Reluctant Travellers:
Shifting Interpretation of the Observations of Hendrik Hamel and his Companions

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ABSTRACT
The description of Korea by Hendrik Hamel (1630-1692) contained in the account of the thirteen years he spent in the country after his ship was destroyed in a storm off Cheju Island was originally written to inform Hamel's employers, the Dutch East India Company, of possible trade opportunities. Very soon, however, Hamel's Journal was commercially published in Holland to satisfy the curiosity of the general public about foreign climes. Before long the book was published in French, German and English and included in general collections of tales of travel, turning into a modest classic. In 1920 a Dutch edition was prepared based on the original manuscript, without all the distortions that had been the result of the complicated process of publication and (repeated) translation. Around this time the book also started to draw the attention of Korean readers. At present several translations are still readily available in Korean bookshops. This means that the book has almost continuously remained in print since 1668. Over the years, however, the reasons why the book was published and read have not always been the same. This article primarily aims to trace the publication and reception history of the Journal. Why was it thought worth publishing and what meanings have been discovered in the book over a period of more than 300 years? It also asks the question what the present value of the Journal might be, and suggests that it allows us some intimate glimpses of 17th century Korea that are unavailable anywhere else, while it also fosters awareness that at the time European attitudes toward Asia were much more characterized by appreciation and a sense of fundamental equality than in the 19th century, thus, in its own way, de-centering Europe.

Keywords: Hendrik Hamel, reception history of the Journal, European-Korean relations, travelogue, intercultural contacts.

Introduction
The basic facts are well-known: when in 1653 the Dutch vessel Sperwer [Sparrow Hawk] was shipwrecked on the coast of Cheju Island, thirty-six men of the crew managed to reach the shore alive. Thirteen years later, in 1666 when only sixteen of them were left, eight men managed to escape in a little boat and reached Japan, where the Dutch East India Company had a trading post in Nagasaki. While he was waiting there to be repatriated, the bookkeeper of the Sperwer, Hendrik Hamel (1630-1692), wrote down an account of their adventures and a description of Korea in what now is known to the world as his Journal. It is a fairly brief text, which subsequently was published in many forms and became the subject of several studies.
It may seem superfluous, therefore, to pay attention once more to a text that is already so widely known: yet, there are various reasons to return to the *Journal*. The first is that there have been many complications in the reproduction and translation of the text, leading to all kinds of misunderstandings. This has made it more difficult to appraise the *Journal*’s value. A reassessment is necessary that is based on a full understanding of the true nature of the text. Another reason to subject the text once again to detailed scrutiny is that it was widely and regularly reproduced over a period of more than 300 years in Dutch, French, German, English, Korean, Japanese and yet other languages, and became in a modest way a classic. Whenever a text is read and published over such a long period of time, and even more so in different geographical regions, every age and every country will bring its own perspective to the text and will discover different things in the same words. Thus the reception history of the text by itself becomes a topic worthy studying.

Why did people in very different countries and different ages think the *Journal* was worth publishing or buying, and what did they read into it? What does its reception history tell us about the ways East and West have been looking at each other? Seen in this way, the *Journal* also invites us to search for a contemporary perspective. Of what present concern is the *Journal* to us, in this day and age? In this paper, I will suggest that one of the merits of the *Journal* is that it affords us insights in the problems of intercultural contacts and communication, issues that in the present, highly globalized world are of manifest importance. To lay the groundwork for a discussion of this aspect and to provide the necessary background I will address the other points mentioned above, and first review the nature of the various texts of the *Journal* that have been made available to readers all over the world between 1668 and 2004 and look for the motives behind their publication. Doing so, I will point out some of the problematic aspects of these editions. The discussion will not be limited to the *Journal* alone; I shall also refer to the information about Korea the shipwrecked Dutchmen presented to the Amsterdam scholar and burgomaster Nicolaas Witsen (1641-1717) for the second edition of his book, *Noord en Oost Tartarye* [North and East Tartary], which contains, among other things, the first list of Korean words published in Europe.¹

**The nature of the texts and the European editions of the *Journal***

That it is a mistake to call the book Hamel wrote a journal in the literal sense of the word will be clear to everyone who reads the text, even though this title was attached to it right from the beginning. It is not a day-by-day account written over a period of thirteen years, but a report composed during a limited period, probably no more than a few weeks at the utmost, while the Dutchmen who had escaped from Korea in 1666 were waiting in Nagasaki to set sail for Batavia (i.e. present-day Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies. It has only been in 2003, however, that an important discovery was made public which explains the particular format Hamel chose for his description of Korea. The Dutch literary historian Vibeke Roeper, who is a specialist in the history of narratives describing the maritime exploits of the Dutch in the seventeenth century, discovered that Hamel’s account is structured by very detailed instructions provided by his employer, the United Netherlands Chartered East India Company (generally known by the acronym of its name in Dutch, *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, as VOC).² This was a kind of check-list of items that VOC employees who visited unknown regions had to pay attention to. There were seven general headings: geographical characteristics, the organization of the state, commerce, agricultural products, the position of the VOC in the region concerned, and miscellaneous information, all neatly subdivided under sub-headings. It turns out that Hamel followed this model very closely; and sometimes even literally quotes the sub-headings. This is of importance for the interpretation of his remarks, a point I will return to shortly. In any case, the primary purpose of the description of Korea was not to satisfy the idle curiosity of a European readership thirsting for tales of adventure, but to enable the Directors of the VOC to judge whether Korea offered good opportunities for trading. Nor was the dramatic account of the storms the *Sperwer* encountered and the tragic shipwreck merely a tale of adventure. Hamel had to justify his actions and those of his companions. They had lost a valuable ship, together with its precious cargo, and needed to convince their superiors that they had done everything possible to prevent the shipwreck, or else they might be held personally responsible and punished.

The knowledge that the *Journal* was written to address quite specific questions the VOC had about the *terra incognita* of Korea, may significantly alter our interpretation of the text. The book has always been read as a general description of Korea while, as we have seen, in reality it is a systematic survey of the opportunities available to the Dutch East India Company to engage in trade there. This throws a different light on one notorious passage in which Hamel seems to judge the Korean people quite harshly. I quote from the most recent English translation: "...this nation is much inclined to stealing, lying and cheating. One should not trust them too much. Sharp practice is a matter of pride to them; it is not considered a shame."³ Although this can in no way be interpreted as complimentary, it is important to realize that Hamel is not talking about the "Korean national character" in general (as the Korean translator assumed who added this heading to this section ¹), but more specifically about what one might call Korean “business culture.” The VOC needed to know first of all whether contracts would be honored or not; that was what the question was about. Hamel counsels to be very cautious in this respect, because Korean standards were different from Dutch or European standards, but

¹ Witsen 1705. For the word list, cf. Vos 1975:7-42.
² The document was called “Memorandum to Traders and Other Officers: matters to which they should pay attention when writing their reports.” See Roeper and Walraven, eds. 2003b:149.
³ Roeper and Walraven, eds. 2003b:149.
⁴ Hamel 2003a:130.
⁵ The difference may have had something to do with the vast extent of international trade relations within Europe. Without a high degree of mutual trust, commercial relations with numerous business partners in many different countries, whom one could not all know personally, would be impossible. Self-interest dictated that one respect strict business ethics.