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Modern Asian Studies / Volume 36 / Issue 03 / July 2002, pp 513 - 534

DOI: 10.1017/S0026749X02003013, Published online: 19 August 2002

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### How to cite this article:

Jihang Park (2002). Land of the Morning Calm, Land of the Rising Sun: The East Asia Travel Writings of Isabella Bird and George Curzon. *Modern Asian Studies*, 36, pp 513-534 doi:10.1017/S0026749X02003013

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*Land of the Morning Calm, Land of the  
Rising Sun: The East Asia Travel Writings of  
Isabella Bird and George Curzon*

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The developments in East Asia in the late nineteenth century became a matter of great interest to Britain. The rise of Japan and the wrangles among the great powers over China and Korea were some of the issues that put East Asia in the spotlight. In China, Western powers had been contending fiercely for economic and political hegemony since the Opium War. Japan, after abandoning its national policy of seclusion in 1854, carried out the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and was driving towards rapid Westernization. Here modernization took place in a relatively smooth manner and there was no need to fear external threats, but domestic tensions were inevitable. Finally Korea, after being forced to open its doors in 1876, suffered from acute dissensions between conservatives and progressives, and fierce competition between China, Japan and Russia over hegemony in Korea complicated the situation further.

In such a period, many Englishmen and women visited the region and wrote of their travels. Among these, this paper attempts to analyze the works by Isabella Bird<sup>1</sup> and George N. Curzon—specifically, their travel writings of Japan and Korea. Bird and Curzon visited East Asia at about the same period in the early 1890s, Bird having previously published the account of her trip to Japan in 1880.<sup>2</sup> Bird was one of the most celebrated women travelers and explorers along with Mary Kingsley, renowned for her African expedition. As for

<sup>1</sup> Bird was married to Dr John Bishop in 1881 and called Mrs Bishop afterwards. I will use, in this paper, her maiden name for the sake of convenience.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon's writings were published as a single book encompassing the three East Asian nations while Bird's travel writings of Japan and Korea comprised two books respectively. George Curzon, *Problems of the Far East* (Longmans, Green, 1894); Isabella Bird, *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* 2 vols (John Murray, 1880); Isabella Bird Bishop, *Korea and her Neighbours* 2 vols (John Murray, 1898). Each book is cited as 'Curzon,' 'Japan I,' 'Japan II,' 'Korea I,' and 'Korea II' henceforth.

Curzon, he was an eminent politician who had served as Parliamentary Under-Secretary for India just before his visit to East Asia, and was later to be appointed the Viceroy of India and the Foreign Secretary. If we agree with Mary Louise Pratt who prescribes travel writings as materials which show how Europe 'produced the rest of the world' for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory, we may learn through Bird's and Curzon's texts how the British perceived and represented East Asia when the British empire reached its zenith.<sup>3</sup>

The essential goal of travelers is experiencing the exotic. They seek out the picturesque and the unusual and plan their trip to enjoy the sense of freedom away from home and the mundane. Bird and Curzon are no exception in exhibiting this tendency, and yet their journeys intend more than simply getting away. Curzon's trip is a kind of political reconnaissance. Having entered Parliament in 1886 from a Tory constituency at the age of 28, Curzon was chided by his colleague Arthur Balfour for 'inveterate restlessness' and described as an 'explorer of wilderness and a student of effete civilizations.'<sup>4</sup> He had been appointed Parliamentary Under-Secretary for India in 1891 but when the Liberals won the general election the following year, he resigned his office and arranged his trip to East Asia. Curzon's excursions to the Orient, including East Asia, were all part of his scheme of studying the problems facing Asia and their implications for India. Curzon made it clear that he was more interested in discussing 'important and profound matters' than in describing details of the sights, and his text pays overwhelming attention to the political situation and power relations in East Asia and the prospects for the British empire in that area.

Curzon arrived in Japan in September 1892, a month after his departure from England. During his trip in Japan, Curzon was aided by Spring-Rice, an alumnus from Oxford who accompanied him to Korea in October. After visiting his next destination, China, he passed through Japan once more on his way to Vietnam and Cambodia. Needless to say, his main interest in Indochina was French imperialism. Curzon returned to England in March 1893 and published *Problems of the Far East* in the summer of the following year. The outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War contributed to the book's

<sup>3</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> David Gilmour, *Curzon* (John Murray, 1995), 89.

being a bigger success than expected, as Japan's victory over China proved that his estimate of the warring powers had been accurate.<sup>5</sup> Probably because Japan was already a relatively familiar country to British readers, his book deals almost exclusively with the consolidation of the modern state in Japan. By contrast, he illustrates the scenery of Korea and aspects of people's lives at great length, probably induced by a sense of duty as one of the 'less than half-a-dozen Europeans' who had visited the interior of Korea (Curzon: 102).

Bird, on the other hand, was driven to East Asia by the more genuine interest of a traveler. As a person traveling through Japan immediately after the Meiji Restoration and Korea at a time when its fate was hanging by a thread, Bird could not remain apathetic toward the political situation and yet her main concerns were travel and exploration. Bird was the first woman to travel in the Yangtze Valley and received such recognition that in 1893 she was one of the very first female members accepted by the Royal Geographic Society. In 1897 she became the first woman to give a speech in that society. All her books achieved popularity and her *Korea and her Neighbours* remained the standard reference long after its publication in 1898.<sup>6</sup> While most travelers refrained from going beyond the well-known areas, Bird explored as far as Hokkaido, which was just beginning to be colonized and was still regarded to be barbarian. Bird left England in 1878 and arrived at San Francisco where she boarded a steamship bound for Japan. She entered the port of Yokohama, and after several weeks' preparations for the trip, which included hiring a Japanese interpreter-servant, she passed through the northeastern region on her way to Hokkaido. She then returned to Honshu to visit the Western regions including Kyoto. Arriving in Korea in 1894, she entered the country through Jemulpo, port city of Seoul, and after an unsuccessful search for an interpreter, she hired a sampan and a boatman and found her way into the interior along the Han River. She then surveyed the northern parts of Korea, even showing the zeal of exploring the Korean settlements near Vladivostok.

The first object of this paper is to understand the ways in which Japan and Korea are represented in the texts of Bird and Curzon. This implies the task of tracing the subtle boundary between mod-

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 92–3.

<sup>6</sup> The popularity of her books is indicated by the size of her estate at her death—£33,408. Susan Thurin, *Victorian Travelers and the Opening of China, 1842–1907* (Ohio University Press, 1999), 22. See also Evelyn Kaye, *Amazing Traveler Isabella Bird* (Blue Panda Publications, 1999).

ernity and premodernity defined by the Victorians. In their travels in Japan and Korea, Bird and Curzon confronted the problem of defining modernity and premodernity and placing the two countries in an evolutionary hierarchy. While the epithet, the 'Land of the Morning Calm' designating Korea at the time, denoted an image of stagnation, Japan's image as the 'Land of the Rising Sun' suggested progress. If Korea was typical of staid and unchanging Asia and hence was simply defined as 'premodern,' Japan's position was more ambiguous. By analyzing their texts we can ascertain how Victorian travelers understood the complex co-presence of modernity and premodernity in non-European societies.

The second object of this paper is to find common features of colonial discourse as well as differences in the travel writings of Bird and Curzon. Their texts reflect colonial discourse that circulated at a time when the supremacy of Western civilization was unchallengeable. But if Curzon belonged to the mainstream within an 'imperial race,' Bird as a woman was in a marginalized position within that group, and therefore her discourse is not identical to Curzon's. We can detect in their discourses shared elements as well as differences and even contradictions which might be attributed to various parameters, one, of course, being gender. Curzon's text, written by a man who professed to be a 'convinced and unconquerable Imperialist,'<sup>7</sup> is a classic model of colonial discourse. Bird's texts contain aspects quite different from Curzon's, and yet her firm sense of cultural and racial superiority deters her from overcoming the framework of colonial discourse.

The final object of this paper is to investigate whether, and if so how, the elements of gender and race influenced native reactions to Bird and Curzon. Japan, avidly absorbing Western civilization, found England its highest exemplar and a worthy object of admiration. It appears that the gender element was not a significant factor in Japan's perception of Europeans. For the Koreans, however, a European woman such as Bird was a perplexing challenge and their attitudes were far more complex than those of the Japanese. Differentiating the varying attitudes toward Bird and Curzon displayed in the two nations may offer us an insight into the conflicting discourse of civilization and barbarity in the East and the West.

<sup>7</sup> George Curzon, 'The True Imperialism,' *The Nineteenth Century*, LXIII (January 1908), 151.

### Colonial Discourse: Civilization and Barbarity

The discussion of colonial discourse that has proceeded from Edward Said primarily emphasizes that the West has discriminated and distanced the Orient as the Other so as to clarify the hierarchy between the two.<sup>8</sup> The most distinct feature of the differentiation practiced by Europeans is representation of the East as stagnant or dilapidated in contrast to the constantly progressing West. Such plain Orientalism is revealed in the texts under our analysis. Both Bird and Curzon basically adhere to the Victorian perspective that Asia is stagnant and unchanging. Japan, however, does not fit into this stereotype, and the perplexity arising from this leaves Bird and Curzon in a predicament where they need to explain the difference between Japan and Korea, while acknowledging them as Europe's Other.

Travelers are bound to nurse an established image of their destination even before leaving home. Curzon's image of the East sprouted from the *Old Testament* and the *Arabian Nights* that he had read as a child, and he has his own opinions of Asia's characteristics. To him 'unappeasable warfare against hurry' on the part of the Asians is the representative symbol of a stagnant Oriental Society. Another Englishman who visited Korea in the early twentieth century also observed that Koreans 'never hurry.'<sup>9</sup> In the East, even the landscape seems stagnant. Here is Bird's first impression upon entering Yokohama.

The air and water were alike motionless, the mist was still and pale . . . grey clouds lay restfully on a bluish sky, the reflection of the white sails of the fishing boats scarcely quivered; it was all so pale, wan, and ghastly, that the turbulence of crumpled foam which we left behind us, and our noisy, throbbing progress, seemed a boisterous intrusion upon sleeping Asia. (Japan I: 14)

The houses are characterized by similar monotony. Curzon cannot discern any beauty in the dull Korean houses built of mud, paper and

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978); Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (eds), *Colonial Discourse/Postcolonial Theory* (Manchester University Press, 1999); James Duncan and D. Gregory (eds), *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (Routledge, 1999); Keith Pearson, Benita Parry and Judith Squires (eds), *Cultural Reading of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History* (St Martin's, 1997); Nicholas Thomas, *Colonialism's Culture* (Princeton University Press, 1994); Robert Young, *White Mythologies* (Routledge, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> B. L. Putnam Weale, *The Reshaping of the Far East* (Macmillan, 1905), 491.

wood. Japan is no exception. Japan is beyond the limits of 'Oriental magnificence,' palaces and cottages being alike of grey wood (Japan I: 7). The Koreans dress themselves entirely in white while the Japanese were 'dull blues, browns, and greys,' and a monotony of meanness characterizes the towns (Japan I: 7). Bird's first impression of Korea later evolves into recognition of a 'strange beauty' and she comes to discover signs of vitality existing even in the staid Korean society: that is, she witnesses a shaman ritual for the sick, a funeral, and a wedding in procession at one village. However, the overall impression of Korea remains the absence of vitality, dullness in which nothing occurs and an immutable state of stagnation. Another British traveler visiting Korea in the beginning of the twentieth century characterizes Korea as 'a nation of sturdy apathetic sheep' with 'silent indifference beneath the driving lash of the world.'<sup>10</sup>

The Others constructed by Westerners tend to be homogenized into a collective 'they' and described as an indistinguishable mass, void of individual details. Individuals are nonexistent in the accounts of our authors, Bird's as well as Curzon's. Curzon does not even reveal the last name of the Korean foreign minister whom he interviews, while Bird's texts merely mention the last name of the interpreter or boatman who accompanies her, although it is true that she shows far more interest in natives than Curzon. Bird omits people in her description of the impression of Jemulpo, her first destination in Korea. Likewise, Seoul is full of throngs of people but they are 'purposeless crowds.' Bird perceives the movement of people in the streets of Seoul as 'medieval processions' (Korea I: 33). By thus qualifying Korea as 'medieval', she relegates the nation to the European Middle Ages, another way of maneuvering employed by the Europeans to distance the Other.<sup>11</sup>

According to Bird and Curzon, Korea is a decaying and dying country and obstinately resists reform from the palace to the lowest slums. They use the term 'conservatism' to represent Korea. Bird views it as the hotbed of 'the antique Oriental conservatism' (Korea

<sup>10</sup> R. J. Farrer, 'Impressions of Korea,' *Nineteenth Century*, LIV (December 1903), 925. Similarly Lady Elizabeth Craven, who visited Turkey in the 18th century, observed that 'The quiet stupid Turk will sit a whole day by the side of the Canal, looking at flying kites or children's boats.' S. H. Turner, 'From Classical to Imperial: Changing Visions of Turkey in the Eighteenth Century,' in *Travel Writing and Empire* ed. Steve Clark (Zed, 1999), 127.

<sup>11</sup> Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (Routledge, 1993), 49, 88–9.

II: 287), and Curzon concludes that a 'conservatism of a hide-bound stolidity is instinctive' in the Korean people (Curzon: 187). Koreans cannot even comprehend the concept of constitutional monarchy. Bird writes that when she had an audience with the King, it was impossible to explain to him through an interpreter, to whom the ideas were unfamiliar, the constitutional checks on the English crown. However, things are different in Japan. Yokohama's image of 'sleeping Asia' vanishes upon stepping on shore. Not only Yokohama but Japanese cities in general appear to be ebullient and energetic. Bird therefore diagnoses Japan to be a 'much governed' country (Japan I: 24) while Curzon finds its Westernization remarkable. Japan is being Europeanized rapidly, taking on the features of a modern state and progressing toward social democratization.

The disparity between Japan and Korea is also detected in the level of competence of their politicians. Curzon finds Ito Hirobumi's cabinet surely a 'Ministry of All the Talents' (Curzon: 23). After exchanging conversation with Ito and his colleagues on several occasions, Curzon expresses respect toward the country that has produced such public men. But his impression of the Korean foreign minister is completely different. Being aware that Curzon served in the British government, the minister assumes that he is a close relative of the English royal family. When Curzon replies that he is not, the minister shows his disgust. This is exemplary of the gap existing between modern and premodern states. Curzon recognizes that Western pragmatists sacrificed Koreans by 'seeping into their weak structure with modern institutions' such as leaseholds, banks, and factories, but he justifies these pains caused by imperialist invasions as the price Korea must pay to encounter civilization (Curzon: 165–6).

'Civilization' as defined and used in nineteenth-century England implied such values as manners, cleanliness, diligence, freedom, and above all, progress towards increased wealth and power through social co-operation.<sup>12</sup> Civility was considered the most distinctive hallmark of a civilized society and in this, Japan and Korea could be differentiated. In one Korean village, Bird is virtually abducted by the female servants of a certain wealthy household and taken to the women's quarters where no one, regardless of their status, shows any

<sup>12</sup> For the contemporary concept of civilization, see J. S. Mill, 'Civilization: Signs of the Times' in *The Emergence of Victorian Consciousness*, ed. George Levine (Free Press, 1967).

trace of civility. In fact Bird prefers natives who remain untainted by the West to the Europeanized ones. Yet when they fail to observe Western proprieties, she finds it intolerable. Bird's distrust of Korean proprieties is apparent in her emphasis on the rudeness of 'yangbans,' Korea's elite class. She is aware that yangbans are the 'cultured class' of Korea. Even so, Bird considers them to be rude. By contrast, Bird notices in Japan that the people are courteous and polite in the mountain villages, in the trains, virtually everywhere. During Bird's stay in a hinterland village, some villagers call on her out of curiosity. They express their gratification at seeing so 'honourable' a traveler, to whom Bird replies that she is thankful to see so much of their 'honourable' country, and everyone bows 'profoundly' (Japan I: 316). The grace, dignity, and courtesy of their manners are impressive and altogether perfect in their way, yet 'not in the slightest particular formed upon our models' (Japan II: 205, 226). This is the decisive factor in evaluating the Japanese as civilized. However, Curzon does not trust the Japanese civility as Bird does. He points out that the Japanese act like scoundrels in Korea though observing propriety in their homeland, and criticizes Japan for repeating the same arrogance towards Korea as the Westerners while denouncing the unequal treaties imposed on Japan by the Western powers.

Contrary to travelers who admired the courtesy of the Japanese, those Englishmen who resided longer in Japan and came to know the country better saw through its hypocrisy. They generally disliked and disdained the duplicity of the Japanese, especially the way they made polite evasions when rejecting. Some missionaries who disliked the hollow insincerity beneath Japanese courtesy taught their students to refrain from it. Robert Young, the editor of the *Japan Chronicle*, an English newspaper published in Japan, deemed that Japanese hospitality and courtesy were 'the product of the feudal system' and that their courage and loyalty were nothing but 'ignorance and superstition.' He concluded that the people of Japan simply lacked spirit.<sup>13</sup> Japanese courtesy that Bird regarded as the 'symbol of modernity' was rather the evidence of a 'lack of modernity' in others' eyes.

Another hallmark of civilization that was universally recognized by the Victorians was cleanliness. In the accounts of travelers who visited Africa and Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth

<sup>13</sup> Beatrice Webb and Sidney Webb, *The Webbs in Asia: The 1911–12 Travel Diary* ed. George Feaver (Macmillan, 1992), 32–3.

centuries, cleanliness was the most frequent denominator of racial differences.<sup>14</sup> Bird also views filth as a distinct aspect of the Orient. The passages in which she describes Korea are embellished with such adjectives as 'dirty,' 'filthy' and 'squalid' and she confesses that she 'shrinks from describing' intra-mural Seoul. She thought it 'the foulest city on earth before I saw Peking' (Korea I: 32–3, 36). Curzon also describes Seoul as 'disagreeable to the nostril as it is bewildering to the eyes' (Curzon: 125). Japan, on the other hand, is clean in all places. Nikko is 'so painfully clean' (Japan I: 102), and filth or poverty is nowhere to be seen in Tokyo. Three decades later when the Webbs visited an elementary school in Tokyo on inspection, they could not detect any unpleasant odors in the assembly of 60–70 children.<sup>15</sup> To the British travelers cleanliness is surely an important mark of Japan's modernity. Hence one Westerner summarizes the difference in cleanliness among the East Asians as the following: 'The Japanese as a race place great importance upon cleanliness of body and clothing as well. The Korean insist upon clean clothing but pay little attention to cleanliness of person. The Chinese are extremely dirty both as regards clothing and body.'<sup>16</sup> The Japanese, however, had been clean regardless of the impact of the West and modernization. Cleanliness might not be necessarily a trait of modernity as the Victorians assumed.

Industry is another significant value that the Victorians applied in their 'Othering' process. In Liberalism industry served as an important index for classifying civilization and non-civilization, and its leading thinkers, including John Locke, held that only a diligent life with a rational and practical goal was worthwhile. Viewed from this perspective, Korea, where people are 'sauntering along in their dress hats, not apparently doing anything' (Korea I: 29), is barbaric, whereas Japan, where everyone diligently moves about, is civilized.<sup>17</sup> Bird's particularly scathing indictment against Korea's ruling class seems to be partially based on the measure of industry. The intellectual class of yangbans is proscribed from physical labor, but it is not considered a disgrace to be supported by their relatives or by the earnings from 'the clandestine industry of their wives in sewing and laundry work' (Korea I: 113). The existence of such a class verifies

<sup>14</sup> Thurin, *Victorian Travelers*, 190.

<sup>15</sup> *The Webbs in Asia*, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Frederic Coleman, *The Far East Unveiled* (Cassell, 1918), 155.

<sup>17</sup> F. T. Piggott also contrasts the 'busy Japanese' and the 'contemplating Korean.' 'A Fortnight in Seoul,' *Nineteenth Century*, LXVII (June 1910).

Korea's barbarity. The numerous Buddhist priests who depend on donations for their living are another evidence of the non-existence of the value of labor in Korean culture. Curzon also views 'the incurable laziness of the Korean people' as the reason so many people embrace Buddhism despite popular skepticism and official neglect (Curzon: 103). On the other hand, Japanese people are all industrious. Upon arriving at Yokohama, Bird is first struck by the fact that there are no idle people: 'All the small, ugly, kindly-looking, shrivelled, bandy-legged, round-shouldered, concave-chested, poor-looking beings in the streets had some affairs of their own to mind' (Japan I: 17). Tokyo shows such dynamic commercial activity that no street in Liverpool or New York could compare. 'No time is lost and "presto" is the motto' (Japan II: 177).

Civility, cleanliness and diligence, however, do not qualify the Japanese for modernity. Admitting that Japan is decisively more civilized than Korea, Bird and Curzon do not fully acknowledge its modernity. It is not that Korea alone is 'medieval.' Curzon finds 'feudal' elements in Japan as well, which are particularly evident in politics. He has indeed no faith in Japan's modernization. Although Japan is a 'country intoxicated with the modern spirit' (Curzon: 395), its modernization is after all an imitation and all its valuable assets have been acquired from abroad. What he finds impertinent is that such a nation is critical of Europe. Curzon cannot stand the fact that 'the more she has assimilated European excellences, the more critical she has become of European defects' (Curzon: 45).

Curzon, convinced that the Orient could never catch up with Europe, does not in the least suspect that Japan might become a threat in the future and merely predicts that it would become a commercial power at the most. Concerning the Japanese victory in the Sino-Japanese war, he retorts: 'In the victory of a young and energetic and well-knit Asiatic power over the notorious invalid of the Far-Eastern world, why should Europe read her own death-sentence in that continent?' (Curzon: 387). What draws our attention is the fact that his judgment is based primarily on racism. The Japanese do not possess the 'hereditary instinct' for expansion and do not demonstrate any evidence of an ability to govern or educate a subject race of another blood (Curzon: 412).<sup>18</sup> Bird, who understands race as a moral force, finds Japan's limitations in the fact that

<sup>18</sup> Curzon was convinced that the British empire was the result of 'an instinct, the ineradicable and divinely implanted impulse.' 'The True Imperialism,' 153.

they are not Christians. Holding Christianity to be the source of Western civilization, Bird views Japan's modernization as an attempt to secure the fruit of Christianity 'without transplanting the tree from which they spring.' Feudalism, which is the 'millstone of Orientalism,' hangs around her neck and Japan's modernity seems to be a 'failure' (Japan II: 347).

Japanese patriotism, so admired by Japan's adorers, is also nothing but the deficiency of modernity from the colonial perspective. To be sure, Bird marvels at the patriotism of Ito, her interpreter-servant, and remarks: 'I never met with such a boastful display of it, except in a Scotchman or an American' (Japan I: 312). At the same time she detects antipathy towards foreigners among the Japanese. Curzon also warns against the 'extravagant or ridiculous assertion of the national spirit,' and claims that such impetuous chauvinism is found in nations such as Japan advancing toward greatness and those like France, that is 'smarting under the memory of a great national humiliation.' In this respect, the Japanese are the 'Frenchmen of the Far East' (Curzon: 47–8). Witnessing some Japanese who applaud childish and impudent behaviour, Curzon mocks that 'one trembles to think what will be the fate reserved for a genuine Japanese hero,' should such a one ever appear (Curzon 47–8). Bird and Curzon thus, while acknowledging Japan's progress in contrast with the stagnancy of Korea, nevertheless find it limited in many ways. Japan may be advancing toward modernity but its racial and religious defects should make this impossible in the end.

### **Femininity and Masculinity of Colonial Discourse**

The above discussion has shown that Bird and Curzon shared the dominant perspective of the Victorians regarding the non-European world. However, we become aware that unlike Curzon who adheres absolutely to colonial discourse, Bird rejects it in some ways. We can discern some distinctive differences in their texts that might be attributed to gender. Curzon's text stands for masculinity. He never mentions personal contacts with the natives, and concentrating his attention mainly on political situations, he elaborates on 'great' issues such as the military, commerce, taxation and the political future. By contrast Bird is fundamentally concerned with more personal and domestic matters such as weddings and marital relationships, although she occasionally comments on trade or commerce.

Topics such as the military or combat power are not found in Bird's texts. To be sure, Bird tries to take on the role of a scientific investigator, presenting the detailed longitude and latitude of each location, noting geographic facts, measuring the temperature, altitude, atmospheric pressure and so forth, and introducing the plants with a list of their long scientific names. She also acquaints the reader with her busy daily routine of collecting and drying plants, taking and developing pictures in spite of the difficulties of making a darkroom and discusses commerce and the political situation of East Asia in detail. However, Bird's lengthy explanation of the political situation of Japan and Korea reveals her misunderstanding of the situation. She commits the grave mistake of overlooking Japan's imperialist ambitions and draws the conclusion that though Japan 'lacked experience and was oftentimes rough and tactless and aroused hostile feeling needlessly,' it has no intention to subjugate Korea, only desiring to play the role of the 'protector for Korea and the guarantor of her independence' (Korea II: 287). By contrast, Curzon's assessment of Japan's ambitions is accurate despite his overconfidence of Britain's role in East Asia.

The concept 'going native' is a helpful index for understanding Bird's attempt to overcome colonial discourse. Here Bird and Curzon demonstrate clear differences. Bird incessantly yearns for contact with the natives. Everywhere she enjoys meeting with the natives, serves tea and exchanges conversation, and the natives seek her as well. Bird abhors 'the denationalization of nations' and criticizes missionaries for inducing their students to renounce Japanese courtesy (Japan II: 220–1). When travelers received by the Korean King ridicule the audience and the palace, Bird speaks in defense of Korea. She thus censures the inflexibility of the Westerners who laugh at national customs and proprieties different from their own. And yet, her inability to tolerate the impoliteness of Koreans reveals the limits of flexibility on her part. Bird is critical of the English employed by the Japanese government who isolate themselves from the natives and do not devote any attention to Japanese affairs. Bird also displays an impatience to get out of large cities as the metropolises are so similar to 'home.' It is unlikely that scenery identical to home would be of much interest for a traveler who has escaped from the mundane. After her return from Hokkaido, she 'regretted the loss of afternoon' at the reception held by the Japanese foreign secretary to congratulate her 'unprecedented tour.' It was a mere imitation of an English reception with nothing distinctively Japanese

about it. By contrast, she is very grateful to Satow, the British Minister in Tokyo, who held a dinner party for her 'in his beautiful Japanese house' (Japan II: 204). This does not mean that Bird relinquishes all English modes of life. Even while traveling in a small, miserable boat, 'afternoon tea of Burrough's and Wellcome's tabloids was never omitted' (Korea I: 91). Contrary to Bird, Curzon deems it positive that the English abroad follow the English way of life. He is pleased to find that the places frequented by Englishmen in Shanghai, Hong Kong and Singapore have magnificent club-houses furnished with English newspapers and periodicals as any of the places of Pall Mall. The Englishman in Asia also enjoys various sports including cricket, golf, football, and horse-races, and stays the healthiest while 'the German easily grows fat, and the Frenchman withers' (Curzon: 420).

While Curzon thoroughly prefers Western civilization, Bird is opposed to Asians being Europeanized. She criticizes the Japanese habit of wearing European dress when it only makes them look smaller. It is rather their traditional costumes that make them appear larger and hide their physical deficiencies. Western dress 'exaggerates the miserable physique and the national defects of concave chests and bow legs' (Japan I: 27). If Western-style furniture, carriages, and imitations of cheap taste are replacing traditional decorations in Japan, foreign items such as 'Brussels tapestry carpets, great mirrors in tawdry gilt frames and French clocks' are vulgarizing Korean simplicity (Korea I: 98–9). Bird feels a strong revulsion toward what she regards as Korea's primitiveness at first but grows gradually fond of it. Bird appears to have retained the concept of the 'noble savage' to a certain extent. For there no longer exist places in the so-called civilized societies where a woman such as herself could travel 1,200 miles hardly running into any one. It is the same case for Seoul. Seoul is a place with 'unspeakable meanness and faded splendors,' and yet it is also a place where tigers and leopards are shot within the walls and where a European woman can ride without an escort (Korea I: 33–6).

Description of the body, another recognized mark of femininity in the discussion of travel writings, is clearly revealed in Bird's texts. While Curzon hardly mentions the appearances of the natives and attaches importance to the national characteristics and temperament, Bird devotes a considerable portion of her books to detailed references to appearances, employing the adjective 'ugly' quite frequently. She adopts the view that Asians are deficient in terms of

a Western norm of beauty and finds the Japanese to be physically repugnant. She becomes particularly abhorrent of Japanese women.

I saw nothing like even passable good looks. The noses are flat, the lips thick, and the eyes of the sloping Mongolian type; and the common customs of shaving off the eyebrows and blackening the teeth, together with an obvious lack of soul, give nearly all faces an inane, vacant expression. Their shoulders are round and very falling, their chests and hips narrow, their hands and feet very small, their stature from four feet eight inches to five feet one inch. They look as if a girl passed from girlhood to middle age almost at once when weighted with the cares of maternity. (Japan I: 76–7)

Bird is critical of Japanese dress as well. To Bird, discontented with the tight corsets and narrow waists in English women's outfits, the Japanese outfit seems just as uncomfortable, and what is worse, the wooden clogs worn with the tight outfits force women to walk in tiny steps. The narrow, tight clothes make them look even smaller, and the tiny Japanese woman inside seems almost 'truly helpless,' giving the impression that this race is gradually disappearing (Japan I: 38–9). Japan is a land of mannequins. It is as if she saw them all before 'on trays, fans, and tea-pots' (Japan I: 29). Derisive accounts of small houses and doll-like women often appear in Bird's text. A portable restaurant, though neat and compact, looks as if it were made 'by and for dolls, and the mannequin who kept it was not five feet high' (Japan I: 17). What's most interesting is that Bird, who makes this remark, was only 4 feet 11 inches tall herself. Bird ridicules the small stature of the Japanese as if her privilege as a white race made up for her own.

Although Bird could not escape her innate concept of European superiority, her texts indicate the subordination of colonial discourse in showing sympathy toward the weak. Her harsh judgment of the yangban class in Korea seems to point to this. Bird's text, which describes yangbans as men 'with a scornful and sinister physiognomy' (Korea I: 116), reveals much stronger emotions than Curzon's narrative does. Bird's criticism of Japan and sympathy with Korea could be read as another evidence of her femininity. By contrast, Korea elicits no sympathy from Curzon. To him, Korea is nothing but a depraved and irremediable country. Yet Bird tries to comprehend its 'pitiful attempt to retain its manners, customs, and identity' in the face of such innumerable destructive influences (Korea I: 33). Bird's sympathy with the weak, however, proves to be limited as revealed in her attitude towards native women. Europeans commonly viewed the bondage of women as evidence of the barbarity and deficiency

of Eastern society and used it as a justification for the Civilizing Mission. Bird and Curzon accept this perspective and confirm the bondage of women in Japan and Korea. For Curzon, the fate of Korean women is represented by the laundry work continuing into the night everywhere, the only sound which breaks the stillness of a Seoul night being the regular beat of laundry sticks. Curzon even jumps to the conclusion that 'the white cotton garments of the men are now maintained by them for the excellent purpose they serve in keeping women busy' (Curzon: 128–9). Bird also judges that 'so long as her lord wears white,' women are 'slaves to the laundry' (Korea I: 43).

She goes on to explain in detail other bondages of Korean women such as the custom of strict seclusion. At the time of Bird's visit to Korea, the practice of men retreating from the streets after darkness was reinforced and in the middle of the night, women and servants holding lanterns were the only ones to be seen in the streets of Seoul. Bird also describes the discriminatory practice in which the wife must recognize duties toward her husband though he hardly acknowledges corresponding obligations. Women's clothing is extremely dirty while the men wear clean white clothes, and this is interpreted as due to men's monopoly of women's ceaseless laundry work. In a country where concubinage is a recognized institution, a Korean man confesses to Bird that they 'marry our wives, but we love our concubines' (Korea II: 154). In Japan likewise, the status of women is so deplorable that husbands are permitted to beat their wives as long as they do not wound them with cuts, and maternal rights are unheard of. More than anything, prostitution underscored women's bondage in Japan, where every travel guide book referred to the regions of prostitution. But Bird's feminine modesty prevents her from speaking on the subject.<sup>19</sup>

Bird, however, shows no sympathy toward Asian sisters. She simply draws the conclusion that they accept their inferior position as their fate and that they will probably never think of breaking the custom, judging that they do not long for the freedom enjoyed by European women. Seclusion has been the custom for several centuries and surely Korean women believe that they are scrupulously controlled because they are 'valuable chattels' (Korea II: 152). Bird's attitude is similar to that of white women who seek to reaffirm their superior-

<sup>19</sup> Beatrice Webb, by contrast, inspected a prostitution area and interviewed with the women. *The Webbs in Asia*, 86.

ity and liberated position through the inferior status of non-white women. Her sense of cultural, racial superiority makes her unable to empathize with the women of backward countries.<sup>20</sup>

### Gender, Race and the Natives

Bird's cool-headed attitude changes when she herself experiences the clash between gender and race. When she could not avoid the conflict with masculine supremacy in Oriental society, she attempts to overcome the limitations caused by gender by using the assumed racial superiority. One element that clearly reveals the relationship that white women share with native men is their relationship to the native interpreter. The interpreter is someone who transcends the master–servant relationship, with the tendency to invade tentatively the authority of the West. The dissimilitude of Bird and Curzon is vividly revealed here. Though Curzon must have been accompanied by an interpreter as well, he does not mention this person at all. A white man such as Curzon does not have to experience the subtlety in his relationship with the interpreter that Bird, a white woman, perceives. Bird's relationship with her interpreter is the scene of a meeting between a female member of a 'masculine race' and a male of a 'feminine race'. Bird was unable to acquire a suitable interpreter in Korea and did not need to have a direct relationship with an interpreter. In Japan, however, Bird hires a young man named Ito as an interpreter-servant, and she is practically ruled by him throughout her travel. She finds herself powerless in his absence. Ito is in charge of all matters including food, clothing and shelter, and Bird becomes so reliant on him that she entrusts her passport and half of her money in his hands. And yet, Bird uses English as a means of exercising authority over Ito who wishes to learn 'good English,' and tries to maintain her superiority by emphasizing the fact that Ito tries to hide the dark sides of Japan.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> For women and imperialism, see Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Indiana University Press, 1992); Clare Midgley (ed.), *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester University Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> When the Sino-Japanese war erupted during her travels in Korea, Bird was forced to flee to China where she resumed her explorations. There she sought to hire an interpreter who had not served a European before, which demonstrates her obvious intention to secure docility and loyalty. Thurin, *Victorian Travelers*, 143.

The natives of Korea posed more difficulties for Bird than the native Japanese and such disparity had a bearing on the difference in their acceptance of the West. Japan was in the process of discarding its own traditions and embracing Westernization with the firm belief that a civilization of any worth could only be a Western one.<sup>22</sup> Thus in 1884 we find Fukuzawa Yukichi, a most influential reformer and thinker, demanding that Japan 'dissociate from Asia and join Europe.' The conviction of the Japanese that their country shared some common features with England, such as their geographic condition and 'national character', is reflected in their use of the epithet, the '*England of the Far East*,' and also served to intensify their desire to follow England's example. Such calls for unconditioned Westernization were bound to meet challenges in the course of time, and one of those who converted their view was Tokutomi Soho. Tokutomi, once having been an enthused admirer of the West, came to be a spokesman for extreme nationalism in the late 1890s.<sup>23</sup> After Japan's victory over China in 1894, it became quite clear that Europe refused to acknowledge Japan as an autonomous and civilized nation, causing much disappointment and hostility in Japan regarding the West.<sup>24</sup> However, Europe retained the admiration of most Japanese at the time of Bird and Curzon's travels and even Bird managed to elicit respect from the natives despite her womanhood. Commoners in Japan feel such trust in Bird that they request her to practice medicine for them and she does not decline. Western medicine was in fact one of the most effective tools employed by European expansionism but it was also a symbol of masculinity. Bird's prescription is nothing more than a few pills of pain-killers, but such treatment clarifies the hierarchy of the East and the West in science and knowledge and helps Bird overcome limitations as a woman. The fact that Bird was a woman did not matter to the Japanese as long as she was an *Englishwoman*.

<sup>22</sup> In their visit to Japan in 1911, the Webbs found the Japanese prime minister holding to the same belief. *The Webbs in Asia*, 36.

<sup>23</sup> Tokutomi, Soho, *Taisho no Seinen to Teikoku no Zento [The Youth of the Empire and the Imperial Future]* (Minyusha, 1916); Kenneth Pyle, *The New Generation in Meiji Japan* (Stanford University Press, 1969).

<sup>24</sup> For the Japanese reception of the West, see Nagao Nishigawa and Hideharu Matsumiya (eds), *Beikokairan Jikki wo Yomu [Reading the Report of the Iwakura Mission]* (Horitsu Bunkasha, 1995); W. Beasley, *Japan Encounters the Barbarian* (Yale University Press, 1995); Carol Gluck, *Japan's Modern Myths* (Princeton University Press, 1985); Hiroshi Imai, *Nihonjin to Igiris [The Japanese and England]* (Chikuma Shobo, 1994); Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

In Korea the native reactions to Bird varied depending on social status. The primary reaction of the common people is extreme curiosity and Bird becomes the object of surveillance and trespass. Curzon does not mention such a 'reciprocal gaze' and hence does not acknowledge it. Bird experiences it everywhere she goes and becomes dispirited by it. In Japan, the courtesy of the natives makes it at least tolerable, but the stifling curiosity of the 'obstreperous and obnoxious' Koreans goes beyond her patience. The rumor of a Western woman brings Koreans from several miles away. Once, while standing on a rock on the riverbank, Bird is nearly pushed into the water by the crowd, and a scene like that of a show production is stirred up at the village inn. The women 'investigate' Bird's clothing, take off her hat and try it on themselves, twist her hair, pull off her gloves and try them on with shrieks of laughter.

The simplest way of minimizing such trespass is to avoid it by taking unbeaten tracks. But when such passive methods fail to be a solution, Bird relies on genuinely colonial and masculine means. Bird, following the suggestion of a Chinese servant she brought from the British Consulate, frees herself from the 'aggressive and intolerable curiosity' of the Koreans by pretending to clean her revolver (Korea I: 144). On another occasion when throngs of people are following her, a young man plays a prank by kicking her ankles from behind, backing away and assaulting her again. Miller, a consul who is accompanying Bird at the time, turns around without a word and strikes a blow to the young man's chest. Although Miller regrets doing so, Bird is satisfied that it has left a 'salutary impression' on the natives by serving 'summary justice with perfect coolness' (Korea I: 116–17).

Far more unbearable to Bird is the way in which the elite class treats her. Everywhere she goes, Bird is mistreated by high-ranking officials. When Bird and her company bow low, they do not even bother to raise their eyes and some yangbans open the curtains of the partition on the boat Bird is in and thrust their shoulders and heads inside. Bird's challenge to such treatment is refusing to recognize the power yangbans are supposed to possess, and seeing in them only impotence. The yangban is required to be in 'supreme helplessness,' carrying nothing for himself, not 'even his pipe' (Korea I: 113). Contrary to Bird, Curzon does not view yangbans as impotent though he considers them to be plunderers. It appears that Curzon is not mistreated by officials during his trip to Korea. He rather advises the reader to 'invoke some sort of official assistance' for it is

difficult for the stranger to procure lodging or food in this poor country (Curzon 100–1). In Bird's case, she is received coldly even though she carries the official introduction (kwan-ja). Other male Westerners who also visited Korea around this period all testified that Koreans were kind and showed no antagonism toward Westerners.<sup>25</sup>

The singularity of the scorn and mistreatment that the yangban class exhibited toward Bird is testimony to women's status in Korean culture. By the time Bird and Curzon visited the country in the 1890s, three outlooks on the West and on modernization had been established in Korea. The traditional viewpoint asserted the centrality of the Chinese civilization and dismissed all the rest as barbarian. When Bird and Curzon defined Korea as barbaric, traditionalists did the same concerning the West, following the Chinese 'occidentalism.' Then there were those who, while maintaining that Korea must preserve its traditional values, conceded that they must master Western technology in order to build up a stronger and wealthier nation and thus formulated a concept encapsulated as 'Eastern Ways, Western Machines.' Finally, a third view claimed the superiority of the West in both mental and material aspects and argued that Korea should accept Western values as well, which was understood to be represented by Christianity. But adherents of the third view were extremely few in number, and even those who held the second opinion were a minority compared to the traditional Confucian literati.

It is noteworthy, however, that a majority had come to acknowledge the material supremacy of Western civilization. Even traditionalists who still regarded Westerners as the equivalent of beasts, attributed this beastly status to their ethics and values. The progressives, on the other hand, exalted England as the world's greatest civilized nation. An editorial in the *Tongnip Shinmun* [*The Independent*], the pioneer newspaper in Korea, introducing the sixtieth anniversary of Queen Victoria's accession to the throne, stated that 'the ignorant person is the greatest rarity' in England, exhibiting an exaggerated belief in the English people's level of enlightenment.<sup>26</sup> One admirer

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, William R. Carles, *Life in Corea* (Macmillan, 1888); R. J. Farrer, 'Impressions of Korea'; Walter Hillier, 'Korea: Its History and Prospects,' *Fortnightly Review*, LXXV (May 1904); Frederick Mackenzie, *The Tragedy of Korea* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1908); E. H. Parker, 'Korea,' *Fortnightly Review*, LXIII (February 1898); Savage-Landor, 'A Visit to Corea,' *Fortnightly Review*, LVI (August 1894).

<sup>26</sup> *Tongnip Shinmun* [*The Independent*], June 22, 1897.

of England even expressed his wish that Korea should be colonized by Britain if it were doomed to be so by any power.<sup>27</sup> When they came to know of Bird's book, *Korea and her Neighbours*, progressives sought in it a justification of their demand for reform. Expressing 'both resentment and gladness' at her observation that Korean emigrants in Russia were diligent and independent while those living within Korea were inert and lazy, the progressives attributed such disparity in people's behavior to oppressive domestic politics and demanded that corruption and exploitation should be eradicated in Korea.<sup>28</sup>

Bird is caught up in the clashing contradictions of discourses on civilization and barbarity prevalent in Korea at the end of the nineteenth century. The yangban class, whom Bird had regarded to be so representative of the uncivilized, were educated in Chinese culture and proclaimed that they themselves were the embodiment of propriety and Korea the 'country of courteous people in the East.' They abhorred Christianity especially since the Protestant churches prohibited the ritual of ancestor worship, which imprinted on the Koreans the impression that the West was the world of beasts that recognized neither filial devotion nor loyalty to the king, the two supreme values in Confucian society. Female subordination was considered an oriental virtue and the most basic of social precepts, and according to Eastern proprieties, it was unimaginably barbaric for a woman to wander alone in foreign lands.

All this supports the conclusion that the yangbans' cold reception of Bird which formed a stark contrast with that of Curzon and other travelers was not so much due to the fact that Bird was a Westerner as to her womanhood. The subordinate status of Korean women accentuated Bird's femininity, which in turn overpowered her racial superiority. The status of Japanese women was certainly also deplorable. But the Japanese adored and adulated the West and therefore between the two classifiers, gender and race, the latter held much greater importance and being a Westerner was a far more consequential element than being a woman. However, this was not the situation in Korea where the blind faith in the superiority of Eastern values still persisted. While Bird wanted to assert her superiority by

<sup>27</sup> Yun Chi-Ho, *Yun Chi-Ho's Diary*, vol. 2 (National History Compilation Committee, Seoul, 1974), 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Tongnip Sinmun [The Independent]*, May 21, 1897.

means of her race, the Koreans confronted her by putting forward the gender element.

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Despite the differing perspectives and motivations for their journeys, the common theme found in the travel writings of Isabella Bird and George Curzon is the reaffirmation of the superiority of Western civilization and the engagement in a certain degree of colonialist rhetoric. Their colonial discourse reflects their preoccupation with the British empire and the maintenance of its influence in East Asia. They, to be sure, discover certain signs of modernity in Japan but attempt to trace its limitations. Bird and Curzon show the capacity to differentiate between Japan and Korea in evolutionary ranking, but they eventually turn to binary oppositions and consign Japan to premodernity. Curzon's text is typical of masculine colonial discourse. His perspective induces him to evaluate Korea as merely the most uncivilized, enervated and spiritless country in the world, and Japan as gasping under the treadmill of tradition. Curzon's pride leads him to underestimate Japan's imperialist ambitions at the cost of painting a rosy future for the British empire in Asia. The section where Curzon writes about Britain's future role in East Asia clearly demonstrates what sort of misleading conclusions could be drawn when colonial arrogance is excessive.

Bird's texts display much more complexity than Curzon's in that while her writings contain the standard colonial discourse, they are intermixed with notions that contradict or are inconsistent with it. As Bird sustains a respect for the weak and the 'noble savage' to a certain extent, she sets restrictions on the Civilizing Mission of the Europeans. At the same time, she accepts the Victorian concepts of civilization and race without reservation. When her perception through personal contact of the Ainus, the aborigines of Hokkaido, is different from conventional wisdom, she simply ignores the conflict by confirming the latter. She discovers, for instance, a 'singular dignity and courtesy of their manners' in the Ainus and comes to believe that 'the expression of their faces is European,' yet she accepts the ethnological knowledge of the time and does not hesitate to call them 'savages' (Japan II: 107). As a courageous and independent explorer of unknown lands, she made a crucial contribution in breaking the boundaries that confined Victorian women but ultimately she did not reject the dominant masculine discourse of that society. Bird's following statement demonstrates this straightfor-

wardly: 'In the reception of Christianity, with its true principles of *manliness* (my emphasis) and national greatness, she [Japan] may become, in the highest sense, "the Land of the Rising Sun" and "the Light of Eastern Asia"' (Japan II: 347).<sup>29</sup>

Clearly Bird and Curzon were not free from the dominant discourse of their time concerning civilization and racial hierarchy. If Curzon strode the world unreservedly as a white man, Bird, a woman, peeped into the world, fettered with restraints. She nevertheless became one of the few Westerners to explore Hokkaido and Mt Keumkang of Korea. What guaranteed her that freedom was the conviction of racial superiority prevailing in Victorian society. For women travelers, it was not their female body but their white skin that formed their identity in foreign lands.<sup>30</sup> For Koreans, however, it was not race but gender that determined their attitude towards European women travelers. It should be remembered that the distinctions Bird and Curzon made between civilization and barbarity was challenged and rejected in Korea. When civilizations which define themselves as 'civilized' and the Other as 'barbaric' clash with each other, it is the logic of brute force and power that decides which is superior in the end. But one must bear in mind that for many Koreans, the superiority of Western civilization was not as self-evident as Bird and Curzon believed them to be during their visits to Korea.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Kingsley also drifts away from feminist discourse with statements such as 'a great woman either mentally or physically will excel an indifferent man, but no woman ever equals a really great man.' Mills, *Discourses of Difference*, 174.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages* (Cornell University Press, 1994), 105.