Korea was a country virtually unknown to Europeans until the very end of the nineteenth century. For hundreds of years a mystical “veiled” region, Korea only appeared as a reference in obscure books and shipwrecked seamen’s accounts. The kingdom itself had a long-standing and strict policy of rejecting any contact with Westerners and maintained an anti-Christian position. However, by the nineteenth century, French missionaries began to make their way into the forbidden land to introduce Christianity and Western ideas, like a thread entering the needle’s eye, and thus became the principal sources of information about the country.

Korea began to welcome Westerners after it was forced to conclude a treaty with Japan in 1876 as a means of resisting Chinese and Japanese domination. Western diplomats, businessmen, adventurers, doctors, geographers, and explorers all contributed to a rich body of new literature about Korea. As with many other “benighted” and “heathen” countries, Korea was widely perceived as poor, ignorant, backward and unprogressive by Europeans who mirrored the views and attitudes of the missionaries and others who came before them. As European supremacy in industry and commerce reached its pinnacle, Westerners took on a “civilizing” mission, secular as well as religious. Paternalistic ideas like “Manifest Destiny” and “White Man's Burden” contributed to the growth of imperialism. Eurocentrism, which may be defined as both ethnocentric and racist, resulted in unprecedented imperial expansion during this period. Colonial attitudes were hardly new, but became more pronounced than ever before.

Travel literature emerged as one of the most popular literary genres among European readers during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Detailed accounts of journeys to unfamiliar locales fed the readers’ desire for knowledge concerning the foreign and the exotic. Perceived differences in behavior, customs and beliefs held a deep fascination for nineteenth-century Europeans, and for many, the travel narrative provided
the only vehicle for its manifestation. This fascination was enhanced by the exaggerated recollections of explorers who depicted Koreans as strange or exotic. The influence of European travel literature on readers and public opinion in general did not have an immediate impact. However, over time, these travel narratives provided a significant source of increased European awareness of Korea.

This chapter, primarily focusing on European discourses on Korea during the second half of the nineteenth century, is a case study in exploring how Europeans have typically understood and viewed Korea and its people. It traces how race and imperialism influenced European constructions of Korea in relation to the power politics the country had to face. This is not a discussion of Korea and Korean-ness. Rather, it is an exploration of the influence that travelers’ accounts had in forming European views of Korea. Written from a Korean perspective, this study offers an alternative lens through which European attitudes can be examined and sheds light on just how unaware Europeans were of their own biases.

**Racial Clichés**

Until the end of nineteenth century, European images of Korea were largely based on ignorance and an accumulated negative historical record. European travel literature relied on unsubstantiated documents in the construction of its narratives. When Europeans arrived in Korea—diplomats, traders, and missionaries—they were not impressed with what they saw. Korea was nearing the end of a dynasty; it was decaying from internal causes, and poverty and evident misgovernment made the country unattractive. Missionary appeals to the Catholic Church for support tended to reinforce the impression of Korea as a desperately poor, backward country in need of Christian charity.

The earliest European account of Korea was written by the Dutch seaman Hendrick Hamel, who landed on Jeju Island with surviving crew members after a series of storms. Published in 1668, Hamel’s record of his fifteen years in custody as a prisoner and slave were, in fact, used as supporting evidence in his application for back pay from the Dutch East India Company to cover his period of incarceration. Hamel’s negative and contradictory accounts of the people he encountered became the first and often the only primary source material used by many European authors writing about Korea. For centuries, much of the travel literature on Korea reproduced fantastical versions of Hamel’s accounts.