

Intercultural Legacies in Shaping the British-Korean Relations Between the 1880s and 1920s

A historical proposal for intercultural studies

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ABSTRACT: Spanning from the late 19th to the early 20th century, the intricate dynamics between Britain and Korea reveal a multifaceted interplay often overshadowed in broad historical discourses. This article offers an exploratory glance into the multifaceted nature of the British-Korean relationship, touching upon a variety of political, economic, and cultural interactions. The study highlights the geopolitical concerns of the time, marked by Korea's nuanced role amidst its relations with regional powers like China, Russia, and Japan and Britain's intermittent sidelining of East Asia due to its global imperatives. The economic exchanges, while not vast, were pivotal, illustrated by the flow of Korean art to Britain and the seeding of British industries in Korea. Central to this narrative are key figures like Isabella Bird, Sir John Jordan, John McLeavy Brown, Ahn Changho, and Syngman Rhee, whose personal experiences and informal influences brought unique depth to the cross-cultural dynamics. The vibrant cultural exchanges, emphasizing both the arts and societal norms, underline the depth and resilience of the Korean-British connection. While the process of Korea's reception of and response to Western culture took place primarily under the influence of the Japanese Empire, Korea was also unofficially incorporated into the global network of capitalism organized under the leadership of the British Empire during this period, and it is therefore academically relevant to analyze this division in line with recent trends in the study of the history of the British Empire. Looking at how the informal networks of the British Empire worked on the Korean peninsula

holds significance. Ultimately, this comprehensive exploration underscores the significance of historical cultural engagements, emphasizing their relevance in today's world of diplomacy and global collaboration. This article suggests that further research should address these issues from an intercultural perspective.

KEYWORDS: Korean-British Relations, Cultural Exchange, Imperialism, Economic Interactions, Geopolitical Concerns

논문초록: 19세기 후반 이래 한국과 영국의 관계는 역사를 통해 진행된 광범위한 상호작용을 통해 발전했다. 이 글은 19세기 말과 20세기 초에 양국 관계에 영향을 미친 제국주의적 야망, 지정학적 고려, 그리고 예술을 포함한 다양한 분야에서의 사회적, 문화적 교류에 이르기까지 다양한 상호작용을 조명한다. 제국을 중심으로 한 영국의 글로벌 정책에서 동아시아는 상대적으로 소홀히 다루졌던 것처럼 보이지만, 한국(조선)은 중국, 러시아, 일본과의 관계에 있어 이 지역 국제정치에서 미묘한 역할을 수행하고 있었기 때문에 영국도 직접 개입은 피하면서도 다양한 경로를 통해 한반도의 운명에 영향력을 행사했다. 한국이 일본 제국주의의 압박 속에서 서양 문화를 수용하는 과정에서 맞닥뜨렸던 어려움들 역시 영국의 국제관계 정책에 의해 상당 부분 영향을 받았다. 경제 분야에서의 상호작용도 규모는 작았지만 의미 있는 내용을 포함하고 있었는데, 이 과정을 통해 한국의 예술 작품이 영국으로 유입되고 영국의 산업제품이 한국으로 수입되는 등 나뉠의 교류가 존재했던 것이다. 정치, 외교, 문화 등 다양한 분야에서 양국의 교류를 촉진하는 데 중요한 역할을 했던 여행작가 이사벨라 버드, 외교관 존 조던, 재정전문가 맥클리비 브라운, 서양으로 유학을 다녀온 안창호와 이승만 등의 역할에도 주목한다. 한영 관계의 지속성과 깊이는 문화 부문에서 특히 두드러진다. 한국이 서양의 문물을 받아들이고 그에 반응하는 과정은 기본적으로 일본 제국의 영향력 아래에서 진행되었지만, 영제국의 주도 하에 전 세계에 구성된 자본주의의 네트워크에 한국 역시 비공식적으로 포함되어 있었기에 최근의 영제국 관련 연구 경향에 맞춰 이 분제를 분석하는 것도 학술적으로 의의가 있다. 결국 현재 외교 안보는 물론 글로벌 경제협력 분야에서 양국이 맺고 있는 중요한 관계가 문화적 교류의 역사를 바탕으로 삼고 있다는 점이 중요하다. 이 글은 이러한 역사학적 주제들이 향후 문화간 연구(intercultural studies)의 중요한 대상이 될 수 있다고 제안한다.

핵심어: 한영관계, 문화교환, 제국주의, 경제교류, 지정학적 고려

1. Introduction

At the dawn of the 20th century, the British Empire and the Korean Peninsula were entwined in a complex web of diplomatic, cultural, and economic

interactions set against the dynamic tableau of global power shifts. This era, bridging the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was marked by Britain's strategic expansion in East Asia and Korea's delicate navigation through modernization and foreign pressures.

The interplay between Britain and Korea during this transformative period is pivotal, offering insights into the intricate relationship that has evolved between them—a relationship that has significantly shaped the contours of today's global interconnectivity. The British Empire, a sprawling conglomerate of territories, was a conduit for the dissemination of Western culture, the expansion of British commerce, and the establishment of economic infrastructures across the globe, including in Korea (Lee, 2012; Nahm & Hoare, 2004).

The British imprint on Korea in the 19th century was indelible, with the introduction of Christianity by British missionaries and the modernization of the educational system inspired by British models. The British cultural influence permeated various aspects of Korean life, from fashion to music to literature. In a reciprocal exchange, Korean cultural artifacts—pottery, music, painting—have etched a lasting impression on British society, as manifested in the burgeoning interest in Korean language and culture among the British populace.

Despite the extensive documentation of Britain's interactions with China and Japan, Korea's narrative within the British imperial chronicle has often been relegated to the periphery. Yet, as Larsen (2016) contends, Korea's strategic significance rendered it an area of British imperial interest, albeit a secondary one.

This study endeavors to cast light on the rich tapestry of the Korean-British relationship during this era. Historians are divided: Lowe (1969) portrays Britain's engagement with Korea as primarily opportunistic, driven by imperialistic objectives, while Nahm and Hoare highlight the mutual respect and genuine curiosity that fueled cultural and economic exchanges.

The ensuing sections will probe deeper into the multifaceted dimensions of the Korean-British relationship, from the strategic underpinnings of diplomatic initiatives to the lasting imprints of cultural and economic exchanges. This investigation will contextualize Korean-British interactions within the expansive narrative of British imperial history and the geopolitical fabric of East Asia during that period.

In this crucial historical juncture, Korea found itself at the epicenter of

geopolitical upheaval, with various external powers vying for dominance (Schmid, 2002). Britain's engagement with Korea was multifaceted, encompassing formal diplomatic relations and informal connections through the narratives of travelers, diplomats, and administrators. This dual history will be explored through the contributions of figures such as Isabella Bird, whose writings brought Korea to the British consciousness, Sir John Jordan, whose diplomatic acumen was complemented by a profound grasp of local nuances, and John McLeavy Brown, whose economic policies and insights, particularly as Chief Commissioner of Customs in Korea, were influential (Kim, 1989).

Equally significant are the narratives of Korean figures like Ahn Changho and Syngman Rhee, whose experiences abroad informed their perspectives and subsequent contributions to Korean society. These personal stories, often eclipsed by grand political narratives, constitute a rich mosaic of mutual aspirations and inspirations.

This research delves into the colonial and imperial contexts that have sculpted Korean-British relations, drawing upon Cannadine's concept of 'ornamentalism' to elucidate the profound impact of these dynamics on mutual perceptions and interactions (Cannadine, 2001). Furthermore, this study seeks to trace the historical threads that continue to shape contemporary cultural exchanges between Britain and South Korea. It is important to note that this article does not engage in an exhaustive historical analysis based on primary sources; instead, it posits the potential for further research into this historical dialogue from an intercultural studies standpoint.

2. Historical and Political Context: The Empire's Periphery

The 19th century was a canvas of global transformation, painted with the broad strokes of Western imperial expansion, with the British Empire at the forefront. In the grand geopolitical theatre of East Asia, Korea emerged as a subtle yet pivotal player within Britain's strategic narrative.

China was the focal point of Britain's East Asian interests throughout the 19th century, as evidenced by the Opium Wars and the Treaty of Nanking in 1842, which solidified Britain's imperialistic designs (Hevia, 2003). Korea, nestled between the regional behemoths of China and Japan, nonetheless secured a crucial role in the geopolitical machinations of the time, becoming

an essential component in the regional balance of power (Bickers & Henriot, 2000).

While the lion's share of Britain's imperial gaze was directed towards other regions, Korea's strategic location—poised between Russian and Japanese imperial aspirations—rendered it an understated yet significant axis in East Asian geopolitics (Lowe, 1969).

Post-Nanking, Britain's economic ventures in East Asia were predominantly China-centric. However, British commercial interests, driven by an indomitable entrepreneurial spirit, found their way to Korean shores, albeit in fewer numbers than in China. The port of Busan stands as a testament to this, where British ships frequently docked, drawn by Korea's untapped resources (J.-R. Kim, 2013).

The 1870s marked Britain's diplomatic entry into Korea, reflecting its wider imperial strategy to extend its influence across East Asia through diplomacy and commerce (Akita, 1999). The 1883 Korean-British treaty, building upon Korea's earlier agreements with the US and Japan, signaled a formal acknowledgment of shared interests, though the partnership was asymmetrical (Larsen, 2016).

John McLeavy Brown's appointment as Chief Commissioner of the Korean Customs Service signified a new era in British-Korean relations, embodying Britain's nuanced 'soft power' in its Korean engagements through tax reform, diplomatic counsel, and advisory roles (Kim, 1989).

Yet, Britain's interest in Korea transcended strategic and economic calculations. The British were genuinely intrigued by Korean society. The narratives of British travelers, diplomats, and merchants provided a rich tapestry of Korean culture and traditions, which we will explore further in section 4.

During this period, Britain's geopolitical lens was sharply focused on Korea, especially as the peninsula became entangled in the imperial ambitions of Russia, Japan, and China. Sir John Jordan, Britain's first Minister to China, was a pivotal figure whose dispatches and communications with Korean leaders, including King Gojong, offered a comprehensive view of the East Asian political landscape (Park, 2018).

The British preoccupation with Russian expansionism in East Asia was a persistent theme. Britain's strategic interests occasionally aligned with Japan, particularly as a counterweight to Russia. This indirect partnership reached its zenith in 1910 when Britain adopted a non-interventionist stance during

Japan's annexation of Korea, a decision influenced by the Anglo-Japanese alliance (1902-1923) (Larsen, 2016).

This epoch, characterized by the dual narratives of imperialism and nascent nationalism, choreographed a complex interplay between Britain, an imperial colossus, and Korea, a nation striving to preserve its autonomy. The trade agreements of this era are relics of these interactions, where economic and political motives are intricately intertwined.

Therefore, the Korean-British relationship during this period was not an isolated affair but a segment of the grand narrative of global imperialism, nationalism, and the shifting dynamics of power. This section sets the stage for a deeper exploration of these relationships, which the next section will address, shedding light on their complexities within the wider context of the capitalist networks established by the British Empire.

3. Economic and Educational Ties: Beyond Traditional Trade

The economic exchanges between Britain and Korea transcended the traditional trade narrative, despite the physical distance and Korea's nascent industrial development. Within the intricate global trade networks of the time, British commodities, though not directly traded in substantial volumes, found their way to Korea via intermediary channels, showcasing Britain's industrial and commercial prowess (Larsen, 2009). British exports, primarily textiles, metals, and machinery, contrasted with Korea's agricultural exports, such as rice and tungsten, which were often exported under pressure and facilitated by British trade networks (Denton, 2013).

While direct British investment in Korea was limited, the spillover from British financial activities in neighboring countries occasionally reached Korean markets (Chang, 2019). The global financial infrastructure, dominated by British banks, shaped Korea's economic policies and opportunities, influencing credit availability, foreign exchange, and trade financing.

Japan's imperial ascent and its intimate ties with Korea often eclipsed other foreign influences. However, Japanese economic policies were not immune to the prevailing British-led economic principles (Kimura, 1995). Similarly, Russian and Chinese economic ambitions in Korea intersected with British global economic interests, creating a complex economic tapestry. The economic maneuvers of other powers, like France and the US, also indirectly

molded Korea's economic environment, reflecting or challenging British economic paradigms.

The British Empire's impact on Korea was nuanced, often exerted through the economic activities of other regional powers. This subtle interplay offers a clearer understanding of Korea's role within the global economic framework of the time, demonstrating that the influence of a dominant empire can extend its reach far beyond its direct territories.

Contemporary scholarship, such as the works of John Darwin and Antoinette Burton, underscores the complex networks—both formal and informal—of the British Empire (Burton, 2017; Darwin, 2009). Korea, much like regions outside the formal British dominion, operated within these networks, adapting and sometimes benefiting from them.

The global trade system, facilitated by British imperial networks, allowed for the free movement of goods, capital, and labor. Korea's primary trade interactions were with its immediate neighbors, yet the imprint of British financial systems, maritime laws, and trade standards was evident (Cain & Hopkins, 2016).

The British-initiated treaty system, starting in China, extended to Korea with the Treaty of Ganghwa in 1876. Though negotiated directly with Japan, the treaty mirrored the precedents established by British agreements with other Asian entities. British diplomatic strategies, particularly the Anglo-Japanese alliance, indirectly dictated Korea's geopolitical fate amidst regional contenders (Bayly, 2004).

A comprehensive understanding of these trade dynamics necessitates future research into period newspapers, trade documentation, and diplomatic exchanges. It is crucial to recognize that the British-led industrial revolution and the proliferation of capitalism established the benchmarks for modernity, with Korea being an integral component of these global networks.

Korean students studying abroad were often immersed in an educational milieu shaped by British standards, particularly in disciplines like law, engineering, and the sciences. Although most missionaries in Korea were American, the broader Protestant missionary movement had significant British origins. These missionaries introduced British educational and health norms to Korea (Porter, 2004).

In conclusion, while Korea's history during the late 19th and early 20th centuries was directly molded by its regional neighbors, it was concurrently influenced by the overarching British-led global order. Acknowledging these

indirect influences offers a more intricate perspective of Korea's historical role and the extensive networks of the British Empire.

4. Portrayals and Perceptions: The Cultural Nexus Between Korea and Britain

The dawn of the 20th century marked an era of vibrant cultural and educational exchanges between Korea and Britain. As Korea embraced openness, it found resonance with the Western educational model, which Korean reformers sought to integrate into their own systems. The exchange of students between the two nations, including notable Korean figures like Syngman Rhee and Ahn Changho, became emblematic of this burgeoning relationship. Rhee's exposure to British scholarship profoundly shaped his democratic ethos, while Ahn's engagement with British educational practices influenced his advocacy for reform in Korea's schooling system.

The British public, meanwhile, developed an affinity for Korean arts and crafts. The impact of Korean ceramics and textiles on British art movements of the era is a testament to the depth of cultural interplay (Horlyck, 2013). Korean traditional music and dance began to enchant British audiences, just as British classical music found a new home in Korea. The introduction of the English language, primarily through missionary and educational efforts, marked another significant cultural milestone. Furthermore, the translation of Korean literary works into English fostered a deeper cultural appreciation between the two nations.

These cultural and educational exchanges laid the groundwork for a lasting mutual respect and understanding, setting the stage for the socio-political landscape of modern Korea. Despite the geographical distance and limited direct contact, Korea captivated the British imagination, largely through the lens of literature, travelogues, and media portrayals. British writers and travelers painted a multifaceted picture of Korea, ranging from romanticized to exotic, often tinged with the pristine allure of the Korean landscape (Piggott, 1910). British newspapers and periodicals, chronicling the political upheavals in Korea, especially in the context of Japan's ascendancy, further shaped public perception, albeit with Orientalist undercurrents (Park, 2001).

Among the cultural ambassadors who have shaped the perceptions

between Korea and Britain, Isabella Lucy Bird stands out for her extensive travels and vivid descriptions of the Korean landscape and society in the late 19th century. Bird was not merely a traveler but an intrepid explorer whose journeys were motivated by a mix of personal health quests and a deep-seated curiosity about the world.

Born in 1831 in Yorkshire, England, Isabella Bird was a pioneering figure in the field of travel writing, and her contributions to the understanding of Korean culture by the West are invaluable. Plagued by health issues throughout her life, she found respite and vigor in travel, which was quite unconventional for women of her time. Her determination led her to explore far-flung regions of the world, including North America, Hawaii, India, Kurdistan, Persia, Tibet, and eventually Korea.

In 1894, Bird embarked on a journey to Korea, a country that was little known to the outside world at the time. Her travels across the Korean peninsula resulted in the seminal work, *Korea and Her Neighbours* (Bird, 1898). This book provides a detailed account of her experiences and observations, offering a unique perspective on Korean society, culture, and the political situation during a period of great change and upheaval.

Bird's narrative is particularly notable for its depth of detail. She ventured beyond the well-trodden paths to engage with people from various strata of Korean society, from government officials to commoners. Her interactions were not limited by the language barrier; she often communicated through interpreters and was keen to understand the nuances of Korean etiquette, culture, and the challenges faced by the country.

Her writings reflect a genuine effort to portray Korean life accurately, although they were not free from the Orientalist perspectives common at the time. Bird described the landscapes with an artist's eye for detail, from the rugged mountains to the bustling markets of Seoul. She was particularly struck by the beauty of Korean ceramics, the intricacies of traditional Korean houses, and the grace of the *hanbok*, the traditional Korean attire.

Isabella Bird's work did more than just document her travels; it humanized the people she met, going beyond the exotic to show the daily lives and struggles of Koreans. She offered insights into the effects of political intrigue and the encroachment of Japan on Korean sovereignty. Her observations on the role of women, the class system, and the impact of Western influence on Korea were ahead of her time, providing a valuable resource for historians and cultural scholars alike.

Her legacy extends beyond her writings. As the first woman inducted into the Royal Geographical Society (Park, 2020), Bird broke gender barriers and paved the way for future generations of female explorers. Her life and work continue to inspire those interested in the complexities of cross-cultural encounters and the role of travel narratives in shaping our understanding of the world.

The travel writings of the period, as scholars like Edward Said and Mary Louise Pratt have observed, offer a complex mix of Western perspectives and insights into the countries described. These accounts navigate between admiration and Orientalism, reflecting the intricate dynamics between the observer and the observed. British writers, captivated by Korea's natural beauty, often contrasted its unspoiled landscapes with industrial Europe, while also examining its social structure and traditions with a mix of respect and superficiality (Said, 1978).

Travelogues frequently idealized the 'simple' lives of Korean commoners, presenting them as emblematic of a life untouched by urban complexities. These writings often highlighted differences from Western norms, such as the cleanliness of Korean cities compared to their Chinese counterparts or unique market practices. Observations on the role of women in Korean society provided both insights and cultural misunderstandings, often judged against Western standards (Pratt, 1992).

Descriptions of Korea as an isolated 'hermit kingdom' often revealed more about the writers' imperial expectations than the Korean reality. British travel writing on Korea, while informative, is a rich blend of observation, interpretation, and occasional misinterpretation, underscoring the need for critical engagement with these primary sources within their cultural and imperial contexts.

Korea's journey through the late 19th and early 20th centuries was a delicate dance between modernity and tradition. The signs of its warming to British modernity were evident in educational reforms, literary adaptations, and even subtle shifts in fashion, reflecting its engagement with British culture.

Significant cultural events, such as the 1883 Korean Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in London, played a pivotal role in introducing Korean art and culture to the British populace. The intricate craftsmanship of the displayed Korean pottery, ceramics, textiles, and artworks garnered admiration. Publications like *The Studio* provided further insights into Korean art forms,

though it is crucial to acknowledge that these exhibitions and features often presented Korean culture through a Western lens, occasionally risking exoticization.

The cultural tapestry woven between Korea and Britain during this period was rich with mutual admiration and a quest for understanding. Through cultural and literary exchanges, both nations peered into mirrors reflecting their evolving identities amidst a dynamically changing world. While these interactions were not without misunderstandings, they ultimately led to a deeper mutual appreciation.

5. Modern Ties and Continuing Legacy

In the contemporary landscape, the historical tapestry of Korea-Britain interactions weaves through the fabric of their current relationship. This section delves into the enduring legacies and the dynamic nature of their modern ties.

Economic partnerships between Korea and Britain have evolved, reflecting the shifts in the global economic milieu. The foundational trust and cooperation that characterized their historical engagements have matured into robust trade agreements and dynamic business collaborations (Shapps, 2023). These modern economic ties are complemented by a shared vision on global issues. Joint efforts in tackling climate change, promoting disarmament, and advocating for human rights demonstrate their deep-rooted diplomatic solidarity, often showcased on international stages like the United Nations (Eckert et al., 1991).

The cultural phenomenon of the *Hallyu* wave has swept across Britain, with K-pop, K-dramas, and Korean cinema finding a passionate audience. Conversely, the artistic expressions of British music, film, and television have found a receptive audience in Korea. This cultural exchange is a testament to the reciprocal appreciation and influence that these nations exert on each other (J.-R. Kim, 2013).

The academic realm has also seen a significant exchange. British universities, renowned for their academic excellence, have become a beacon for Korean students, leading to a vibrant student exchange program. This academic intermingling has sparked numerous collaborative research projects and scholarly conferences, fostering a rich environment for intellectual

exchange.

Tourism between Korea and Britain has flourished as the world has grown more interconnected. Britons, drawn to the historical depth and natural beauty of Korea, explore its ancient palaces and bustling cities. Koreans, with their appreciation for history and the natural world, traverse Britain's iconic landmarks and picturesque landscapes. These reciprocal visits have not only invigorated tourism but have also strengthened interpersonal bonds, weaving a stronger fabric of mutual understanding.

The trajectory of the Korean-British relationship, rooted in a shared history, stands as a testament to a partnership that continues to flourish. It is a relationship that thrives on shared experiences, mutual respect, and a confluence of destinies, ensuring its vibrancy across the political, economic, and cultural spectrums.

6. Concluding Reflections

The narrative of Korean-British relations, at a cursory glance, unfolds as a chronological account of diplomatic and economic interlacing. Yet, this overarching story acquires a richer texture and a more vivid palette when we consider the individual lives that have bridged these two worlds.

From Isabella Bird's evocative descriptions of Korea, Sir John Jordan's diplomatic finesse, John McLeavy Brown's economic foresight, to the educational odysseys of Ahn Changho and Syngman Rhee in Britain, each thread contributes to the intricate human tapestry that underpins national interactions. Their stories, rich with emotion, ambition, and lived experience, resonate through history, offering a profound understanding of the enduring nature of cross-cultural connections.

The multifaceted relationship between Korea and Britain, encompassing trade, diplomacy, cultural exchange, and the nuances of colonial legacies, has evolved significantly over time. From the cautious engagements of the late Joseon Dynasty to the robust partnership of today, this relationship has weathered shared adversities and celebrated unique triumphs. Despite divergent paths, a mutual desire for understanding and cooperation has always been at the core, weaving together a rich mosaic of collective and distinct histories.

The enduring impact of British industrialization on Korea and the

vibrant influence of Korean culture in Britain are testaments to periods of deep mutual influence and respect. The contemporary resonance of K-pop in London's alleys and the esteem for British brands in Seoul's markets underscore the enduring nature of this relationship (Y. Kim, 2013).

As we confront new global challenges and opportunities, the historical interplay between Korea and Britain serves as a robust foundation for future collaboration. Whether leading the charge against climate change, partnering in healthcare, or driving forward technological innovation, the potential for joint endeavors remains extensive and promising.

The rich tapestry of cultural exchange has solidified the bond between Korea and Britain, fostering a legacy of admiration, respect, and understanding. This historical narrative not only offers a window into the past but also provides guidance for the future course of their relationship. In examining the annals of Korean-British relations, we are reminded of the enduring values of mutual respect, understanding, and collaboration—principles that continue to illuminate the path in a rapidly changing global milieu. It is hoped that this article will inspire further scholarly exploration into the intercultural dimensions of Korean-British relations, grounded in historical evidence.

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