

Introduction

The major aim of this necessarily brief and thus far from comprehensive paper is to highlight the genuine importance of Asia in the minds of early modern Britons prior to the establishment of full-blown colonial domination by the British East India Company in India in the later Eighteenth Century. The British government and people have shown considerable and sustained interest in the entirety of Asia for many centuries, in fact. Whilst the British were certainly attracted to building stronger and direct links with Asia, particularly potentially lucrative trading relationships, it is important to note that their continental European rivals, first the Catholic Portuguese and then the Protestant Dutch, were very much ahead of them in forging such engagements.

It is certainly largely true, however, that the principal early modern English (and later *British*) network of international commerce, and indeed colonial expansion, focused more on the so-called “Westward Enterprise” across the Atlantic Ocean in the Americas until the middle of the Eighteenth Century. This was the case even after the 1707 creation of the “United Kingdom” through the Union of the English and Scottish Parliaments, which formed a new, integrated *British* state and empire (which the Scots played a disproportionately prominent role in, as we shall return to later). For most British historians traditionally, then, Asia (especially East Asia and the Korean peninsula) has been of marginal interest in comparison both to internal events and processes within the British Isles themselves and the external drive towards transatlantic expansion and colonial settlement.

As the title of my paper seeks to communicate and emphasize, we need to take on board the deep significance of the central fact that most of what people in early modern Britain learnt about Korea, and East Asia more broadly, in actual fact came filtered or “translated” via other European writers. This paper thus seeks in the limited time available to explore the fashion in which many British authors took their materials on East Asia, including Korea, directly (and often without acknowledgement or attribution) from other European authors. It thus seeks to examine and evaluate the implications of evolving early modern British views of Korea within the context of wider European understandings of Asia.

As participants in this conference will be well aware, no doubt, one of the most influential early European accounts of Korea in the period prior to its establishment of direct relations with the West at the end of the Nineteenth Century was that of the Dutch East India company mariner Hendrik Hamel in the Seventeenth Century (published first in Amsterdam and Rotterdam in 1668). Hamel’s narrative was actually quickly translated into several other European languages, including English (although this was indirect, by way of a French translation, as highlighted by the modern editor Jean-Paul Buys). It was subsequently incorporated into several popular and influential travel narrative collections in the Eighteenth Century in Britain, most notably Awnsham and John Churchill’s celebrated *A Collection of Voyages and Travels* (first published in 1704 in London, and which then went through numerous editions throughout the century). We should note here that the Churchills were the most successful London printers and booksellers of the period. They were distant relatives of the first Duke of Marlborough (the great English general who built Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire and ancestor of Prime Minister Sir Winston). Awnsham Churchill was, in fact, a Whig Member of Parliament closely connected to the philosopher John Locke (whose books he published and for whom he was financial agent). Locke indeed is often thought to have inspired this collection, one of their most popular works.

Before I begin my presentation in earnest, though, I would like to offer my sincere thanks for the opportunity to learn so much from the other participants in our conference. Prior to attending the conference here at the Academy of Korean Studies, I felt deeply self-conscious that I am not actually primarily a scholar of Korean studies. Being given the great privilege, however, to participate in the many stimulating dialogues and fruitful exploring of intellectual boundaries,

both geographical, chronological, and disciplinary, I feel somewhat reassured that my stepping out (if only tentatively) into an academic realm literally beyond my own rather limited knowledge and capacities will be treated with a gracious generosity to which my efforts may not be entitled!

You may be wondering at this point, then, perfectly legitimately, why am I here at the Sixth World Congress of Korean Studies in Seoul, if I am not a bona fide Koreanist? The direct answer to this is in many ways a reflection of my pedagogical interests (and the administrative positions that I have held and currently hold) rather than my own principal research interests. I am a Western historian (focusing chiefly on eighteenth-century Scottish intellectual history and its place in the understanding and shaping of the early modern world system) rather than a Korean studies professor. Having said this, though, I did serve for the last couple of years as Chair of our Core Liberal Arts (or what we term there Common) Curriculum in my program, Underwood International College, within the larger institution of Yonsei University, located, as I am sure you are all aware, here in South Korea.

This program, Underwood International College, which I have taught in since its inception in 2006, runs a 4-year undergraduate Liberal Arts degree that has at its core requirements to take several classes in fields such as *World Literature* (itself sub-divided into such areas as Comparative Literature, East Asian Literature, and English and American Literature) and also *World History*, amongst a number of other subjects that constitute our Common Curriculum studied by all students. We have also an interdisciplinary Humanities major titled *Comparative Literature and Culture*. This has given me the opportunity and incentive, then, to develop an interest in Korean studies, broadly defined. My current position as Associate Dean at the Office of International Affairs of Yonsei University has also encouraged me to think about how we can communicate knowledge of Korea to an enthusiastic audience of students from around the world.

Whilst I have been, and continue to be, very excited to have the wonderful opportunity to teach and to have had an administrative role within this fairly unique program in Korea, my aim (and that of my colleagues, I believe) is to be more reflective and self-aware, or indeed self-critical, about what we mean by *World Literature* and *World History*, or indeed such courses as *Western Civilization* and *Eastern Civilization*, which we teach in a new first-year residential college program that we have just begun last year at our new International Campus in Incheon. Being part of an International College, where a very diverse community, in terms of both the student body and faculty, are studying a range of subjects primarily in English, I hoped that this conference would give me a further valuable opportunity to learn more from an international community of scholars about diverse aspects of Korean studies. I am thus very grateful for this opportunity to begin that challenging task here, whilst I am still self-conscious that I may not be capable of contributing sufficiently well to this excellent conference.

Having spent probably too long in what I hope was not an entirely solipsistic discussion of my intellectual rationale for participating in this World Congress of Korean Studies conference, I should turn more directly to the main focus of my paper today. As my title indicates, hopefully, this is the British interest in Asia in the long eighteenth century (essentially the last third of the Seventeenth Century through the first third of the Nineteenth Century). Specifically, I wish to offer a very brief examination of the British interest in, and knowledge of, Korea within the context of the larger framework of early modern European encounters with Asia.

Background and Historical Context

Perhaps reflecting current controversies over globalization and worries, both in Britain and in many other regions of the world, including Asia, about what has been famously (or perhaps infamously) termed a “clash of civilizations,” there has been an upsurge of scholarly, and indeed public, interest in the historical development of Britain’s relations with the wider world.

Unsurprisingly, much attention has been paid particularly to the growth and eventual demise of the British Empire, and the possible lessons that may be drawn from this about the current global order and its future prospects.

It is important to note as a starting point, or contextualization, that much of the historiography of the British Empire and Britain's broader global engagement, as far back as the seminal account in the 1950s and 1960s by Vincent Harlow (then Beit Professor of Commonwealth History at Oxford) of the transition from the so-called “First British Empire” to the “Second British Empire,” has rested on a contrast of the earlier Western-focused Empire of settlement with the later Eastern-focused Empire of trade. In recent years, though, influential historians such as P. J. Marshall (former Rhodes Professor of Imperial History at King's College London) and Sir Christopher Bayly (current Vere Harmsworth Professor of Imperial History at the University of Cambridge) have helped us begin to rethink the complex relationship between the earlier empire, which ended, in essence, with the departure of the Thirteen Colonies at American Independence, and the later pattern of Britain's colonial expansion and global engagement. I would argue also that there was no simple radical rupture and transition from focus on “the West” and the Americas to a new focus on “the East” and Asia. Reading texts from the later Seventeenth and earlier Eighteenth Centuries reveals that Britons were focused on and very much interested in Asia prior to American Independence and the conquest of Bengal. Indeed, they were fascinated by East Asia, including Korea, as well as South Asia and the Islamic world.

It may be particularly appropriate now, at the beginning of the Twenty-First Century, one is tempted to suggest (especially from my current academic vantage point on the Korean peninsula, teaching *Western Civilization* and *World History* at the very heart of East Asia), to reconsider the rise of “the West,” in which Britain was so prominent as an international commercial, diplomatic, and military power. Many scholars and popular commentators have argued, of course, that the world's economic, geopolitical, and indeed cultural and literary axis appears to be shifting eastwards. This process of realignment may be conceived of, however, as representing a return in many significant and striking ways to an older historical pattern of the world order. This prior configuration of international relations, in which Asia was not subordinate but long the center of world commerce and civilization, was of considerable interest to eighteenth-century Britons, as something that they sought both to comprehend and ultimately to subvert.

The British Interest in East Asia: The “Hermit Kingdom” of Korea

As we emphasized at the very beginning of this paper, the British (especially the proportionately more globally-minded and migratory Scots) have shown considerable interest in Asia for many centuries. The previous British Ambassador to the Republic of Korea, Martin Uden, actually edited a very good book on Western, including British, engagements with Korea: *Times Past in Korea: An Illustrated Collection of Encounters, Events, Customs and Daily Life Recorded by Foreign Visitors*. This excellent text is a very helpful way to engage easily with primary sources.

We have noted also, though, that early modern British interest in and knowledge of Asia was intimately connected to (and dependent upon) the ideas and writing of other Europeans. The perhaps unsurprising enthusiasm in eighteenth-century Britain for prominent Anglophile French Enlightenment authors such as Voltaire and Montesquieu is well known, of course. What may not be appreciated as much, however, as the literary scholar Ros Ballaster highlights in her important books *Fables of the East* and *Fabulous Orient: Fictions of the East in England, 1662-1785*, is that “the English encounter with the East is, until their defeat of the French in the Seven Years War in 1763 and seizure of power in Bengal under Robert Clive, largely mediated through France.” We should note that this persuasive insight is certainly true of the specific fields of travel narratives, histories and geographies that are my primary focus in this paper. French and indeed

Dutch writers (including, notably, French Protestant exiles in the Netherlands) had a tremendous impact on the Anglophone interest in, and understanding of, Asia in the long Eighteenth Century.

One of the most fascinating early eighteenth-century French/Dutch Enlightenment texts is the astonishing piece of comparative religion and ethnography *Ceremonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (Amsterdam: 1723-43) written by the French Protestant refugee Jean Frederic Bernard and beautifully illustrated by another French Huguenot exile in the Netherlands, the master engraver Bernard Picart. This has been the subject of outstanding recent scholarship by Lynn Hunt, Margaret Jacob and Wijnand Mijnhardt in *The Book That Changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World* and *Bernard Picart and the First Global Vision of Religion*. A direct translation of the original French title would be simply “Ceremonies and religious costumes of all the peoples of the world.” This was translated into English and published in London from 1733 (with the rather less generous British title of *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Idolatrous Nations*). Bernard and Picart provided an absorbing and provocative account of Korean culture, drawing on but criticizing Hendrik Hamel’s narrative. For these French Protestant exiles, although they also drew on the Jesuit reports from China, a discussion of the Buddhist culture of Korea was an opportunity to contrast this with the abuses of European organized religion, especially Catholicism. Korean monks “are the very Reverse, it must be acknowledged, of our European priests, who value themselves on Account of their living at Ease . . . Those of Corea are forc’d to be diligent and industrious.” As Ros Ballaster comments, “Critiques of oriental despotism, absolutism, and religious bigotry in English writings and translations are frequently means of addressing the perceived threat of French absolutism and Catholicism.”

Illustrating and embodying the complex cross-fertilization between European literatures, one of the most popular French writers whose work covered East Asia, including Korea, was Abbe Prevost (a colorful character who also spent time in England and the Netherlands). His *Histoire Generale des Voyages* (1746-1759, in fifteen volumes) was quickly translated into English. This *History* had fairly extensive discussions of Korea, derived from the Roman Catholic missions in China, especially those of the Jesuits. Similarly, the French Jesuit Jean-Baptiste du Halde’s *Description géographique, historique, chronologique, politique et physique de l’empire de la Chine et de la Tartarie chinoise* (Paris, 1735) was published also in the Netherlands (in French) and translated into English and published within a year in London as *The general history of China. Containing a geographical, historical, chronological, political and physical description of the empire of China, Chinese-Tartary, Corea, and Thibet*.

Global or World History is a field now much in vogue amongst academics and a growing public audience, including in North-east Asia, where the Asian Association of World Historians was founded recently in Tianjin, China. It held its first international Congress in Osaka, Japan, followed by the second in Seoul this past April at Ewha Womans University. I would argue, though, that this laudable contemporary fascination with History on a genuinely Global and Comparative scale was prefigured in the efforts of popular eighteenth-century British, especially Scottish, authors.

One of the most wide-ranging and now, unfortunately, largely neglected eighteenth-century Scottish writers was John Campbell (1708-1775). He was a leading contributor to the fascinating *Universal History* project, writing important articles on European settlements in the East Indies, which were later a key source for the French author Abbe Raynal’s celebrated *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements des Europeens dans les Deux Indes* or *History of the Two Indies*. Sadly, there is very little modern scholarship on the influence of Campbell and this massive project (65 volumes were published in London between 1747 and 1765) – the major exception being the work of the Italian scholar Guido Abbattista. The award of an honorary doctorate from Adam Smith’s academic base the University of Glasgow, however,

illustrated Campbell’s reputation and popularity in the Eighteenth Century. He was a very prolific author and bookseller who socialized with many Scottish luminaries in London at places such as the appropriately named British Coffee House and was discussed with characteristic barbed wit and perspicuity by the famous lexicographer and critic Dr. Samuel Johnson.

Campbell edited and extended, in 1744, John Harris’s *Navigantium atque Itinerantium Bibliotheca; or, a Compleat Collection of Voyages and Travels* (this had been published first in 1702-1705). Significantly, Campbell was also later Secretary to (and leading defender in print of) the United Kingdom’s first Scottish Prime Minister, the Earl of Bute, during his brief premiership at the beginning of George III’s reign. Campbell’s considerably expanded edition of the *Compleat Collection of Voyages and Travels* is deeply imbued with the characteristic eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment preoccupation with commerce and its role in shaping historical development. The award of the honorary doctorate from Glasgow was no accident then! Indeed, Campbell dedicated this text to the “Merchants of Great-Britain” in order to further his explicit goal of “setting the History and Advantages of Commerce in a true Light.” For Campbell, the key benefit of disseminating knowledge of Asia was the “Encouragement, Extension, and Protection of Trade, as the surest Means of making us a great, wealthy, powerful and happy People.” Campbell thus discusses in his text the potential of the “great and rich Peninsula of Corea.” Like many European authors, he described Korea (incorrectly) as “once a Province of China” and possessing the “same Manners and Language” and as being “now tributary to the present Emperor [of China].”

As modern scholars such as the historical sociologist Janet Abu-Lughod (in her important book *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250-1350*) have reflected upon, the pre-modern world sat upon an Eastern axis. This realization was deeply imbued upon and hugely significant for early modern Europeans, in fact, and indeed was an important motive in shaping their global expansionist drive. “Commerce appears at first to have been entirely confined to the productions of the eastern and middle parts of Asia, which have, from the earliest periods, been sought after with great avidity by the people of other countries,” stressed William Playfair, the first editor of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1805, and a fellow Scot.

In a lengthy discussion, making use of both Dutch and British texts, John Campbell advocated the continued search for a North-east Passage, reminding us of the striking and often neglected fact that Europeans centuries after Columbus were still preoccupied with the search for a shorter, direct route to Asia and the wealth of the East (the original motive of Columbus, of course). Campbell explains that “there is good Reason to hope that it would change the very Nature of the East India trade, by bringing the Balance over to the Side of Europe; whereas in the Way we now carry it on, it is morally certain, that if the West Indies had not been discovered, the East India Trade must have eat up and destroyed us, I mean the People of Europe in general.” Campbell highlighted the specific issue of the enormous outflow of precious metals to Asia in the early modern era, and through the mid-18th Century, and thus illustrates precisely why scholars such as the Chinese historians Kenneth Pomeranz and Robert B. Marks are right to contend that the hegemony of a Western-dominated world system was both a historically contingent and very recent phenomenon.

The relative lack of European power or dominance in global terms, especially vis-à-vis Asia, was certainly apparent as much to anxious eighteenth-century European commentators as it has become recently to current World Historians, in fact. Eighteenth-century European authors, such as John Campbell, were writing in a time period *prior* to the high Industrial Revolution and European colonial dominance in Asia. They were acutely aware that the West, including Britain, did not exert global dominion or hegemony. This is precisely why these writers’ texts are so significant and revealing. They remind us of the British and wider European obsession with Asia before European hegemony (which was not suddenly established by Columbus’s voyages or

Atlantic empire and colonial trade, in fact, but only occurred after the early Nineteenth Century during the Industrial Revolution). We should note also that Campbell supports the possibility of discovering a North-east passage from Europe to Asia by direct reference to the account of Hamel: “some Dutch seamen, who were shipwrecked at Corea, observed a harpoon in the Head of a Whale cast upon that Coast, which must therefore have come thither from the Northern Seas.” Interestingly, Campbell took a notable interest in seventeenth-century Dutch history and actually translated and published historical works on the Dutch Golden Age, including memoirs of the murdered statesmen the de Witt brothers.

Conclusion

As we have sought to emphasize throughout this paper, there was considerable interest in East Asia in early modern Europe, including in eighteenth-century Britain. It is perhaps fair to say, though, that Korea was still relatively little known in comparison to other parts of Asia (unsurprisingly, given the lack of sustained contact with Europeans) and was discussed often primarily in relation to China. A representative treatment that illustrates this might be the approach adopted in Thomas Salmon’s *Modern History: Or, the Present State of All Nations* (published in London in 3 volumes, 1744-46, with the first volume being devoted to Asia): “The Kingdom of Korea, whether we reckon it a province of China, or tributary to it, differs very little from the rest of China in their manners and customs: it is a fruitful country, abounds in wheat, rice, and other grain; and has mines of gold and silver, and pearl is found in their seas: however, they trade with no other country but China and Japan.”

Early modern Europeans, the Dutch, the French, and the British, would have certainly liked to learn more about Korea and to have the opportunity for direct contact with it. The primary motive for this interest was economic, of course, although there were no doubt genuine intellectual and cultural motives also. Indeed, the British attempted, unsuccessfully, on several occasions to achieve such an opening through the Royal Navy Captains William Broughton, in 1797, and Basil Hall, in 1816 (author of *Account of a Voyage of Discovery to the West Coast of Corea*) and Charles Gutzlaff of the East India Company in 1832. As we know, of course, there would be no official establishment of relations and long-term engagement between Britain and Korea until 1883, in fact.