Rose, was to write to His Imperial Highness of China, Prince Kung, who had suzerainty over Korea. In it he declares:

*The government of His Majesty cannot permit so bloody an outrage to*

*be unpunished. The same day on which the King of Corea laid his hands upon my unhappy countrymen was the last of his reign; himself proclaimed its end, which I in my turn solemnly declare today. In a few days our military forces are to march to the conquest of Corea, and the Emperor, my august sovereign, alone, has now the right and the power to dispose, according to his good pleasure, of the country and of the vacant throne.*

In his reply, Prince Kung tries to persuade Bellonet to investigate before he moves in his forces:

*...seeing however that when two countries come to war it involves the lives of their people, as it will in this case—and therefore, I cannot but endeavor to bring out a solution of the difficulty between them—as the Coreans have killed a number of the missionaries, it seems to me that it would be best to inquire beforehand into the proofs and merits of the affairs, and ascertain what reasons there were for this step, so that, if possible a resort to arms may be avoided.<sup>47</sup>*