

Fin de Siècle Korea as Exhibited at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago: Revisited*

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Most of the World Expositions hosted by industrialized Western nations between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century served as cultural tools for imperialism, platforms for social Darwinism, and show windows for Orientalist discourse. At the same time the World Expositions represented golden opportunities for less developed Asian countries to establish relationships with the emerging international community and to (re)position themselves in a changing regional and world order. This article argues that those Asian countries were not passive and innocent victims of colonizers but active participants who negotiated and contested with Western powers in the process of their nation-state-building and modernization efforts.

Keeping the dualistic nature of World Expositions in mind, this study reappraises the process, characteristics, and historical legacy of the Korean participation at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago. What were some of the typical

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(mis)perceptions of Westerners toward fin de siècle Korean people and culture, and vice-versa? What kind, if any, “clash of civilizations” occurred at the Exposition between Western materialism and the Confucian world view? To what extent was Korea’s experience in Chicago unique as well as universal in comparison with that of other Asian countries? In addressing these questions, this study focuses more on narrating an alternative version of world history based on Korea’s experience than on providing another version of modern Korean history. Avoiding the so-called “global parochialism,” this article uncovers the conflicts and rivalries among Asian countries during the Columbian Exposition.

Keywords: World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, Late Joseon Korea, King Gojong, Jeong Gyeongwon, Korean Exhibit, Horace N. Allen, William F. Griffis

Introduction: Korea and the World Exposition, 1893/1993

In 1993, the Republic of Korea hosted the Daejeon World Exposition. Since the first World’s Fair, the Crystal Palace Exposition of London, opened in 1851, it was only the second time (after the Osaka World Exposition of 1970) that a World’s Fair was held in a non-Western country. As the official theme “The Challenge of a New Road to Development” implies, the Daejeon Exposition was intended as a medium for promoting Korea’s rapid industrialization and democratization since its liberation from Japanese colonial rule after the end of World War II. Approximately 14.5 million visitors from 108 nations came to witness the success story of a young Asian nation, whose popular old image had been that of a poor, divided, and demolished country after the Korean War (1950-1953). The historic opening of the Daejeon World Exposition was designed to commemorate Korea’s first participation at a World Exposition exactly a century before.

The late nineteenth century was the peak of Western imperialist expansion worldwide. Many South and East Asian countries, including the Philippines, India, China, Indonesia, and Vietnam, suffered the dissolution of their traditional civilizations and colonization or far-reaching interference by Western powers. Not coincidentally, the second half of the nineteenth century was also when World Expositions were at the height of their popularity. Industrialized Western countries hosted a series of World Expositions to demonstrate their supremacy in race, science, and technology, justifying their colonial dominance over less developed Asian and African countries. They used the Expositions as cultural tools for imperialism, show windows for social Darwinism, and platforms for Orientalist discourse.¹

On the other hand, World Expositions represented rare and golden opportunities for Asian countries to get acquainted with the emerging international community and to (re)position themselves in a changing regional and world order. Asian countries were not passive and innocent victims of colonizers but active participants who negotiated and struggled with Western powers in the process of their nation-state-building and modernization efforts. Taking advantage of the Expositions, Asian countries including Korea voiced their discontent over national troubles and solicited international attention. They even appropriated Western civilization according to their own “indigenous” traditions and occasionally reformulated it to suit their own national interest and identity politics.

A century ago, Korea, then referred to as Joseon or the Land of Morning Calm (1392-1910), had exposed itself helplessly to foreign aggression and invasion. A series of foreign invasions forced the opening of the secluded county to imperial powers – in 1876 to Japan, in 1882 to the U.S., in 1883 to Germany and Great Britain, in 1884 to Russia, and in 1886 to France – and had resulted in the gradual collapse of the “ancien régime” of Korea. Ignorant of the mechanism of international relations and legal conceptions, Korea’s ruling *Yangban* class was unable to cope with new challenges within and without. Especially prior to the Columbian Exposition, China, Japan and Russia fought over their stake in the Korean peninsula. While Japan was ascending to become the new and sole “guardian” of Korea, China had never given up on its age-old claims of hegemony over Korea’s affairs. Russia also sought its share of commercial concessions, succeeding in the signing of the Russo-Korean Overland Trade Agreement in 1888.

King Gojong, the penultimate ruler of the Joseon Dynasty, was desperate to escape this triangular power struggle. Too reform-minded to ally with the ailing Qing Dynasty, too suspicious to embrace the rising Japanese Meiji government, and too uneasy to befriend the Tsarist Russian monarchy, he might have welcomed the Columbian Exposition as a golden opportunity to test the traditional wisdom of “let the barbarians control other barbarians.” The Korean monarchy, with only a superficial understanding of international laws, might have hoped that the U.S. would protect Korea from the threats posed by

1. For the post-colonial interpretation of the Expositions, see Timothy Mitchell, “The World as Exhibition,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31, no. 2 (1989); Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1919* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Paul Tenkotte, “Kaleidoscopes of the World: International Exhibitions and the Concept of Culture-place, 1815-1915,” *American Studies* 28, no. 1 (1987).

Japan, China, and Russia or that the U.S. would at least play a positive role in establishing and maintaining a stable balance of power on the Korean Peninsula.² It was Horace Newton Allen (1858-1932), a key royal confidant and a secretary to the American legation in Seoul, who successfully persuaded King Gojong to dispatch a delegation to the World's Columbian Exposition.³ The combination of King Gojong's diplomatic need to recruit a third party whom Korea could trust and Allen's personal ambition as a power broker led to Korea's decision to participate in the world event for the first time.

Despite the recent revival of interest in the subject,⁴ very few studies have explored Korea's involvement in the Columbian Exposition,⁵ and despite some

2. For a review of hegemonic struggles over the Korean Peninsula among China, the U.K., Japan, and the U.S., see Choe Munhyeong, *Hanguk eul dulleossan jegukjuui yeolgang ui gakchuk* [Competition of the Imperial Powers in Korea] (Seoul: Jisik saneopsa, 2001). Around the time of Korea's treaty with the U.S., King Gojong acknowledged the significance of international laws as a new and indispensable tool for Korea's independence. He encouraged his subjects to study the international legal system, which he believed could guarantee the balance of power on the Korean peninsula by allowing the fair establishment of international relations. For a brief discussion on the subject of the inception and appropriation of international laws among Korean officials, see Young-sob Oh, "Understandings and Applications of the International Law in Early Modern Korea," in Yonsei University Institute for Korean Studies ed., *Seogu munhwa ui suyong gwa geundae gaehyeok* [Adoption of Western Culture and Modernization in Early Modern Korea] (Seoul: Taehaksa, 2004), 113-116.

3. Allen once boasted that, after the departure of both Paul G. von Moellendorff (the German adviser to King Gojong from 1882 to 1885) and George C. Foulk (who led the first U. S. delegation to Korea from 1883 to 1885), he had "become the most influential foreigner here [in Korea]. The King has consulted me on all matters and always takes my advice." Horace Allen, September 11, 1886, in Kim Won-mo ed, *Horace Newton Allen's Diary* (Seoul: Dankook University Press, 1991/2008), 11. This self-assessment of his important role in the Korean government was in no way an exaggeration. William Sands, who was a foreign adviser to King Gojong in 1896, confirmed King Gojong's trust in Allen: "There is not a diplomat of them all who possessed the confidence of the Emperor [King Gojong] and the people as Allen did. Others might cajole or bully; it was to Allen that the emperor turned for advice or consolation." William F. Sands, *Undiplomatic Memories: The Far East 1896-1904* (London: John Hamilton, 1931), 47. In fact, it was Allen who accompanied the first Korean delegation to the U.S. and helped to establish Korea's first diplomatic legation in Washington D. C. in 1886. It was also Allen who, accepting the title of "Honorary Commissioner of the World's Fair," given by the Commissioner of the Department of Foreign Affairs for the World's Columbian Exposition, helped Gustavus Goward, a special commissioner who had arrived in Seoul in May 1891 to encourage Korea's participation, to obtain a "domestic passport" for his travel convenience. Daniel Kane, "Korea in the White City: Korean Participation in the World's Columbian Exhibition of 1893," *Transactions of the Royal Asiatic Society-Korea Branch* 77 (2002), 12.

4. Recent studies have reevaluated World Expositions from a racial and gender-oriented point of view. For instance, see Christopher R. Reed, *"All the World Is Here!": The Black Presence at White City* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); J. J. Boisseau and Abigail M. Markwyn eds., *Gendering the Fair: Histories of Women and Gender at World's Fairs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

differences in their emphasis, they have typically focused on providing a factual reconstruction of the event, such as determining the exact size of the Korean pavilion and the whereabouts of various items displayed in Chicago. Further, relying mainly on overlapping sources, they have tended to highlight and exaggerate the nationalistic achievements through the event, thereby ignoring the transnational dimensions of Korea's representation at the Exposition.

To contribute to the growing body of research on the subject, this paper reappraises Korea's presence at the Columbian Exposition from the perspective of global history. In other words, this study rediscovers the multidimensional meaning of the Exposition by anatomizing it from the transnational point of view. What were Westerners' typical (mis)perceptions of fin-de-siècle Koreans (and their culture) and vice versa? What type of "clash of civilizations" occurred at the Exposition between Western materialism and the Confucian world view? To what extent was Korea's experience in Chicago unique as well as universal in comparison with that of other Asian countries? To address these questions, this paper focuses more on narrating an alternative version of world history based on Korea's experience than on providing another version of modern Korean history. Avoiding what Patrick Manning referred to as "parochial globalism,"⁶ this paper uncovers the intense competition and rivalries among Asian countries at the Columbian Exposition.

Fin de Siècle Korea as Represented at the Columbian Exposition

1. *Men in Strange Black Hats Speaking a Queer Tongue*

Not only Korea's decision to participate in the Exposition but also its preparation for the event was made in a tardy and improvised manner.⁷ On

5. In addition to Daniel Kane's aforementioned work, see Yi Minsik [Min-Sik Lee], *Geundae Han-Mi gwangyesa* [A study of the relations between Korea and the United States of America during the 18-19th century] (Seoul: Baeksan jaryowon, 2001); *Columbia Segye bangnamboe wa Hanguk* [Columbian World's Exposition and Korea] (Seoul: Baeksan jaryowon, 2006); Young-na Kim, "Universal Exposition as an Exhibitionary Space: Korean Exhibition at the 1893 World Columbian Exposition, Chicago," *Seoyang misul sahakhoe nonmunjip* 13 (2000). This article is reprinted in Gim Yeongna [Young-na Kim], *20 segi ui Hanguk misul* 2 [Twentieth century Korean Art] (Seoul: Yegyong, 2010), 14-49.

6. Patrick Manning, *Navigating World History: Historians Create a Global Past* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 118.

7. Japan, Russia, Turkey, and Siam were among the first to officially accept the invitation to participate in the Exposition, whereas Korea, Ceylon, and Egypt signaled their intention to

March 12, 1893, less than two months from the opening of the Exposition, King Gojong appointed Jeong Gyeongwon 鄭敬源 (1851-1898) as the Royal Commissioner of the Korean Delegation to Chicago.⁸ The Royal Commissioner was diligent and meticulous enough to keep a diary and a travelogue during his assignment.⁹ Anxious to be well prepared for his official task, Jeong obtained and read *A Diary of the Philadelphia World Exposition* (*Feifu bolanhui riji* 費府博覽會日記), which was written by a Qing Chinese official.¹⁰ Two other representatives – Choe Munhyeon 崔文鉉 (1856-1926), a staff member, and An Giseon 安琪善 (1865-1937), a translator (as well as a band composed of ten traditional musicians) were later added to the delegation. Leaving Jemulpo (the current port of Incheon) on March 23, the thirteen members of the Korean delegation arrived in Chicago (Sigoa 市高俄) on April 28. Korea's participation in the World's Columbian Exposition marked the country's third official international foray since the signing of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce in 1882, for which the Korean government sent a delegation to the U.S.¹¹

participate in the Exposition "in due time." See Rossiter Johnson, *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition, vol. 1: Narration* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1897), p. 112.

8. Initiated into officialdom in 1890 in his forties, Jeong, then an official of the third rank in the Internal Affairs Bureau, had no prior experience with the West and could not speak English at all. For a detailed biography of Chung, see Yi Minsik, *Geundae Han-Mi gwangyesa*, 487-489, 574-577.

9. These facts were discovered and translated from classical Chinese into Korean by Yi Minsik [Min-Sik Lee]. The first part of his translation of Jeong's document, entitled "Wanyeok Jeong Gyeongwon munseo" [Complete translation of Jeong Gyeongwon's documents], can be found in *Geundae Han-Mi gwangyesa* (pp. 170-247), which is referred to in the present paper as *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*. Another translated version of the Jeong Gyeongwon Document appears in Yi Minsik, *Columbia Segye bangnamhoe wa Hanguk* (pp. 489-574), which is referred to in the present paper as *Jeong Gyeongwon Document II*. All English translations of the documents are my own.

10. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 174. I was unable to identify the author of and find bibliographical information on *A Diary of the Philadelphia World Exposition*.

11. Welcoming the opportunity to contact a young Western nation, the Korean monarchy lost no time in 1883 to dispatch a group of special envoys to the U.S. for the purpose of studying the U.S. industry and culture. However, because of diplomatic interference by China, which was anxious to restore its traditional suzerainty over Korea, it took several years before the Joseon government was finally able to send its first minister, Bak Jeongyang, to Washington D.C. in 1887. Bak's premature return to Korea in 1888, owing to China's diplomatic obstruction, illustrates how fragile the diplomatic relationship between the U. S. and Korea was on the eve of the Exposition. The Korean legation in Washington D. C. was administrated by interim officials until 1895, when Seo Gwangbeom was finally appointed as the resident consul. For a detailed account of the diplomatic conflict between China and Korea in the U.S., see Horace Allen, *Things Korean: A Collection of Sketches and Anecdotes Missionary and Diplomatic* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 163-164.



Figure 1. “Chung Kiung Won, Royal Commissioner to the Fair” [Left] “Yi Shing Su, Corean Minister” [Right], *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 23, 1893.

As soon as the Korean delegation arrived in San Francisco, the strange appearance and “uncivilized” behavior of Koreans attracted Americans’ curious gaze. A local newspaper reported that Korean representatives, “arrayed in the curious silken gowns . . . the strange black hat” and speaking a “queer language,” became “the objects of much interest.” When escorted to a dining table for their reception, they “seemed somewhat at a loss on how to proceed” as they “had not yet been fully accustomed to dining in the American way.”¹² Exhausted after spending 38 days on the road, Jeong received a journalist in Chicago “in the full blaze of the Corean court costume: a voluminous robe of sea-green silk with huge blue sleeves, a monstrous, wide-brimmed hat tied under his chin and a pair of felt soled shoes, a la Chinaman.”¹³

It was the presence of the Korean ensemble that created a big fuss among journalists and locals. The *Chicago Tribune* wrote that the group of ten traditional musicians “perform strangely on tom-toms, instruments that look like either a mandolin or a guitar, and big gongs” and “look very much like the Javanese people on the [Midway] Plaisance.”¹⁴ The *Chicago Evening Journal*

12. *The San Francisco Chronicle*, April 23, 1893.

13. *The Chicago Times*, May 24, 1893.

14. *The Chicago Tribune*, April 29, 1893. The Midway Plaisance, an amusement park at the Exposition, featured attractions such as the Cairo Street, the Chinese Village, and the American Indian Village. “Hailed by many as the greatest ethnological display in the history of the world,

reported that “the Native Korean Orchestra ... the stars of the Korean musical world,” “. . .[with] their curious reed and string musical instruments ... resembles the Japanese.”¹⁵ The band played a welcoming tune on the opening day of the Exposition for President Cleveland, who made a courtesy tour through the Manufactures and Liberal Art Building, where the Korean exhibit was located. A Westerner who witnessed the scene recalled the “bursts of martial music from famous English and German bands, answered by the weird tinkling of quaint Korean cymbals.”¹⁶

Speaking “a queer language,” no member of the official delegation was able to speak English fluently enough to properly perform his duty. Jeong lamented that “although many Westerners were on board, to my dismay, we could not gather anything useful because of our inability to communicate through either written or verbal means.”¹⁷ Luckily, he was finally able to gather some practical information on the Exposition by communicating in classical Chinese with a Japanese officer who had participated in previous World Expositions as a Japanese representative.¹⁸ In his first official report on May 3rd, Jeong informed King Gojong that “as An Giseon lacks appropriate English proficiency, his translations are too brief and rough. . . And I am very worried that there is no one who can take care of the ten members of the traditional band, who have absolutely no English ability.”¹⁹ Thus, the Royal Commissioner had

the Midway provided visitors with apparent ethnological, scientific sanction for the American image of the non-white world as barbaric and childlike. The Plaisance, in short, served as a convenient moral, cultural, and racial yardstick by which to compare and measure America’s achievements with those of other peoples.” Robert W. Rydell, “The World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893: Racist Underpinning of a Utopian Artifact,” *Journal of American Culture* 12 (1978), 255.

15. *The Chicago Evening Journal*, April 28, 1893.

16. Rossiter Johnson, *A History of the World’s Columbian Exposition*, vol. 1, 352.

17. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 498.

18. This Japanese official introduced himself to Jeong as follows: “As a top-ranking officer and a judge, I participated in the Vienna World Exposition twenty years ago, and carrying the same official title, I took part in the Philadelphia World Exposition in celebration of the centennial foundation of the U. S.” *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 172. His name can be read as “Aida Makoto” 鹽田真, but I was not able to verify his name in the official list of Japanese commissioners. For Japan’s participation in World Expositions, see Neil Harris, “All the World a Melting Pot? Japan at American Fairs, 1894-1904,” in Akira Iriye ed., *Mutual Images: American-Japanese Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); Ellen P. Conant, “Refractions of the Rising Sun: Japan’s Participation in International Exhibitions 1862-1901,” in Tomoko Sato and Toshio Watanabe eds., *Japan and Britain: An Aesthetic Dialogue 1850-1930* (London: Lund Humphries, 1991); and Angus Lockyer, “Japan at the Exhibition, 1867-1970,” PhD diss., Stanford University, 2000.

19. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, p. 510.

to hire two young Koreans, Bak Yonggyu 朴容奎 and Seo Byeonggyu 徐丙珪, who happened to be staying in the U.S.²⁰ Jeong's inability to communicate in English did not prevent him from attending many official banquets hosted by other nations. He simply sighed that "many people came to ask for my calling card, but not a single word was exchanged."²¹

When Royal Commissioner Jeong and Yi Seungsu 李承壽,²² the newly appointed interim Chargé d'Affaires in Washington, attended the opening ceremony of the Exposition, their physical appearance again became the center of public attention. This time, a cynical commentary came not from Western journalists but from its neighboring nation. A correspondent from a Japanese newspaper alleged that Korean representatives resembled American Indians in "their distinctive costumes," which "attracted a great deal of attention."²³ Japan, proud of being a forerunner in adapting to the Western style and taste, might have felt superior to other Asian countries, whose representatives still wore their traditional attire, which were considered a symbol of Asia's backwardness. In fact, the Japanese government proclaimed in 1872 that those conducting official business with Westerners or attending government functions should dress in Western costumes.²⁴

It should be noted that throughout the entire period of the Exposition, it was Korea's strange physical appearance, not its art, culture, or history, that attracted constant attention from the public. During his visit to St. Louis, Jeong had to be guarded by eight policemen who separated him from curious and intrusive Americans;²⁵ the hosts' bizarre-looking costumes, "the Korean high-crowned hat with a tight-fitting Cardinal's cap of black beneath," received

20. Jeong was very pleased to know that "Bak Yonggyu, who dressed in Western suits, spoke English so fluently that I could hardly distinguish him from Americans." *Jeong Gyeongwon Document II*, 498; 512-513. For a brief biographical sketch of Bak and Seo, see Yi Minsik, *Columbia Segye bangnamhoe wa Hanguk*, 143-149.

21. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 534.

22. For a biographical sketch of Yi Seungsu, see Yi Minsik, *Geumdae Han-Mi Kwangyesa*, 445-475.

23. *The Japan Weekly Mail: A Review of Japanese Commerce, Politics, Literature, and Art* (Yokohama, June 3rd, 1893), 655. It is difficult to determine how many foreign representatives attended the ceremony in their native costumes. Perhaps the bad memories of the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition of 1876, where foreign commissioners in their peculiar native costumes were harassed by American spectators, might have discouraged them from making the same innocent mistake.

24. Barbara Molony, "Modernity, Gender and the Empire: Gender, Citizenship and Dress in Modernizing Japan," *IIAS Newsletter* 46 (Winter 2008), 8-9.

25. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 544.



Figure 2. “Jueng Kiung Won Marvels at Western Ways,” *The Chicago Times*, May 24, 1893 [Left], “Korean World’s-Fair Commissioners,” *History of The World’s Fair: Copiously Illustrated* (1893), 167 [Right].

considerable attention at the Korea-sponsored farewell party.²⁶ At the farewell banquet hosted by the U.S., a passing statement about “the fantastic headgear of Corea” was the only comment that the Korean representatives earned.²⁷ Regardless of their resemblance to Japanese, American Indians, or “Chinamen,” the Korean delegation were treated as exotic barbarians or a living ethnic fossil reserved for the Midway Plaisance. We should bear in mind that the “anthropology” that justified the hierarchical chain of human beings indeed became a popular discipline among ordinary Americans thanks to the Columbian Exposition.²⁸

2. The Toy-Like Korean Pavilion

A few days away from the opening of the Exposition, the Korean pavilion was

26. *The Chicago Tribune*, September 6, 1893.

27. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair: A Historical and Descriptive Representation of the World’s Science, Art, and Industry, as Viewed through the Columbian Exposition at Chicago in 1893* (New York: Bounty, 1893), 970.

28. When Frederic Ward Putnam, professor and chief of the Department of Ethnology at Harvard University, named an exhibition hall as the Anthropology Building, “it was the first time the term ‘anthropology’ had ever been used in a popular context.” *Ibid.*, 265-266.

still under construction. Further, Royal Commissioner Jeong was unable to itemize the display pieces and file a complete list with the Administrative Office until mid-May.²⁹ Located on the ground floor of the Manufactures and Liberal Art Building between those of Italy and Ceylon, the Korean pavilion was the smallest. Although Italy had 19,857 square feet and Ceylon 931 square feet, Korea had only 446 square feet. Jeong complained that “to my worry, our pavilion, next to that of Siam, is so small.”³⁰ He was perhaps too naïve to apprehend that the World Exposition was after all a competitive international arena where each nation was ranked and classified according to its power and influence. According to the *Official Guide to the world's Columbian Exposition*, Russia was below France, Germany, and the U.K. and equal to Austria and Japan.³¹ Thus, countries were treated differently in accordance to their international status, monetary contributions, and level of civilization.

In contrast to Korea, Japan, the most “civilized” (Westernized?) nation in Asia, spent \$650,000 for its display and obtained 27,005 square feet of display space. Japan sent its own craftsmen to construct its national pavilion “Ho-oden” on Wooden Isle. Located at one of the fair ground’s most favorable and convenient spots, the so-called “Phoenix Hall” was admired as “the handsomest and costliest ever made by the Empire” and “among the most celebrated of the Fair.”³² By sparing no financial resource and lavishing labor on constructing the national pavilion, Japan was anxious to demonstrate that it really deserved to be admitted to the restricted fellowship of advanced nations. Gozo Tateno, the Japanese ambassador to Washington, regarded the Exposition “as the growth of a modern civilization” and made it clear that Japan’s participation in the Chicago event would show the world that “Japan is a country worthy of full fellowship in the family of nations” and that Japan had reached “a position worthy of the respect and confidence of other nations.”³³

29. Jeong Gyeongwon Document I, p. 518.

30. Jeong Gyeongwon Document II, p. 180. Although Flinn reported that “in the Art Gallery Korea has a handsome and valuable display of pottery (p. 118),” Jeong pointed out that “As Korean items were just cloths and hides, we displayed them all in one exhibit.” Jeong Gyeongwon Document I, p. 180.

31. Russia was given 25,176 square feet to exhibit, whereas France, Great Britain, and Germany each had 61,006 square feet in the Manufactures and Liberal Arts Building. Austria had 30,436 square feet. John Flinn, *Official Guide to the world's Columbian Exposition*, 128.

32. Ibid., 81-82; 125.

33. Gozo Tateno, “Foreign Nations at the Worlds’ Fair: Japan,” *The North American Review* 156 (1893), 34, 42-43. It was argued that Japan became the first non-European country to gain full international status and full recognition as a ‘civilized power’ by 1905, if not by 1895. See

In general, Siam was well received and regarded by the U.S. Returning a favor to the Siamese monarchy – Chulalongkorn (Rama V, reigned 1868-1910) donated \$35,000 for the Exposition – Siam was allowed to occupy 1,096 square feet – more than twice the size of the Korean pavilion.³⁴ Siam, which signed a treaty with the U.K. in 1855, began its modernization program under the leadership of Mongkut (Rama IV, reigned 1851-1868), the first Asian ruler with the ability to speak English. His son Chulalongkorn, hailed as “Siam’s Peter the Great,” continued to accelerate Siam’s march toward Westernization.³⁵ Their efforts were rewarded at the Exposition, where the Siamese pavilion was admired as “one of the most unique and attractive structures” in the Manufactures and Liberal Art Building and its exhibit was cited as “a remarkable piece of workmanship.”³⁶

Korea, one of three “independent” East Asian nations present at the Exposition, was no match for Japan and Siam, the two “civilized” Asian nations. Fin de siècle Korea was too poor to cover the minimum expense for the Exposition on time. Yi Chaeyon 李采淵 (1861-1900),³⁷ the interim Chargé d’Affaires in Washington, promised that “although we have never been asked about the expenses, I am sure that our folks at home are willing to spend whatever sum necessary.” Despite the financial shortfall, he made it clear that the group of musicians were at the Exposition not to perform for money but to enhance the dignity of the Korean monarchy and commissioners.³⁸ Confucian self-esteem and stubborn anti-commercialism, however, could not mask the financial hardship facing the Korean representatives. The ten musicians had to return to Korea on May 3 to reduce expenses, and the remaining commissioners had to move three times in six months (from a decent hotel to a cheaper facility to a leased room).³⁹

Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 240.

34. M. P. Handy ed., *World’s Columbian Exposition: Official Catalogue* (Chicago: W. B. Gonkey Company, 1893), 139.

35. For modernization movement programs under Mongkut and Chulalongkorn, see Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society*, 217-230.

36. H. H. Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, Vol. 1, 219-220.

37. For a biographical sketch of Yi Chayeyon, see Yi Minsik, *Geundae Han-Mi Kwangyesa*, 375-401.

38. *The San Francisco Chronicle*, April 23, 1893.

39. Jeong explained this situation by stating that “abiding by America’s custom, we borrowed \$700 from a U.S. bank and paid \$300 in advance.” He informed King Gojong that “we will be, with our capital, short of disposable cash within the next few days. ... The place that Yi Chayeyon reserved for us was a top-class hotel, and we could not afford it. We thus rented a house for six

According to the *Official Guide of the World's Columbian Exposition*, Korea was “represented by fabrics woven from cotton, hemp, silk, and grass; by paper; by culinary utensils, table sets, precious stones, musical instruments, etc.” Bancroft, the author of the semi-official guide book, wrote that “the toy-like pavilion of Corea” contained “twenty-five or more tons of exhibits, most of them taken from the royal palace,”⁴⁰ including a sedan chair, ginseng roots, tiger skins, and a collection of armor. Interestingly enough, he acknowledged Japan’s cultural and artistic indebtedness to Korea. Perhaps jealous of the Japanese exhibit, which excelled in its quantity and quality, some members of the Korea delegation or sympathetic Americans who were familiar with Korean history might have informed Bancroft that Koreans had taught the Japanese the know-how for manufacturing porcelain after Japan kidnapped Korean artisans during the Korea-Japan War of 1592.⁴¹

months and hired a western housekeeper.” *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 505, 516. In early August 1893, Royal Commissioner Jeong received approximately \$5,650 in cash from the Korean legation in Washington D.C. Jeong spent the money to pay some overdue expenses, including the cost of constructing the Korean exhibit hall (\$500), a two-month salary for Allen (\$400), a six-month salary for the Korean hall attendant (\$240), and his own travel expense (\$1,000). The remainder (\$2,940) was deposited in a bank for later use. For more information on this account, see *Ibid.*, 537-538.

40. Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 118.

41. Allen, the de facto curator of the Korean pavilion, recorded in his memoir that “After the great Japanese invasion of Korea in 1598, General Nabeshima gathered all available specimens of the early Korean pottery manufacture, together with all the potters themselves with their families, and carried them to Japan, where he established the potters as a colony on his native island of Satsuma. Here these exiles continued the manufacture of this ware and taught the art to their neighbours ... From this small beginning, the vast manufacture of the exquisite pottery of today had its origin in Japan.” Horace Allen, *Things Korean: A Collection of Sketches and Anecdotes Missionary and Diplomatic* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), 210. Another American, William Griffis, supported Allen’s statement by claiming that “If China is the Egypt, and Japan the Greece of Eastern Asia, then Corea is the Cyprus, supplying the middle term of development between the two phases of art... The decay of Corean art was largely due to the fact that the Japanese drained the rival country of her best artists and workmen. The emigrations of Coreans to Japan, so often noticed in the annals of the latter country, resemble the scattering of the Huguenots in Europe... It is perhaps no exaggeration to claim that one of the motives which helped to swell the war-cry of ‘On to Corea’ in 1592 was the desire of Taiko’s generals to seize and bring over the entire ceramic art and industry of Corea bodily.” “The Corean Origin of Japanese Art,” 224; 226-227. Rutgers University William Elliot Griffis Collection, Grif DS908.k8 1887 #21.

3. *The Exposition as an International Arena for Gauging the Standard of Civilization*

With the closing of the Columbian Exposition approaching, the Korean delegation hosted a formal banquet on September 5 to celebrate King Gojong's birthday. Reportedly costing \$1,500, the banquet was held at the luxurious Auditorium Hotel and approximately one hundred dignitaries, including the President of the Commission for the World's Columbian Exposition, the Mayor of Chicago, and the Japanese Commissioner, were present.⁴² Delivering his first and last official speech, the Royal Commissioner made clear King Gojong's real motive for sending him to the Exposition:

Korea, which some refer to as the hermit nation, has been open to the world for only about ten years. . . . Never before has Korea taken part in any international exposition, but in response to an urgent request of America, a great friend of Korea, his Majesty has sent his first official exhibit abroad to make complete the representations of nations. . . . We are sure this exposition will help to facilitate the establishment of the principles of judicial arbitration as the supreme law governing international relations.⁴³

Putting the polite Confucian rhetoric aside, Jeong made it explicit that by hiding behind the timid image (i.e., the hermit nation) no longer, Korea was committed to becoming a full member of the international community and that dispatching its representatives to Chicago was a clear demonstration of Korea's commitment. In return for Korea's sincere gesture and commitment, Jeong (and King Gojong) hoped that countries observing international laws would safeguard Korea's independence and security.

Both King Gojong and his Commissioner Jeong had not the slightest idea that concluding international treaties or exchanging diplomatic envoys would not automatically guarantee a nation's membership in international society. A nation wishing to enjoy equal rights in the international community had to satisfy "the standard of civilization," which was prescribed, regulated, and measured exclusively by Western nations. Based on the logic of inclusion-exclusion, Western powers manufactured and manipulated the universal principles of civilization to make them the very basis and rationale for international laws.⁴⁴ Any non-European nation that failed to meet the Western

42. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, p. 541.

43. *The Japanese Weekly Mail*, October 7th, 1893, 406-407.

standard of inalienable human rights (liberty and property?) and freedom of trade was ostracized from the family of nations. Based on the exhibit space, Korea ranked at the bottom in terms of the civilization process and had the lowest international status: below Persia (1,825 square feet), Turkey (2,270 square feet), and even British colony Ceylon (931 square feet).

By the late nineteenth century, the World Expositions had transformed into a smokeless battle ground for securing a favorable international position, and thus, Asian countries spared no effort to demonstrate their maturity as a “civilized” nation and consolidate their seat amidst the international community. For instance, Siam’s pavilion reproduced the king’s garden house and hung photographs of the royal family, the guardians of Siam’s modernization efforts. Throwing the official banquet on September 30 to celebrate King Chulalongkorn’s birthday, Siam’s representatives wished that Western guests would appreciate his enlightened leadership. Japan articulated its political messages by decorating vases with various carvings and pictures: “The chrysanthemum and *kiri* blossoms, the national symbols of Japan, appear between the rising sun and the American flag, indicative of the cordial relations existing between the two nations.”⁴⁵ This artwork alluded that Japan, standing shoulder to shoulder with the U.S., reached a level of civilization similar to that of the U.S. and thus had the same rights in international affairs.

In this regard, it may be no exaggeration to claim that it was at the Columbian Exposition that the two emerging super powers – the U.S. and Japan – in the disguise of “cultural politics” discussed how the ideal world order should be aligned and reshuffled. It is then not surprising that the U.S. and Japan exchanged the secret Taft-Katsura Memorandum in 1905, which recognized Japan’s sphere of influence in Korea and the U.S.’s sphere of influence in the Philippines. It is also no wonder to notice that when Japan announced its diplomatic suzerainty over Korea, the U.S. was the first to withdraw its legation from Seoul. Korea’s noble dream to be a modest part of the fraternal union of nations through the World’s Columbian Exposition was

44. Gerrit W. Gong, *The Standard of ‘Civilization’ in International Society*, 54-56; Martti Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations: The Rise and Fall of International Law, 1870-1960* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2001), 174-5.

45. Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 222. Japanese artists might have been ordered by their government to transmit an explicit diplomatic message by depicting on the surface of a vase “political events as the threatened annexation of Korea by China or Russia.” For the first time, the Columbian Exposition allowed Japanese artworks to be displayed in a separate art museum, that is, the Palace of Fine Arts. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art ed., *Japan Goes to the World’s Fairs: Japanese Art at the Great Expositions in Europe & the United States, 1867-1907* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2005), 74, 91.

thus shattered by the congenial league of future colonizers.

Remaking of Korea's Modern Identity

1. Was Korea Really an Independent and Modern Nation?

A reporter from the Chicago Daily News spotted an intriguing piece of paper hanging in front of the Korean exhibit hall. Entitled "Questions Answered," it listed several features of Korea's geography, population, and culture, addressing the most frequent inquiries by visitors. The hand-written "Questions Answered" document included the following information: "'Korea' and 'Corea' are both correct, but the former is preferred;" "Korea is not part of China; it is an independent country;" "Koreans do not speak the Chinese language, and the Korean language resembles neither Chinese nor Japanese;" and "Korea has electric lights, steamships, and telegraph, but it does not have railroads."⁴⁶ Designed to impress ignorant foreign visitors with a viable image of a country whose name vacillated between "Korea" and "Corea,"⁴⁷ "Questions Answered" revealed a delicate disparity between Korea's desire and the reality. Let us evaluate how plausible Korea's linguistic and political independence was and how well prepared it was to adopt Western technology.

Bancroft noticed that "a group of brass cannons made in the 10th century, about the size of a small howitzer, but with barrels wrought in modern style" was displayed at the Korea pavilion.⁴⁸ The Korean government might have sent such heavy and bulky items to exaggerate its military ability, which was a crucial condition for national independence. Interesting enough, a disabled U.S. veteran visiting the Korean pavilion saw the brass cannon and shouted that "I was shot by that damn cannon!"⁴⁹ He must have been one of the ten U.S. soldiers wounded in the Battle of Ganghwa Island in 1871.⁵⁰ An Giseon, who

46. *The Chicago Record's History of The World's Fair: Copiously Illustrated* (Chicago: The Chicago Daily News Co., 1893), 224-225.

47. For changes in the spelling of names in chronological order, which appeared in foreign journals and publications, see O Indong, *Kkorea, Koria: Seoyangin in pureun uri nara gukko ui yeoksa* = *Corea or Korea* (Seoul: Chaek gwa hamkke, 2008).

48. Hubert Bancroft, *The Book of the Fair*, 219.

49. "A Former Korean Commissioner and the World Exposition: A Memoir of Forty-Three Years Ago," *Sin-Dong-A* (Feb. 1936), 57.

50. In retaliation for the General Sherman Incident of 1866, in which all of the U.S. crew members were killed by Koreans, the U.S. government expedited its navy force to Ganghwa

recollected this episode 43 years later, did not clarify whether the display of the antiquated armory was well received by foreign visitors as a symbolic token of Korea's independence.

As a matter of fact, Korea was not the only Asian nation that tried to demonstrate its (imagined) military strength to scare off potential foreign aggressors. Ceylon displayed old Kandyan pistols, knives, and spearheads; Turkey, a military rifle and decorated armor; and Siam, an ornamented bow. However, these exhibits failed to convey the message that these countries were willing to resort to military violence for the sake of national independence. In the eyes of the U.S. audience, "most of the Oriental exhibits of war material were interesting from the aesthetic rather than from the military point of view."⁵¹ The Oriental ordnance was collectively appreciated as beautiful pieces of traditional artworks whose military function lagged behind the advanced machinery of Western armory. The Korean cannons may have been viewed in a similar manner.

Furthermore, Korea wanted to represent itself as a country well equipped with Western technology. In fact, thanks to a direct contract with the Edison General Electric Company, Korea's first electric plant was established in the Gyeongbok Palace (the royal residence) in 1886, outpacing Japan's gaslight system. Allen explained that "in getting a fine electric plant at this early day, Koreans wished to profit by the experience of other people, and since this was the latest and best light, they skipped the gas period and secured the highest product of modern experience in light development."⁵² Telegraph was introduced in the mid-1880s, and the electric streetcar and the intercity railroad in 1899. Although fin de siècle Korea was certainly "an early adopter" of modern technology, it is unclear whether its government was well prepared to launch a long-term and well-coordinated modernization reform. There has been an ongoing debate over whether King Gojong, who was fond of all kinds of new Western gadgets, had any blueprint for modernizing Korea.⁵³

Island and demanded an apology from the Korean government. The military collision between the two nations in 1871 resulted in two American and 240 Korean casualties.

51. Johnson, *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition*, vol. 3: *Exhibits*, 310.

52. Horace Allen, *Things Korean*, 216. Also see Min Suh Son, "Enlightenment and Electrification: The Introduction of Electric Light, Telegraph and Streetcars in Late Nineteenth Century Korea," in Kim Dong-no et al. eds., *Reform and Modernity in the Taehan Empire* (Seoul: Jimoondang, 2006).

53. For the on-going debate over the exact nature of King Gojong's vision and leadership as an "enlightened ruler," see Yi Taejin et al., *Gojong Hwangje yeoksa cheongmunhoe* [Public hearing on Emperor Gojong] (Seoul: Pureun yeoksa, 2005).

2. Visitors and Their Opinions About the Korean Exhibit

Who visited the Korea pavilion and read “Questions Answered”? Stewart Culin, Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Paleontology at the University of Pennsylvania, might have taken advantage of the Columbian Exposition to broaden his knowledge of popular culture in East Asia in general and Korea’s folk culture in particular. Culin displayed his collection of Asian games at the Columbian Exposition, and for this, he contacted a member of the Korean delegation, Pak Young Kiu [sic], to obtain detailed information on Korean games. Their conversation and correspondence resulted in the publication of the first book by a Western ethnographer about the origin, nature, and range of Korean games.⁵⁴ Culin was convinced that “the remarkable survivals of primitive social conditions that exist in Korea” would help anthropologists to trace the “divinatory origins of world games” from a comparative perspective.⁵⁵ He may have been disappointed to learn that Korea, “a land most prolific in survival,” was invaded by modern technology, as “Questions Answered” proudly indicated.

However, the most visible and outspoken visitor was Yun Chiho (1865-1945), a self-exiled politician and an accidental student abroad in the U.S. Yun stopped by Chicago in September on his way back to Korea. After spending several days in Chicago, Yun recorded his verdict on Asian nations on display at the Exposition:

The Chinese exhibit is very stupid. Except in ivory carving, fineness or delicacy is not a part of the Chinese skill. Such a miserable grotesqueness in their paintings! The Japanese exhibit is praised by everybody. Japan should be proud. Siam and Burmah [sic] are represented. Corea has a corner where are found the crude productions of the Corean skill or rather dullness. While I could not help blushing at the poverty of Corea arts and others, the sight of Corean flag had a strong attraction to me.⁵⁶

A former leader of the Japanese-sponsored Gapsin Reform and a Christian advocate of Westernization, Yun was ashamed to discover the “crude” items

54. Stewart Culin, *Korean Games with Notes on the Corresponding Games of China and Japan* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1895). This book was reprinted as *Games of the Orient: Korea, China, Japan* (Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1958). I thank Robert Oppenheim for calling my attention to this work.

55. *Ibid.*, xviii.

56. *Yun Chi Ho Diary*, September 24 1893, 168.

displayed at the shabby Korean pavilion. In his eyes, the Korean delegation itself was nothing but “a fair specimen of the degraded humanity of Korea.” According to Yun, An Giseon was “dirty, lazy, dull, and filthy in the mouth and in morals,” and Royal Commissioner Jeong was “stingy and bigoted.”⁵⁷ His denigration of both the Korean pavilion and its official personnel exactly echoed the fin de siècle social Darwinist discourse, which justified the imperialist mission for civilizing non-European barbarians.

Although Yun Chiho and Royal Commissioner Jeong did not meet in person in Chicago because of the political antagonism between the two,⁵⁸ they shared an ambivalent national (or patriotic) sentiment. Yun was deeply moved by the sight of the Korean flag *Taegeukki* on the roof of the Korean exhibit, and so was Jeong, when he saw it raised to the same height as that of the U.S.⁵⁹ Their emotional consonance, however, fell short of bridging the grave discrepancy in their ideology and orientation with respect to nation-building and modernization efforts. Yun was convinced that unless Korea followed the path of Meiji Japan, there would be no bright future for the Korean people.⁶⁰ By contrast, as we will discuss shortly, Jeong was a disciple of the opposite ideological movement known as “defend orthodoxy and reject heterodoxy” (*wijeong cheoksa*).

On May 2, there was another memorable visitor. Royal Commissioner Jeong “had a long conversation” with an “American gentleman who studied literature:”⁶¹ William F. Griffis (1843-1928).⁶² Griffis was the author of *Corea: The Hermit Nation*,⁶³ which, since its first publication in 1882, had become “for several decades the authoritative reference in the West on Korean culture and history” and “the most important maker of Korea’s image in America.”⁶⁴

57. Ibid., September 28 1893, 179.

58. When Yun requested to see Jeong on September 24, 1893, the Royal Commissioner refused him “on the grounds that, as a representative of the government, he didn’t think it was right to see a man whose father was a political exile and who has been out of the country for so long without any good cause!” Yun’s father was involved in the pro-Japanese reform movement.

59. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 559.

60. For more information on Yun Chiho and his intellectual transformation from a modernist/nationalist to a Japanese collaborator, see Koen de Ceuster, “From Modernization to Collaboration, the Dilemma of Korean Cultural Nationalism: The Case of Yun Ch’i-ho (1865-1945),” Ph.D. Dissertation (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 1994).

61. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 508.

62. I thank Daniel Kane for the verification of Griffis’s visit to the Korean pavilion.

63. Originally published by AMS Press in New York, *Hermit Nation* was reprinted several times until its revised and expanded ninth edition appeared in 1911.

64. Sung-hwa Cheong, “William Elliot Griffis and Emerging American Korea,” *The Review of*

In retrospect, it was a historical moment in that the very person who was most responsible for misrepresenting ancient Korea as a backward and reclusive country knocked at its door for the first time to get a glimpse of the kingdom.⁶⁵ Did his direct encounter with Korea's representatives and material culture at the Columbian Exposition have any impact on his (in)famous stereotype of fin de siècle Korea as a "hermit nation?"

A self-learned expert on Korean politics and history, Griffis straightforwardly challenged the solidarity of Korean independence and raised the question of "why does Korea still use, instead of the Korean alphabet, classical Chinese?"⁶⁶ He was very certain that the everlasting influence of Chinese civilization on Korea's politics, society, and culture was the most malicious obstacle and poison that prevented Korea from becoming a truly independent new nation. Griffis claimed that Korea was a country "where mental initiative was long ago practically lost, where originality was swamped by too slavish dependence upon China, [and] where the original poverty of mind and dearth of ideas has been almost petrified."⁶⁷ To this rude American visitor, Royal Commissioner Jeong had to admit that the Joseon Dynasty occasionally indulged itself in abstract Confucian scholarship in the past five centuries, thus failing to pay due attention to the importance of "military defense" (*mubi* 武備) and "practicality" (*silli* 實理). However, Jeong countered that the Korean monarchy now struggled to strike a sound balance between Confucian virtue and military strength.⁶⁸

Griffis continued to point out the absurdity of the Korean government's Sino-centric linguistic policy, which was clearly incompatible with what "Questions Answered" insisted: "If the Korean alphabet, unlike classical Chinese, is so easy to learn and master, why is it that the Korean ruling class does not encourage and teach its own people the Korean language so that they could be more knowledgeable, not ignorant?" He asked, "the Korean government still relies on classical Chinese as the official language for written communication, so how dare you insist that Korea is independent from Qing?"⁶⁹ Jeong protested that Korea's ruling elite's use of classical Chinese had

Korean Studies 3, no. 2 (2000), 53.

65. Griffis had never visited Korea until 1927, a year before his death. Taking advantage of his six-month stay in Tokyo, he visited Korea briefly on his way to Manchuria.

66. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 509.

67. W. M. Elliot Griffis, "Korea and the Koreans: In the Mirror of Their Language and History," *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 27, no. 1 (1895), 12-13.

68. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, p. 509.

69. *Ibid.*, 509-510.

nothing to do with national pride and autonomy and underlined that classical Chinese was simply a superior and efficient means of communication for various languages, including Korean.⁷⁰ If linguistic dependence were a barometer of political and diplomatic autonomy, Jeong countered, the U.S. would still be dependent on the U.K. because it used English, the language of the former colonizer.⁷¹ Regardless of who won the argument, Griffis later recognized that, with the negative veil of the hermit nation removed, a New Korea was emerging and that a whole new chapter of its history remained to be written.⁷²

In sum, the above anecdotes provide ample evidence of the Korean delegation's fragile and desperate efforts to construct their national identity at the Columbian Exposition. The awkward mixture of traditional and modern elements at the Korean pavilion mirrored the unstable coexistence of the conflicting views held by the pro-Western Reform movement: the "Eastern Way–Western Technology" (*dongdo seogi* 東道西器) and "Defend Orthodoxy and Reject Heterodoxy" views. Ginseng roots and tiger skins for mysterious Oriental medicine and the human-operated sedan chair were accompanied by state-of-the-art Western technologies such as electric light and telephone "on paper." The Korean delegation's hand-written assurance of its political and linguistic independence was contested and weakened by Griffis's sour criticism of its de facto and ongoing subjection to the Chinese world order. In this respect, the Korean pavilion resembled a house of self-contradiction where the reality and appearances collided and different versions of state-nation-building and modernization efforts clashed.

70. It is ironic that Yun Chiho kept the first part of his diary in classical Chinese. Although he started to use Hangeul for his diary from November 25, 1887, Yun began using English on December 7, 1889 (a year into his stay in the U.S.), adopting the solar calendar to date his entries. Yun provided the following reason for not using the Korean alphabet: "[Korean] vocabulary is not as yet rich enough to express all that I want to say." (December 7, 1889). In fact, exclusively trained in and accustomed to classical Chinese, Yun Chiho had a poor command of Hangeul. Koen de Ceuster, "From Modernization to Collaboration, the Dilemma of Korean Cultural Nationalism," 15, Footnote 32.

71. Jeong Gyeonwon *Document I*, 510.

72. W. E. Griffis, "Korea, the Pigmy Empire," 470. Grif DS 908.K8 1888 #13. Griffis anticipated that "the New Korea will rise according to the model of New Japan." Griffis, "Korea and the Koreans," 20. Yi Tae-Jin thus criticized that "in categorizing early modern Korea as a hermit nation, Griffis was only acting as the spokesperson for Japan's aggressionists." "Was Korea Really a 'Hermit Nation'?" *Korea Journal* 38, no. 4 (1998), 32-33. For a more positive reinterpretation of Griffis's role in advocating Korea's autonomy, see Gim Sutaе, "William Griffis ui Hanguk geundaesa insik" [William Griffis' Awareness of Korea's Modern History], *Jindan hakbo* 110 (2010): 125-156.

A Confucian Appropriation of Western Civilization

Royal Commissioner Jeong was not confined to Chicago during his six-month duty. Taking advantage of his official visit to Washington D.C. to meet President Cleveland, he toured the Smithsonian museum, Arlington National Cemetery, and George Washington's Mt. Vernon residence from May 22 to June 19. He also travelled to St. Louis, Missouri, from October 2 to October 5. How did he assess the merits and weaknesses of a modern Western civilization in general and the American way of life in particular? Was the "American way" an ideal model with which Korea could transform itself into an enlightened nation? Royal Commissioner Jeong's diary and travelogue offer some clues to these questions.

First, Jeong grasped the essence of Western civilization as the pursuit of material interests. The relentless quest for material profits was what distinguished the Western world from the Oriental world:

In terms of making a profit, we adopt a wrong instrument by respecting agriculture and despising commerce, whereas Westerners succeed by emphasizing commerce and thus accumulate wealth and maintain peace. . . . The order of the Orient (Dongyang 東洋) stays in the world of tranquility (*jeong segye* 靜世界), whereas that of the West, in the world of movement (*dong segye* 動世界) – the latter wastes too much energy (*gi* 氣) to be capable of nourishing self-correction (*jajeong* 自正).⁷³

In other words, the strength of Western civilization derived from the constant dynamics for material performance, whereas its defect, from the lack of discipline and self-control. Because the West and the East belonged to different spheres of philosophy, he believed that the establishment of a universal human community would be highly unlikely.

It is clear that the Royal Commissioner was impressed by all kinds of modern technologies and products, such as elevators (*hyeonbangjang* 懸方丈), fountains (*sinin* 神人), telephones (*amsosik* 暗消息), train stations (*yunchabang* 輪車房), and thermometers (*hanseopyo* 寒暑表), among others. Nevertheless, the technological superiority of the Western world never intimidated the Confucian world vision cherished by the Royal Commissioner. For instance, Jeong insisted that the origin of the World Exposition could be traced back to the ancient Chinese kingdom of Xia 夏. He stated that most of the neighboring countries

73. Jeong Gyeongwon Document II, 207-208.

sent their tributary offices along with valuable gifts such as silk and pearls to pay their respects to King Yu 禹 and that this signified the beginning of the ancient prototype of the World Exposition.⁷⁴

He even reinterpreted Western religion in a Confucian context: “Jesus Christ (Yesu 耶蘇) is nothing but a Mozi 墨子,” who preached universal and indiscriminate love during the ancient era of Warring States. And, Jeong could not make sense at all as to why Western Christians sanctified the bloody and gruesome statues of Jesus Christ crucified on the cross and worshipped it daily in their household. The strange ways of their religious observances appeared to be totally incompatible with Confucian doctrine of benevolence (*in* 仁).⁷⁵ The Royal Commissioner thus assimilated and acculturated Christianity as a whole in a “Confucian melting pot.”⁷⁶ It appeared that some kind of “clash of civilizations” occurred within the micro mental world of the Confucian Korean literati vis-à-vis the Christian civilization.

On the other hand, in his eyes the U.S., a descendant of Western civilization, was seriously contaminated by material cupidity. “Imitating European countries, the U.S. hosted the World Exposition to recruit talented people, promote its industries, maximize their utility, and enrich livelihoods (*iyong husaeng* 利用厚生).”⁷⁷ He protested that “the real purpose of holding the Exposition was to study the genuine nature of everything and thereby understand the exact ways to deal with it (*gyeongmul chiji* 格物致知), not to stimulate economic activity.”⁷⁸ Jeong also complained that the local people of Chicago were obsessed with material greed, noting that because of increases in transportation fares on the opening day of the Exposition, many people had to

74. *Ibid.*, 222.

75. *Ibid.*, 216.

76. It should be noted that the first Parliament of World Religions took place in Chicago in 1893 in conjunction with the Columbian Exposition. Innumerable scholars and religious ministers participated in the conference to exchange mutual understanding, enhance religious tolerance, and bridge doctrinal differences among Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism, and other religious orders. I was not able to come across any hint or trace which indicated Jeong's awareness of and/or attendance at the Parliament of World Religions. Perhaps the Royal Commissioner's incapability of communicating in English discouraged him from being a part of this religious world event. I thank an anonymous referee for reminding me of this issue. For the recent discussions on the Parliament of World Religions, see Eric J. Ziolkowski, *A Museum of Faiths: Histories and Legacies of the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions* (New York: An American Academy of Religion Book, 1993); Richard H. Seager, *The World's Parliament of Religions: The East/West Encounter, Chicago, 1893* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

77. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document II*, 223-224.

78. *Ibid.*, 182.

walk through muddy roads to save money.⁷⁹ Unfortunately, the Korean delegation also became a victim: “Charging 20 dollars for meals and refusing to deliver the ordered meal on the pretext of the long distance, they lost their face in their pursuit of material benefits. Isn’t this behavior similar to that of a thief?”⁸⁰ Jeong deemed it totally inappropriate that “the essence of the human character and the rightness of things are hierarchically determined by the measurement of losses and gains.”⁸¹

Accustomed to the Confucian concept of paternal rule and social propriety, Jeong was very uncomfortable with the egalitarian and populist political culture and social norms in the U.S. He was surprised to witness that although there existed some ceremonial formality between the president and common people in the public sphere, there was no distinction between them in terms of their dress, behavior, and lifestyle in the private sphere.⁸² When he visited the White House to meet President Cleveland on May 25, he was embarrassed to find that the presidential living room and its furniture were humbler and simpler than those of rich Americans.⁸³ Further, soaked in the Confucian concept of the virtuous ruler, he regarded “republicanism” (*gonghwa ji jeong* 共和之政) and the “parliamentary system” (*uiwon ji ui* 議員之議) practiced by the U.S. and other Western nations as nothing but “a government of mediocre people” (*jungin jeongbu* 中人政府) that was often spoiled by the populist and capricious majority principle and thus curtailed the sacred right of the monarchy.⁸⁴ For Jeong, the old principle of the heavenly mandate was a sounder form of legitimacy than the Western concept of popular sovereignty.

The Royal Commissioner was unable to avoid addressing a more sensitive and radical issue associated with the contemporary U.S., that is, the increasing role of the feminist movement in American society. As a paternalistic Confucian scholar-bureaucrat, he must have been shocked by the different legal and social status of American women. During his visit to St. Louis on October 2, he attended a social dance at a hotel banquet and had considerable difficulty

79. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 506.

80. *Ibid.*, 539. According to Yun Chiho’s calculation, “a good meal [in Chicago] can be had for 20 cents (roast beef, Irish potatoes, coffee, and light bread, among others).” *Yun Chiho Diary*, vol. 3, 171. Although the Korean delegation paid 100 times Yun’s lunch money, it is impossible to determine how many meals were ordered for 20 dollars.

81. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document II*, 191.

82. *Ibid.*, 185,

83. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 521.

84. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document II*, 195, 212.

enduring the seductive and revealing physical figure of a female “whose waist was as beautiful and slim as a cloud who dared to expose her bare shoulders underneath her silk-embroidered skirt.”⁸⁵ Not confining themselves to cooking and nurturing children, American women aggressively demanded equal opportunity for higher education and managed to work side by side with males in astronomy, geology, science, mathematics, and law, among others. When he visited the Women’s Building, Jeong was very impressed to know that female members participated and were equally represented in virtually every session of the Exposition.⁸⁶ He asked the General Secretary of the Women’s Commission whether “the U. S. would elect a female president in the future.”⁸⁷

It is ironic to note that Royal Commissioner Jeong’s close encounter with the political institutions and material culture of the U.S. resulted not in questioning but in reinforcing his Confucian world view and conviction. Uncomfortable with the West’s (the U.S.’s) vulgar materialism, political populism, and feminist movement, Jeong thought that a reform based on the American model would be neither worthy nor recommendable. King Gojong, who anticipated that the U.S. would be an honest, powerful, and dependable ally, might have regretted his choice of Royal Commissioner. In one sense, Jeong and King Gojong represented two antagonistic stereotypes of America dominant among the Korean ruling elite at the end of the nineteenth century: America as a dangerous and barbaric state versus America as a wealthy and civilized nation.⁸⁸ Despite the differences in their attitudes and expectations with respect to the U.S., both King Gojong and his Royal Commissioner, Jeong, failed to grasp the bare and brutal face of the realpolitik hiding behind the spectacular mask of the World Exposition.

In fact, it was at the Columbian Exposition that Frederick Jackson Turner, then a relatively unknown young historian, presented his renowned Frontier Thesis, which sanctioned the concept of a “frontier in constant motion” as the driving force behind American civilization.⁸⁹ The Exposition was a critical turning point for the U.S., which, after succeeding in domesticating “the wild

85. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 544-545.

86. For a detailed account of women’s involvement in the Columbian Exposition, see Jeanne M. Weimann, *The Fair Women: The Story of the Woman’s Building. World’s Columbian Exposition, Chicago 1893* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 1981).

87. *Jeong Gyeongwon Document I*, 569-570.

88. Lew Young Ick, “A Historical Overview of Korean Perceptions of the United States: Five Major Stereotypes,” *Korea Journal* 44, no. 1 (2004).

89. For a summary of the “Frontier Thesis” and its effects on the territorial expansion of the U.S., see Robert Muccigrosso, *Celebrating the New World*, 122-127.

West,” launched its imperialist campaign to become the Great World Power. Its ambition was disguised under the name of progress and civilization. “To change its civilization,” Griffis predicted, Korea would turn away from China and then from Japan to the U.S., “which has brought about the great movements of progress in the far Orient.”⁹⁰ He asserted that “as the Americans conquered Japan with peaceful armadas, unselfish diplomacy, and a whole army of missionaries and teachers, so also Korea will be likewise conquered by the people of that country, which President Arthur called the Great Pacific Power.”⁹¹ Royal Commissioner Jeong’s personal tour of the U.S. and his lengthy conversation with Griffis after all fell short of anticipating the super imperial potentiality of the United States.

Conclusion

The case study of Korea’s participation in the Columbian Exposition of 1893 offers us a number of inspirations to attempt a *histoire croisée* (“entangled history”). First, we should not underestimate the fact that the Exposition held in Chicago functioned as a hothouse where key factors such as international law, the advancement of science and technology, and the standard of civilization converged to foster social Darwinism and Orientalist discourse. Western powers including the U.S. played the prime role of gatekeeper to determine which non-Western nations would be given the honorable medal of a legal and civilized country. As “apprentices,” the non-Western nations had no option but to imitate their master’s path to modernization and nation-state building. In other words, the Columbian Exposition contributed to tightening a colonial matrix of power which taught “sentimental education” for uncivilized Asian countries to learn by heart Western rule and norms.

Furthermore, the Exposition was a place where one nation’s pride, prestige, and privilege became another’s defect, humiliation, and cruel reality. Fin de siècle Korea as exhibited at the Columbian Exposition clearly demonstrates this paradoxical truth. Depicted as a weird, primitive, and reclusive nation by most foreign journalists, Korea made efforts to be perceived as an “independent and modern” state by exaggerating its military ability and its early adoption of Western technology. Because of the inconsistency between the desired reality and the naked appearance, the Royal Commissioner became a prisoner of this

90. W. E. Griffis, “American Relations with the Far East,” 272.

91. W. E. Griffis, “Korean and Koreans,” 20.

ideal, who trespassed into a forbidden boundary between two antagonistic value systems. Impressed by America's mass politics, material abundance, and feminist liberation, Jeong was nevertheless very reluctant to abandon his Sino-centric world view, which denounced America as a nation of savages and thieves. Trapped in a state of anomie the Royal Commissioner, and with him fin de siècle Korean elites, seemed to be lost in the premature mode of "border thinking."

Finally, it should be pointed out that Korea's experience in Chicago may be unique but is not exceptional. To a certain extent, Korea and other fellow Asian nations had to endure a similar fate and future. Forced to open their doors to Western countries by the so-called "gunboat diplomacy," these "newcomers" spared no effort to survive the hostile international seas. While confronting Western colonial ambitions, they also had to compete with one another to obtain a higher position in the "civilizing process" and international legal status. Then, we may not completely know "what really happened" in Chicago in 1893, unless these Asian nations are allowed to tell their own stories of the Exposition, which may be full of anxiety, regrets, wonders, and/or riddles. The collective and comparative "other" stories would reveal a truer façade of the Exposition. Paraphrasing Chakrabarty,⁹² the time indeed has come to provincialize the concept of state-nation building, civilization, and modernization. It is only then that an adventurous journey towards writing a new global history can begin. Who is afraid to admit that (world) history has to be constantly relativized and re-narrated?

92. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).