

An Unfamiliar Other within the Uncivilized Other: Korea as Depicted by Late Nineteenth-Century British Newspapers

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Abstract

It was during the late nineteenth century that the British began to develop a distinct image of Korea, irrespective of whether the image corresponded to reality. By examining late nineteenth-century British newspaper articles that discuss Korea, this study reveals the image of Korea held by the British people during that time, and the ways in which this image emerged. First of all, articles discussing Korea's political and social situation—namely, the king, government officials, and the working and living conditions of people—are reviewed. Secondly, we examine descriptions in these articles of what may loosely be called the “cultural domain,” which includes clothing, religion, and customs, for example. Finally, British newspaper accounts of Korea's relations with China and Japan are analyzed. Through a systematic examination of the way Korea was depicted by British newspapers, the most popular source of information in late nineteenth-century British society, this study ultimately attempts to show that the image of Korea that they sketched was framed by Orientalist assumptions and based on their knowledge of the relatively familiar Chinese and Japanese.

Keywords: nineteenth-century Korea (Corea), British newspapers, perceptions of Korea, Orientalism, early Korea-Great Britain relations

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Introduction

As far as Great Britain is concerned, it was a merchant named John Framp-ton, and his English version of *The Travels of Marco Polo*, published in 1579, that introduced Korea to the populace for the first time (Cheong 1999). Several works containing fragmented information about Korea, mostly travelogues, were then published during the following centuries (Du Halde 1736; Green 1745-1747; Cook 1784; Vancouver 1798; Broughton 1804; M'Leod 1817; Hall 1818). However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that books exclusively focused on, or extensively discussing, Korea began to appear in Britain (Ross 1879; Oppert 1880; Curzon 1894; Gilmore 1894; Griffis 1882; Savage-Landor 1895; Bishop 1898).

It is no coincidence that most of the major works about Korea were not published until the late nineteenth century, as it was only during the 1870s, with the occupation of Port Hamilton, that Britain became directly involved in affairs on the Korean peninsula. There was also the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-95, which was too important for the British not to become involved in. It is fair to say that it was during the late nineteenth century that the British began to develop a distinct image of Korea, irrespective of whether this image corresponded to reality. This is one of the reasons that most of the literature detailing perceptions of Korea, and Western perceptions in particular, deals with the publications from this period (Cheong 2000; S. Kim 2004; K. Lee 2007; H. Kim 2008; Kim 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Y. Lee 2010; Ryu 2010; An 2011).

While the contributions made by existing studies cannot be denied, these studies are mainly concerned with books and rarely incorporate newspapers into their analyses. However, in nineteenth-century Britain, the press, especially the newspaper press, was one of the few mediums, if not the only medium, through which both information and misinformation could reach a mass audience. It is therefore important to also analyze newspaper articles when describing British thinking in the late nineteenth century.

Until the 1880s, there seems to have been at least a one- to two-week gap between the occurrence of events in Korea and news of these events

appearing in the London press.¹ For instance, the Ganghwa Island Incident, which took place on September 20, 1875, did not begin to appear in British newspapers until November 24.² Furthermore, the Coup of 1884 (Gapsin Jeongbyeon) was not reported by *The Manchester Guardian*—which was renamed *The Guardian* in 1959 (hereafter, *The Guardian*)—or other newspapers until December 15.³

In the 1890s, this time gap was reduced to between two and four days. For example, the assassination of Empress Myeongseong by the Japanese on October 8, 1895, was reported by the British newspapers on October 12.⁴ And when King Gojong and the Crown Prince took “shelter at the Russian Legation” on February 11, 1896, it only took two days for newspapers to publish the news.⁵ It appears that news about Korea rarely came to London directly from Seoul before the mid-1890s, as it is difficult to find dispatches from Seoul then. However, beginning with several items in 1895,

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1. The news published about the Korean-Japanese Treaty of Amity signed on February 26, 1876, was an exception. It took less than a week for this news to reach London. On March 4, 1876, several newspapers reported that Japan had concluded a “treaty with the [sic] Corea . . . on the 27th of [the] last month.” But the source of the news was the Japanese Legation in London (“Japan and the Corea,” *Leeds Mercury*, March 4, 1876; “Summary of This Morning’s News,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, March 4, 1876).
 2. “Corea and Japan,” *Aberdeen Journal*, November 24, 1875.
 3. “Insurrection in Corea,” *Manchester Guardian*, December 15, 1884; Editorial, *Belfast Newsletter*, December 15, 1884; “The Reported Insurrection in Corea,” *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, December 15, 1884; “Reported Revolt in Corea,” *Western Daily Press*, December 15, 1884; “Revolt in Corea,” *Birmingham Daily Post*, December 16, 1884; “Insurrection in Corea: Massacre of Ministers,” *Manchester Guardian*, December 16, 1884.
 4. “Madagascar,” *Glasgow Herald*, October 12, 1895; “General Intelligence,” *Gloucester Citizen*, October 12, 1895; “The Rising in Seoul,” *London Standard*, October 12, 1895; “Affairs in Corea,” *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, October 12, 1895; “The Rising in Corea,” *Morning Post*, October 12, 1895; “Supposed Murder of the Queen of Corea,” *Portsmouth Evening News*, October 12, 1895; “Riots in Corea,” *Western Daily Press*, October 12, 1895; “Rising in Corea,” *Western Mail*, October 12, 1895; “The Rising in Corea,” *York Herald*, October 12, 1895.
 5. “Outbreak in Corea,” *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, February 13, 1896; “Revolt in Corea,” *Bristol Mercury*, February 14, 1896; “Outbreak in Corea,” *Derby Daily Telegraph*, February 14, 1896; “Revolution in Corea,” *Dundee Courier*, February 14, 1896; “Seoul Corea,” *Western Times*, February 14, 1896.

articles mentioning telegrams from Seoul soon started to appear in British newspapers.⁶

British newspapers mainly gathered information about political events in Korea through correspondents stationed in Yokohama, Beijing, Washington, D.C., St. Petersburg, Vladivostok, and, later on, Seoul. As for general information about Korean society, this came from correspondents or publications that the newspapers referred to as “experts” on the East. These “experts” included people such as George N. Curzon and Isabella B. Bishop, whose work was already available in London. The political stance of these “experts” did not seem to have made much of a difference regarding their attitudes towards Korea.⁷ This was partly because the newspapers customarily reproduced, in many cases without any change, what others had previously reported about Korea. Another reason was that it was not the newspapers *per se*, but rather the individual reporters and their sources of information, that created different stories about Korea. For example, the newspapers that received news about the assassination of the Empress from New York and Washington, D.C., clearly indicated Japanese involvement in the incident.⁸ However, the newspapers that obtained information

6. “The Murder of the Corean Queen,” *Belfast Newsletter*, October 15, 1895; “Queen of Corea Murdered,” *Portsmouth Evening News*, October 15, 1895; “Trouble in Corea,” *Star*, October 15, 1895; “The Revolt in Corea,” *Western Mail*, October 15, 1895; “The Murder of a Queen,” *Manchester Guardian*, October 17, 1895.

7. As an example, both *The Guardian*, which followed a relatively liberal editorial line, and *The Times*, which was more conservative, appreciated the importance of Port Hamilton and agreed that Britain should prevent Russia from acquiring it at all costs (“From Our London Correspondent,” *Manchester Guardian*, April 9, 1885; “From Our Correspondent,” *Manchester Guardian*, May 7, 1885; Editorial, *Manchester Guardian*, August 27, 1885; “The Question of Port Hamilton,” *Times*, November 8, 1886; “Port Hamilton,” *Times*, December 13, 1886; “Port Hamilton,” *Times*, March 14, 1887).

8. Some article examples include: “Commotion in Corea,” *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, October 14, 1895; “The Situation in Corea,” *Portsmouth Evening News*, October 14, 1895; “The Situation in Corea,” *Western Daily Press*, October 14, 1895; “Affairs in Corea,” *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, October 15, 1895; “Queen of Corea Murdered,” *Portsmouth Evening News*, October 15, 1895; “Affairs in Corea,” *Sheffield Evening Telegraph*, October 15, 1895; “The Rising in Corea,” *Shields Daily Gazette*, October 16, 1895; “The Revolt in Corea,” *Western Mail*, October 15, 1895.

from Yokohama painted the incident solely as an internal conflict within Korean politics.⁹

During the late nineteenth century, the interest in Korea held by British newspapers appears to have intensified, at least quantitatively, whenever an important political event occurred. This is especially noticeable from 1882 onwards; as major political events started to take place in Korea during this time, the number of articles also began to rise rapidly (Fig. 1). In order to reveal how British newspapers perceived Korean people, this

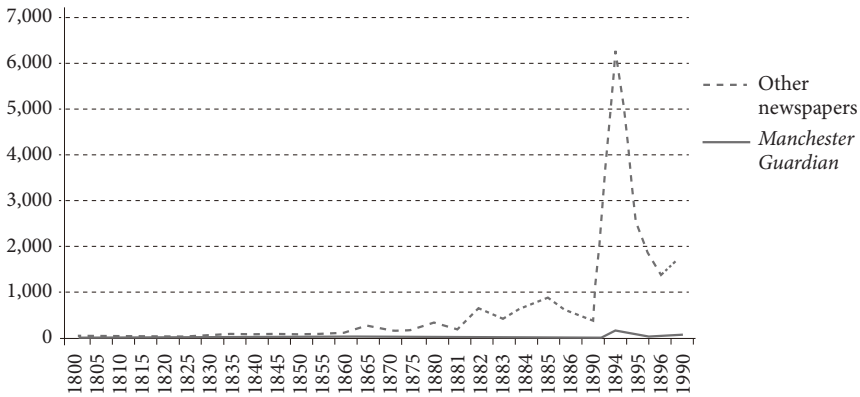


Figure 1. News, editorials, and book reviews mentioning Korea 1800-1900.¹⁰

9. Some examples include: “The Rising in Corea,” *Morning Post*, October 12, 1895; “Corea: The Supposed Murder of a Queen,” *Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, October 16, 1895; “The Situation in Corea,” *Leeds Mercury*, October 16, 1895; “The Reported Murder of the Queen of Corea,” *Liverpool Mercury*, October 16, 1895; “The Situation in Corea,” *London Daily News*, October 16, 1895; “The Murder of the Queen,” *Western Daily Press*, October 16, 1895.

10. Copies of most nineteenth-century British newspapers can be found in the British Newspaper Archive. However, the digital archive does not contain *The Guardian*, *The Illustrated London News*, or *The Times*. It should also be noted that the data in Figure 1 does not include statistics regarding *The Times* due to limited access to its archive (British Newspaper Archive, s.v. “Corea” or “Korea,” accessed April 1, 2013, <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>; Guardian and Observer Digital Archive, s.v. “Corea” or “Korea,” accessed April 1, 2013, <http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/guardian>).

study focuses chiefly on relatively detailed articles—such as editorials, book reviews, and opinion pieces—rather than the fact-based news that was published after 1882. The number of articles and editorials related to Korea was relatively high in 1885 because of the occupation of Port Hamilton by the British navy. Furthermore, the number spiked and reached its peak in 1894 due mainly to the commencement of the Sino-Japanese War.

Numbers are significant in understanding. For this reason, this study endeavors to select examples from articles of newspapers that had extensive circulation, such as *The Guardian* and *The Times*. *The Guardian* was founded in 1821 and was known as *The Manchester Guardian* until 1959. Its daily circulation rose from 3,000 in 1825 to 40,000 in the late 1880s. *The Times*, which was established in 1785, “reached a level of influence unprecedented in the history of journalism” around the mid-nineteenth century (Brake and Demoor 2009; Mitchell 2012).

Nevertheless, the analysis also includes articles from other newspapers because they covered certain subjects that *The Guardian* and *The Times* had not. Also, sometimes other newspapers, like the *Pall Mall Gazette*, whose “early contributors were among the most distinguished practitioners of higher journalism,” published more organized and detailed articles about Korea (Brake and Demoor 2009). Furthermore, illustrated weeklies, like *The Graphic* and *The Illustrated London News*, were more effective at depicting the everyday lives of Koreans.

This study examined the newspaper articles by grouping them into subjects. First, we look at articles discussing Korea’s political and social situation—namely the king, government officials, and the working and living conditions of people. Second, we examine descriptions in these articles of what may loosely be called the “cultural domain,” which includes clothing, religion, and customs. Finally, British newspaper accounts of Korea’s relations with China and Japan are analyzed. This study attempts a systematic examination of the British perceptions of Korea in the late nineteenth century, which we believe greatly reflect how Europeans saw Korea during that period. Given the depth and breadth of this examination, our study complements and extends upon previous studies about images of Korea and the ways in which such images emerged.

Korea's Political and Social Situation: An Asiatic Microcosm

Throughout the late nineteenth century, British newspapers appear to have maintained an intensely critical view of political and social conditions in Korea. Several major events, both political and social, took place during this period in Korea. Some examples include: the Military Mutiny of 1882, the Gapsin Coup of 1884, the British occupation of Port Hamilton from 1885 to 1887, the Peasant War of 1894, the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, the murder of the Empress Myeongseong in 1895, and the Royal Refuge at the Russian Legation in 1896. As early as October 25, 1881, *The Times* had claimed that Korea's "civilization and form of government" were "of that archaic type which alone of all others defie[d] change, the patriarchal Confucian."¹¹ In addition, the series of political upheavals that occurred in the early 1880s seem to have given the British people the perception that Koreans were a violent people. For example, while reporting the Gapsin Coup on December 17, 1884, *The Times* stated:

Corea was hardly likely to remain tranquil in the midst of the common commotion. The chief surprise to its neighbours will be that it has been undisturbed for more than two years. There seems to have been no symptom of restlessness in the Corean people since the Queen and several nobles were massacred in the summer of 1882.¹²

The newspaper exhibited astonishment at the fact that it took two years for a disturbance to occur in a country as "troubled" as Korea. It is curious why a newspaper as highly influential as *The Times* would falsely publish that the Empress Myeongseong had been killed during the mutiny of 1882. Although other newspapers initially believed this false information, they corrected it at a later time.¹³

11. "Russia and the Corea (From Our Correspondent at Shanghai)," *Times*, October 25, 1881.

12. "The Rebellion in Corea," *Times*, December 17, 1884.

13. "The Massacres in Corea," *Freeman's Journal*, October 16, 1882; "China and Japan: Serious Outbreaks among Corean Chiefs," *Western Mail*, October 16, 1882; "News of the Day," *Birmingham Daily Post*, October 17, 1882.

The description of Korean politics given by *The Times* on August 3, 1887, was also negative. *The Times* contended that Korea had been “distracted by political intrigues of every description.” It added that the three leading families had “intrigued each other” and “sought to obtain assistance for its own schemes from outside.” Consequently, the result was “widespread misery and discontent.”¹⁴

In 1894, Korean society went through two major events: the Donghak Peasant Revolution of 1894 and the Sino-Japanese War. After witnessing Korea being overwhelmed by the confusion that followed these events, the *Pall Mall Gazette*, on July 25, 1894, argued that the Korean government was “the most incapable, the most oppressive, and the most miserable in the whole world,” and also stated:

[O]fficials are corrupt; the resources of the country exhausted; the finances in inconceivable disorder; the people starving, or slipping stealthily over the border into Siberia.¹⁵

The wording in this article is exceedingly emotional and uses many superlative expressions. But its core argument reflects the then general opinion. *The Graphic* portrayed the politics in Korea similarly on August 25, 1894, as they described the Korean government as:

A royal figurehead enveloped in the mystery of the palace and the harem; a hierarchy of office-holders, office-seekers, a feeble and insignificant army, an impecunious Exchequer, a debased currency, and an impoverished people.

According to *The Graphic*, these factors rendered Korea “an Asiatic microcosm”¹⁶ or, according to the *Daily News*, the “quintessence” of Asia.¹⁷ On August 28, 1894, *The Times* depicted Korea as “a quasi-civilized community . . . eaten up with abuses,” and claimed the people had “no civil rights” and

14. “Corea,” *Times*, August 3, 1887.

15. “Hare v. Tortoise,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 25, 1894.

16. “Mr. Curzon on the Corea,” *The Graphic*, August 25, 1894.

17. “Among the Coreans,” *Daily News*, June 2, 1893.

were “deprived of all motive for industry by the insecurity of their possession,” which explained “the poverty, dirt, and sluggishness of the country.”¹⁸

Most British newspapers believed that it was not the king, who was often viewed as a caring ruler, but rather the people around him that were directly responsible for the corruption and mismanagement of the government. For example, *The Guardian*, on August 18, 1882, described the Joseon king as a monarch “gifted with an enlightened spirit which promised much for his country.”¹⁹ On September 30, 1882, the same newspaper claimed that the military mutiny earlier that year occurred because “the nobles” had “not yet shared the conversion of their master to cosmopolitanism.”²⁰ Owen N. Denny, who served as a diplomatic advisor to the king from 1886 to 1890, published a pamphlet that was republished in *The Times* on November 10, 1888²¹ in which the king was depicted as “a man of great strength of mind, great kindness of heart, and a sincere desire for the progress of his country and the welfare of his people.”²² Isabella B. Bishop, too, gave a similar picture of the king in the *Belfast Newsletter*, claiming that every attempt at financial reform made by him was thwarted by both his “male and female favorites” and “corrupt officials.”²³ However, the tone seems to have changed a little in 1894 as the *Pall Mall Gazette*, on July 25, 1894, argued that the king was in fact “a puppet,” but still a “bloodthirsty” one. This rather harsh portrayal seems to have been primarily based on the newspaper’s understanding that “[r]efugees [had] been murdered in Japan by the direct orders of the King of Korea.”²⁴

Regardless, the newspapers believed that the Korean politicians and officials were reactionary, incompetent, and self-serving. On August 18,

18. “The Invasion of Korea (From Our Special Correspondent),” *Times*, August 28, 1894.

19. Editorial, *Manchester Guardian*, August 18, 1882.

20. “From Our Correspondent,” *Manchester Guardian*, September 30, 1882.

21. “China and Corea: A Corean Manifesto,” *Times*, November 10, 1888.

22. “China and Corea: A Corean Manifesto,” *Times*, November 10, 1888.

23. “Corea in 1897,” *Belfast Newsletter*, April 20, 1897.

24. “Hare v. Tortoise,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 25, 1894. The “refugee” the newspaper is talking about was probably Kim Ok-gyun (1851–1894), one of the conspirators of the 1884 coup, who, immediately after the failure of the coup, fled to Japan where he stayed for about 10 years. He was later assassinated in Shanghai by Hong Jongu.

1882, *The Guardian* remarked that there was “an intensely bigoted Conservative party” that wished to “maintain the absolute exclusiveness” which had “for centuries so strongly characterised the Hermit Kingdom.” Moreover, the conservative party’s influence had increased “by the conduct of the Japanese settlers at the ports thrown open to Japan under the treaty of 1876.”²⁵ *The Times*, on August 28, 1894, described the Korean official as “the meanest creature that wields brief authority over his fellows.”²⁶

It is hardly deniable that Korea was not at its best in the late nineteenth century. Therefore, the critical, and sometimes condemnatory, accounts of Korea published by British newspapers during that time could contain a grain of truth. However, there seems to have been no shortage of exaggeration on the part of British travelers and journalists about how bad the situation in Korea was. The reliability of these sources is also questionable. For example, *The Times* complained on August 28, 1894, that “most of the readable books” on Korea were by writers who had “never been in the country.” *The Times* stated that the cruelty that supposedly existed in Korea, “when closely examined,” tended to “assume milder forms in practice than would be expected from the verbal accounts of it.”²⁷

Also, the most severe criticisms appeared in British newspapers right before and after the commencement of the Sino-Japanese War. Therefore, it is likely that the Korean government’s inability to prevent its country from becoming a battlefield between China and Japan drove the newspapers to focus more on the negative aspects of Korean society.

British newspapers observed serious corruption and incompetence in late nineteenth-century Korean society. Since the annals of the Korean government and the records of Korean scholars from the period also testify to the severe practices and unjustness Korean people had to endure, one cannot say that the observations made by British newspapers were way off the mark. What is problematic is the way the newspapers tended to lump diverse political, social, and cultural entities together under such an encom-

25. Editorial, *Manchester Guardian*, August 18, 1882.

26. “Invasion of Korea,” *Times*, August 28, 1894.

27. “Invasion of Korea,” *Times*, August 28, 1894.

passing term as “Asia” and regarded the problems they saw in Korea as generic characteristics of the whole country.

Such reporting patterns of the British newspapers seem to have stemmed from their deep-rooted belief that the West equals civilization, and the rest, barbarism. For instance, the *Pall Mall Gazette* stated that barbarism was, in and of itself, threatening to “universal peace” and that “barbarous communities” neither reflected nor argued, but only followed “a natural instinct.” Africa was, needless to say, “thoroughly barbarous from end to end” and Asia was “pure barbarism.”²⁸ Korea was thought to be the place where the symptoms of this “pure barbarism” were manifesting themselves in the most conspicuous manner.

Korean Culture: A Peculiarly Quaint Picture in the Quaintest Part of the World

While Britain maintained a fascination with China and Japan in the late nineteenth century, interest in Korea was relatively low. Thus, coverage of Korea by British newspapers was often limited to political events on the Korean peninsula, while cultural aspects like language, religion, and customs, were hardly mentioned.

However, the situation changed as public attention became “fixed upon the Peninsula owing to the hostilities” between China and Japan.²⁹ On February 12, 1895, the *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that the war that “had been waged” in the Korean peninsula “between the Japanese and the Chinese . . . had concentrated upon that unhappy peninsula and its people the attention of every observer of public affairs.”³⁰ As the public’s attention intensified, newspaper coverage started to include certain “cultural” aspects of Korea.

28. “The Future of Barbarism,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 29, 1879.

29. “The Hon. G. N. Curzon, M.P., on the Corea,” *Birmingham Daily Post*, February 12, 1895.

30. “The Hon. G. N. Curzon, M.P., on the Corea,” *Birmingham Daily Post*, February 12, 1895.

The British newspapers acquired information on Korean culture and political affairs from differing channels. Important political events on the peninsula were reported to London quickly through correspondents stationed in Seoul, Yokohama, Beijing, Washington, D.C., St. Petersburg, and Vladivostok. These telegrams were, however, almost exclusively concerned with Korean politics only. Sources of information on cultural aspects of Korea were limited to missionaries and travelers. Naturally, the content of their reportage was mostly their lectures or reproduction of their publications.

One of the first tangible things a person encounters when coming into contact with a foreign country's culture is the appearance of its people. There seems to have been a consensus amongst British newspapers that Koreans were physically attractive. *The Star*, for example, introduced Korean people as "intelligent and pleasing in appearance, indolent and gentle in character."³¹ The *Newcastle Courant* described Koreans as being "charming and often good looking" but having a "careworn, sad expression" on their faces.³² According to a travelogue published in *The Guardian* in 1851, Korean men and boys were "good humoured" and cheerfully collected shells and sponges for the British visitors "in the hope of being rewarded with a cigar."³³ As far as Korean women were concerned, they were thought to "take[s] the cake for actual beauty and refinement" "among women of far-Eastern nationality" (Savage-Landor 1895, ch. 5).

While Koreans were generally seen to be "naturally a hospitable people,"³⁴ there were some negative comments too. For example, in 1884, the *Leeds Mercury*, quoting from the *St. James Gazette*, said:

More than two centuries ago they had dishonesty both in word and deed. Among them, fraud was supposed to involve no infamy, although the law offered redress to the man who had been cheated in a bargain.³⁵

31. "Corea," *Star*, April 24, 1890.

32. "The People and Customs of Corea," *Newcastle Courant*, August 11, 1894.

33. "A Visit to Corea," *Manchester Guardian*, August 30, 1851.

34. "The Land of the Morning Calm," *London Standard*, April 13, 1895.

35. "Corea and the Coreans," *Leeds Mercury*, December 27, 1884.

It is not certain where this sort of negative view came from, but the execution of nine French missionaries in 1866 certainly put a big dent in the image of the Korean people. Bishop Corfe, in a leaflet reproduced in *The Star*, said that Koreans were “capable of great savagery,” a claim he stated had been proven by the fact that “Christian missionaries” were “killed in the endeavor to convert them into the one true God.”³⁶

As Koreans were considered “unknown others,” one of the easiest ways for British newspapers to provide readers with a concrete image was to compare Koreans with the Chinese and the Japanese, with whom the British public were already familiar. In this way, *The Guardian* claimed that the “complexion” of Korean people’s skin was said to be “similar to Chinese of a corresponding latitude.”³⁷ But Korean men did not shave their heads as the Chinese did and *The Guardian* pointed to this as a big difference.

Several other newspapers, including the *Belfast Newsletter*³⁸ and the *Birmingham Daily Post*, on the other hand, believed that Koreans, while “resembling the Japanese in features . . . more closely approximated to the Chinese in physical stature, in national instincts, and character.”³⁹ Koreans, as was simply put by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, had “Japanese faces” and “Chinese customs.”⁴⁰ In the *Aberdeen Journal*’s opinion, Koreans showed “more pride and independence” than the Chinese and the Japanese, but were “inferior” to the former “in civilisation and intelligence” and more “inclined to Oriental effeminacy” than the latter.⁴¹

Korean clothes, which, like Korean customs, were often described as “peculiar,” were one of the things that made Koreans “undoubtedly an interesting people.”⁴² One can find detailed descriptions and sketches of the clothes worn by Koreans, the most complete and lengthy of which is found

36. “Corea,” *Star*, April 24, 1890.

37. “A Visit to Corea,” *Manchester Guardian*, August 30, 1851.

38. “Some Curious Corean Customs,” *Belfast Newsletter*, September 8, 1894.

39. “The Hon. G. N. Curzon, M.P., on the Corea,” *Birmingham Daily Post*, February 12, 1895.

40. “Reviews: Quaint Korea,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, July 4, 1895.

41. “Manners and Customs of the Coreans,” *Aberdeen Journal*, September 29, 1882.

42. “Books of the Week—Corea or Cho-sen: *The Land of the Morning Calm*,” *Manchester Guardian*, January 15, 1895.

in the *Leeds Mercury*:

Here is the [*sic*] Corean, as he is tailored by his: —The national costume itself, it must be confessed, does rather tend to deform the appearance of the human body, which it is supposed to adorn. First, there is a huge pair of cotton trousers, through each leg of which one can pass the whole of one's body easily, and these trousers are padded all over with cotton wool, no underclothing being worn . . . Padded socks, into which the huge trousers are tucked, and leather or paper sandal-shoes, complete the picture.⁴³

This description, just partially given here, is a reproduction of what Savage-Landor (1895) said in *The Land of the Morning Calm*. It also appeared in the *Morning Post*.⁴⁴ It is interesting that newspapers, through repetition, turned an individual's subjective impression into a widely held public assumption.

Another interesting point about the description is that it includes a hint of judgment; in the eyes of Savage-Landor, clothes were supposed to adorn the body, not deform it, but Korean clothing did not meet his standards. This attitude, based on the thinking that “what's different from us is wrong” was not uncommon in the descriptions of Korean clothing by the British newspapers during this time.

What stands out in these descriptions is that “strange” is a far more often used adjective than others such as “interesting” or “captivating.” The Korean traditional hat, *gat*, for instance, was described as a “strange black hat with a high crown,”⁴⁵ the “beauty” of which being that the wearer was protected from “neither air, sun, nor rain.”⁴⁶ Also, the pipes Koreans used for smoking were, *The Illustrated London News* explained, so long that it was almost “a mystery” how people managed to support them.⁴⁷

43. “Life in Corea,” *Leeds Mercury*, January 26, 1895.

44. “Corea,” *Morning Post*, January 14, 1895.

45. “The Corean Coup D'état: Murder of Ministers, Horrible Scenes at Seoul,” *Illustrated London News*, April 24, 1858.

46. “Sketches in Corea,” *Illustrated London News*, May 10, 1890.

47. “Sketches in Corea,” *Illustrated London News*, May 10, 1890.

Moving on to religion, to most British observers it appeared that there was “not much religion in Korea,” but that this “deficiency” was “made up [for] with a plentiful stock of superstitions.”⁴⁸ A person by the name of Carlos, after a journey to Korea, presented a report to Parliament in 1884, which was later republished in the *Western Daily Press*. The report stated that there was “constant evidence . . . of the influence of superstition,” the quaintest of which was an object made of “thick planks set in the ground, with one face rudely hewn and painted to represent a human head, with teeth fiercely prominent.”⁴⁹

The Illustrated London News held a similar view. It reported that the prevailing religion in Korea was Buddhism, with which Taoist elements were mixed, but Confucianism had been the official creed roughly since the foundation of the Joseon dynasty. In the newspaper’s view, every religion and every creed in Korea, be it Buddhism or Taoism, was tainted with superstitions. What was left after all the violent blending was “an inferior form of religion.”⁵⁰

Religion was not the only thing that was missing from Korea in the eyes of the British. There was, the *Daily News* drily commented, “no survival of that cunning craft in pottery and metal work which it [was] said the Japanese first learned from Korea.”⁵¹ The *Bristol Mercury* elaborated on this point, stating that the Japanese, although having been “a conquering and unconquered race” of “heroic traditions,” imported much of their “language and arts” from Koreans.⁵² However, Korea, for whatever reasons, “lapsed into a state of almost primitive barbarism.”⁵³ As a result, the newspaper continued, “there were few traces left in the Corea of the arts and letters.”⁵⁴

British newspapers were not as critical and judgmental of Korean cul-

48. “The Land of the Morning Calm,” *London Standard*, April 13, 1895.

49. “Superstition in Corea,” *Western Daily Press*, April 12, 1884.

50. “Sketches in Corea,” *Illustrated London News*, May 10, 1890.

51. “Corea,” *Daily News*, July 7, 1884.

52. “Japanese and Coreans,” *Bristol Mercury*, October 3, 1894.

53. “Japanese and Coreans,” *Bristol Mercury*, October 3, 1894.

54. “Japanese and Coreans,” *Bristol Mercury*, October 3, 1894.

ture as they were of Korean politics and the social situation. Nonetheless, there was still something Eurocentric about their descriptions. Cultural behaviors and values needed to measure up to “Western” standards in order to be considered normal.

It is also interesting to note that, in some descriptions of Korean culture, Korea was described as “an Other within the Other,” meaning that British observers used the already familiarized Others, namely the Chinese and the Japanese, as a backdrop against which they compared the culture of Koreans—an as yet unfamiliar Other.

Korea’s Relations with China and Japan: The Dichotomy between the Conqueror and the Conquered

By the late nineteenth century, the British newspapers’ core image of Korea’s relations with China—that Korea, while being formally a vassal to China, was practically an autonomous state—had hardly changed. One can find this sort of view as early as December 26, 1843, when the *Caledonian Mercury* stated, “Coreans pay a small annual tribute to China, but are otherwise entirely independent of its Government.”⁵⁵ On February 10, 1857, the same newspaper reproduced a statement published by the *Pays* saying that “the King of Corea acknowledges the suzerainty of the Court of Peking, but he is completely independent as to the internal affairs of his Kingdom.”⁵⁶ And *The Times*, on February 9, 1857, described Korea as follows:

The Kingdom of Corea, which lies between Manchooria [*sic*], Japan, and the Straits of Corea, contains many fertile districts, and produces many articles suited for export to Europe. The King of Corea acknowledges the suzerainty of the Court of Peking, but he is completely independent as to the government of his kingdom.⁵⁷

55. “Japan, and Its Capability for British Commerce,” *Caledonian Mercury*, December 26, 1842.

56. “China,” *Caledonian Mercury*, February 10, 1857.

57. “Foreign Intelligence,” *Times*, February 9, 1857.

However, interpretations regarding the extent of China's sovereignty over Korea tended to vary from newspaper to newspaper as they witnessed China's reactions to the foreign affairs of her vassal state. For instance, China's behavior following the two foreign military expeditions to Korea in 1866 and 1871 gave reason for British newspapers to either narrowly interpret or entirely deny China's sovereignty claims over Korea. Every time a foreign power, be it France or the United States, contacted China to "demand [recompense] for an outrage committed in Corea," the reply from China was always more or less the same:

Corea certainly is a vassal of ours, but we never interfere with her affairs, and we repudiate all responsibility for what she does. You had better, therefore, go to Corea herself and get redress or a treaty from her.⁵⁸

This tendency to forego responsibility or, as Curzon (1894) called it, "a policy of Repudiation," led to a loosening of the ties between China and Korea, thereby undermining the former's sovereignty claims over the latter. As the *Western Mail* stated in 1871:

The Kingdom of Corea is said to be independent of China, although it sends yearly tribute to Peking; indeed it has been accused of sending tribute to Japan also. As a criterion of independence, however, the tribute is not quite infallible, for some Oriental States seem to have an abstract love of tribute-paying, perfectly unaccountable. On the occasion of the massacre of a French priest and a number of native Christians, by order, it was said, of the King, in 1866, the French representative at Peking endeavoured to make the Chinese Government responsible, but Prince Kung repudiated the sovereignty of Corea.⁵⁹

This kind of attitude gave other countries tangible historical grounds to override China's claims over Korea.

After restoring diplomatic relations with Korea in 1607, Japan dispatched several envoys to Korea. However, on a number of occasions, the

58. "China, Japan, and Corea," *Times*, December 31, 1885.

59. "The American Invasion of Corea," *Western Mail*, June 26, 1871.

Korean court took issue with the documents the envoys brought because of their wording. In particular, the titles used to refer to the Japanese sovereign, such as “emperor” and “imperial throne,” greatly disturbed the Koreans (H. Lee 2009). The philosophy of Korea’s foreign policy at the time was *sadae gyorin* 事大交隣, which meant serving the Great Power, namely China, whilst keeping friendly relations with neighbors, such as the Japanese and the Jurchens, whom the Korean court viewed as barbarians. Thus, it was not acceptable to the Koreans that the Japanese sovereign was referred to as “emperor.”

During the 1870s, some Japanese hardliners, irritated by the Korean court’s series of refusals, started to urge the Japanese court to take action against the peninsula (Auslin 2006). The *Pall Mall Gazette* picked up on this situation in Japan and published an article on February 26, 1874, mentioning that tributes had been received by Japan from Korea since the third century:

Since the beginning of the third century of our era, when Corea was conquered by the Japanese, they have exercised a kind of suzerainty over that country. For a long time back, however, their authority over it would seem to have been little more than nominal. Still Corea did acknowledge its subjection by an annual tribute. But of late it has not only refused this tribute, it has sent an insulting despatch to the Japanese Government, desiring it, if it would have the tribute, to come and fetch it.⁶⁰

On February 28, 1880, the *Examiner* published a reader’s letter on the same topic:

Now I can quite understand the Japanese declaring that the Coreans are not vassals of the Chinese Empire, as their interest is at present to minimise to the utmost the limits of the Middle Kingdom, and to aggrandise themselves at its expense.⁶¹

60. “Affairs in Japan,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 26, 1874.

61. “Corea,” *Examiner*, February 28, 1880.

The author of the letter wrote that Korea was “under a tributary King, who receives his investiture from the Emperor of China.”⁶² However, it is clear from the quotation that Japan was, at that time, making a conscious effort to establish justification for its sovereignty claims over Korea.

Such narratives continued to appear in British newspapers. For instance, *The Guardian*, on July 30, 1884, said that the Japanese, who had “never forgotten that Corea was their vassal before it became China’s,” had insisted on being a “superior race towards Coreans.”⁶³

This historical understanding of Korea’s relationship with Japan, coupled with the alleged strategic necessity of Japan keeping the peninsula under its influence, made it appear inevitable to the British that Japan would make a foray into the Korean peninsula. For example, *The Times*, on January 13, 1885, argued that another country’s occupation of Korea would mean holding “a pistol at the head of Peking,” and that “the possession of Corea by a hostile or unfriendly Power” would be “equally threatening to Japan.”⁶⁴ Therefore, going by the content of British newspapers at the time, the period between the 1870s and the first half of the 1880s can be characterized by the encroachment of Chinese claims over Korea and the emergence of Japan as a formidable rival to China on the peninsula.

Nevertheless, the following Port Hamilton episode became a turning point for the Chinese. The British navy occupied Port Hamilton from April 14, 1885, until February 27, 1887. Due to the active role China played in the process of British withdrawal, some newspapers argued that China had real sovereign rights over Korea. For instance, the *Glasgow Herald*, on February 2, 1887, noted that China had “exercised sovereign authority over Corea” in a real sense.⁶⁵ According to the *Glasgow Herald*, it was China whom the British government would have to negotiate with concerning Port Hamilton. On February 22, 1896, *The Guardian* presented the Port Hamilton affair as a historical instance of the British government’s acknowl-

62. “Corea,” *Examiner*, February 28, 1880.

63. *Manchester Guardian*, July 30, 1884.

64. *Times*, January 13, 1885.

65. *Glasgow Herald*, February 2, 1887.

edgement of Chinese suzerainty over Korea. *The Guardian* claimed Britain's policy had been to "show in every possible way" its acknowledgement of Chinese suzerainty. Furthermore, Port Hamilton's restoration through "Chinese representation"⁶⁶ to Korea was a "public notification" of Britain's acknowledgement of Chinese suzerainty.

China seems to have compensated, though not to a sufficient degree, for what it had lost through the Port Hamilton episode. However, the Sino-Japanese War rendered the situation very much in Japan's favor, once again. In addition, British newspapers started to take a special interest in Korea's historical relations to China and Japan in order to make sense of the belligerent neighbors' clash over the peninsula.

Another noticeable aspect of British accounts of relations in East Asia is that they introduced the legendary Japanese empress Jingu's 神功 alleged conquest of the southern part of the Korean peninsula in the third century as a historical fact. For instance, on July 6, 1894, *The Guardian* claimed that Korea was "as much tributary to Japan as to China" and that "the statesmen of Yedo" never forgot the claim.⁶⁷ *The Aberdeen Journal*, on July 14, 1894, argued that not only had Korea been "for ages in theory the vassal of China," but stood "in a somewhat similar relation to Japan, by whom it was first invaded so long [ago] as the third century." Then, the *Aberdeen Journal* continued, the Japanese emperor was a "recipient of regular presents from Korea."⁶⁸

On August 28, 1894, while qualifying the story of Empress Jingu as "semi-mythical," *The Times* concurred with the newspapers quoted above, stating:

During her long intercourse with Korea, which has extended, without going back to the semi-mythical exploits of the Empress Jingo, over 300 years of clear authentic history, she has invaded the country more than once and exercised the full rights of a conqueror, and an Asiatic con-

66. *Manchester Guardian*, February 22, 1896.

67. *Manchester Guardian*, July 6, 1894.

68. "Passing Notes," *Aberdeen Journal*, July 14, 1894.

queror, but reformed it? Never.⁶⁹

Although *The Times* had some reservations about the story, it still accepted that Japan had conquered Korea at some point. By reproducing the Jingu story, *The Times*, again on October 8, 1894, also offered a historical explanation for Japan's intentions to subjugate the Korean peninsula.⁷⁰ Similarly, on February 29, 1896, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, while reviewing *The China-Japan War: Compiled from Japanese, Chinese, and Foreign Sources* by Zenone Volpicelli (1896), claimed that the Japanese, “under the Empress Jingu, invaded Corea in the year 202,” and the Korean peninsula had “always been a favourite riding-ground” for the Japanese since then.⁷¹

The origins of this sort of understanding of Korea-Japan historical relations can be traced back to the eighth century, when the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (Chronicles of Japan) and the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of Ancient Matters) were published. In the *Nihon shoki*, in particular, Japan is said to have ruled central and southern Korea for a certain period of time after Empress Jingu's expedition to the region in the third century. In the late nineteenth century, several Japanese scholars, including Yokoi Tadanao (1889), tried to evidentially support the argument that Japan had subjugated Baekje and Silla in the ancient era by referring to records of the *Nihon shoki* and the stele of Gwanggaeto the Great.

Japanese perspectives of historical Korea-Japan relations and the records of these perspectives began to flow into the West soon after Japan opened its ports to foreign trade. For example, in 1832, Julius Klaproth (1783–1835), a German Orientalist, published a French translation of *San-goku tsuran zusetsu* 三國通覽圖說 (An Illustrated Description of Three Countries), by Hayashi Shihei 林子平 (1738–1793). In a footnote to Hayashi's statement that Korea “was previously conquered and rendered tributary [to Japan] by Sin kou kwo gou [*sic*], Empress of Japan,” Klaproth (1832) explained that Empress Jingu's reign was between the year 201 and 269 and

69. “The Invasion of Korea,” *Times*, August 28, 1894.

70. “Mr. Curzon's Book on the Far East,” *Times*, October 8, 1894.

71. “Review,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, February 29, 1896.

that the expedition to Silla took place in the year 205. Several other publications, later written in English or French, either introduced or confirmed the Jingu story as a historical fact (Dickson 1869; Rosny 1886; Varat 1892; Chaillé-Long 1894). Then, when the Sino-Japanese War broke out in 1894, British newspapers also began to take a particular interest in the story.

The belief held by British newspapers that Japan subjugated Korea in the third century is problematic on several levels. First, this historical argument is unsubstantiated, as it first appeared in an early entry in the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), a text whose legitimacy is questioned by many historians. Secondly, even if a similar event had taken place, it would have occurred around the year 369. It is now widely believed that the early entries in the *Nihon shoki* correspond to events in the fourth and fifth centuries, thus placing the event at least 120 years later than indicated in the book. Therefore, that an event similar to Empress Jingu's subjugation of Korea actually took place is unlikely (Kim et al. 2002). Nevertheless, British newspapers repeatedly introduced the story of Empress Jingu's conquest as an established historical fact.

As a result, during the course of the Sino-Japanese War, China and Japan's previous conquest of Korea came to take firm root in the British press as sound historical knowledge. This historical "knowledge" both backed up and fit well with the British view of Korea's relations to its neighboring countries at that time.

In 1894, British newspapers basically viewed Korea as a nonentity squeezed in between two big powers. For instance, *The Guardian*, on July 30, 1894, argued that Koreans had "never shown any stomach for fighting" and therefore would not be "a very serious element in the quarrel."⁷² On August 20, 1894, the same newspaper offered an assessment of the relations between the three countries in a review of Curzon's *Problems of the Far East*. *The Guardian* stated that Curzon's book centered on "the contrast of China and Japan, the one obstinately impervious to and the other greedily receptive of" European civilization.⁷³ Then, *The Guardian* continued,

72. *Manchester Guardian*, July 30, 1894.

73. "Review," *Manchester Guardian*, August 20, 1894.

the “two incompatibles meet on the common ground of Korea,” which “counts for nothing in herself” but would be a “prize worth having, as her agriculture has a great future before it and her mineral wealth is likely to prove considerable.”⁷⁴

There is nothing wrong with using an interpretation of the past to make sense of the present. The problem is that British newspapers’ understanding of the historical relations between the three countries was based on a falsely constructed binary opposition between the conqueror (China or Japan) and the conquered (Korea). Moreover, this opposition created an impression that Korea had historically been a country incapable of self-rule which contributed to the legitimization of the war. The *Belfast Newsletter* exemplified this misinformed thinking when they claimed, on November 9, 1894, that Korea had been “for centuries an object of contention between the two Powers” and thus the motives of the current war were “historical.”⁷⁵

Conclusion

In the nineteenth century, the West believed that Korea was disconcerted by foreign interventions, military or otherwise, and was thus fighting against these interventions. To many in the West, and possibly to many present-day Koreans as well, such opposition to intervention was seen as a stubborn and anachronistic attitude for a nation as “backward” as Korea to have towards the “blessings of civilization.” As shown throughout this article, British newspapers of the time basically shared this view.

British newspapers saw the Korean government as a generally exploitive and often destructive entity with incompetent officials, but towards Korean culture showed a less judgmental and more understanding attitude, nevertheless lacking the spirit of modern day “multiculturalism.” Aspects of Korean culture, both tangible and intangible, often seemed strange and bizarre, and were considered *ipso facto* to constitute a deviant case.

74. “Review,” *Manchester Guardian*, August 20, 1894.

75. *Belfast Newsletter*, November 8, 1894.

It is a fact that late nineteenth-century Korea was being shaken up internally by conflicts between conservatives and progressives, and externally by the attempts of Western powers to advance into the peninsula. Yet, the gaze that British newspapers cast on the baffled people of Korea was neither warm nor sympathetic. The British newspapers framed Korea according to their Orientalist assumptions and Korea was depicted through the eyes of the Chinese and the Japanese.

The attitude toward Korea held by British newspapers at the time seems to have been based upon “the opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them,’” coupled with “the binary typology of advanced and backward (or subject) races, cultures, and societies” (Said 1977, 207, 336). However, the examination of articles from British newspapers from the late century also shows that the binary opposition between the West and the East does not explain all. China and Japan were often employed as points of reference in order to identify and locate the characteristics of Korean culture within the frame of preconceived ideas of “Asia.” In addition, existing images of China and Japan tended to permeate into the British newspapers’ perceptions of Korea.

Moreover, in Korean history, the binary opposition in play was not between the West and the East but rather between the conqueror (China or Japan) and the conquered (Korea). This particular binary thinking of Korean history facilitated and reinforced the view that Korea was a nonentity incapable of self-governance and thus in need of intervention from the outside.

In conclusion, it is reasonable to speculate that Korea, China, and Japan were each viewed with different levels of “otherness” by the British people, with China and Japan being already familiarized Others at the time. Furthermore, understandings of China and Japan constituted an essential part of how British newspapers made sense of what they observed on the Korean peninsula, playing a defining role in forming British perceptions of Korea. In short, Korea appeared to the British as an unfamiliar Other, and British observers were only able to construct Korea’s specific identity in relation to aspects of the already familiarized Others, China and Japan.

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