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THE INFLUENCE OF TRAVEL LITERATURE BETWEEN KOREA AND THE WEST[1]

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Abstract

This article explores the reciprocal influences of travel literature between Korea and the West from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, a transformative period marked by Korea's opening to global exchange and its subsequent colonization. It investigates how Korean envoys, reformers, and intellectuals used their travel experiences in the United States and Europe to articulate visions for national modernization, gender reform, and cultural renewal. Their writings functioned as blueprints for Enlightenment-inspired reform and laid intellectual groundwork for movements like the Independence Club and the New Woman movement. In parallel, the travel narratives of Western visitors to Korea shaped Western public opinion and diplomatic postures toward the Korean peninsula. These narratives often oscillated between admiration for Korean traditions and orientalist assumptions about cultural stagnation, and in the colonial period, increasingly echoed or resisted Japanese imperial propaganda. This article examines how travel literature served as a vehicle for intercultural exchange, the transmission of ideologies, and the reimagining of national identities.

Keywords: *travel literature; Korea; modernization; Western perception; enlightenment; reform; cultural exchange*

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INTRODUCTION

In the late 19th century, after centuries of relative isolation, Korea joined a world of global travel and cultural exchange. As Korean envoys and intellectuals ventured to Europe and the United States for the first time, they recorded their impressions in travelogues that would spark debates on modernization and reform at home. Conversely, European and American travelers in Korea produced vivid narratives that shaped Western perceptions of the "Hermit Kingdom". This article examines the social, political, cultural, and intellectual impacts of this reciprocal travel literature between Korea and the West from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s. We will try to analyze how these travel accounts influenced audiences on both sides: inspiring reform movements and new ideas in Korea, while informing, and sometimes misinforming, Western understandings about Korea. Key figures on the Korean side are Yu Kil-chun, Park Jeong-yang, Min Yong-hwan, Na Hye-sok, among others. They used their overseas observations to advocate changes in Korean society, from governmental reforms to shifts in gender norms. On the Western side, travelers like Isabella Bird (Bishop), Percival Lowell, and Homer Hulbert published influential accounts that affected Western public opinion, missionary engagement, and even diplomatic attitudes toward Korea. By exploring representative examples of travel writing and their influences in the two societies which at the time were opposite to one another, we attempt to shed light on specific areas of influence, including reform and modernization debates, views on gender and education, the rise of tourism and missionary work, and the conduct of diplomatic relations. The interplay of these travel narratives reveals a dynamic intercultural dialogue: travel literature became a vehicle for the flow of ideas and images that would leave lasting imprints on Korean modernization efforts and Western visions of the Korean nation.

1. KOREAN TRAVELERS TO THE WEST: PIONEERS OF ENLIGHTENMENT AND REFORM

1.1. Early Envoys and Enlightenment Thinkers

Korea's first significant travel accounts of the West were born from the journeys of late Joseon envoys and intellectuals in the 1880s. Two pioneering figures stand

out: Yu Kil-chun and Park Jeong-yang. Both traveled to the United States (and in Yu's case, also Europe) as part of newly established diplomatic missions, and both recorded their observations in groundbreaking texts that introduced Western ideas to Korean readers.

Yu Kil-chun (1856–1914) was a reformist scholar-official and a member of the first official Korean delegation to the U.S. in 1883. After the delegation's formal visits, which were facilitated by American advisor Percival Lowell (The New York Times 1883), Yu stayed behind to pursue studies in the West, becoming the first Korean student in the United States before the political turmoil forced his return to Korea. During a period of house arrest, Yu wrote a travelogue about his experiences abroad titled Seoyu Gyeonmun (서유견문, Observations on a Journey to the West), published in 1895 (Min & Park 2017). Far more than a travel diary, Seoyu Gyeonmun was intended as a guidebook for national rejuvenation. Yu described not only the geography and cities of Europe and America (서 2019), but also the underlying political and social principles that made those nations strong. In twenty chapters and over 500 pages, he introduced Koreans to Western systems of democracy, judicial courts, education, modern industry, the concept of national sovereignty. Yu delved into military issues as well, dedicating two chapters of his book to this (Eckert 2016). According to Eckert,

> "All the crucial historical European military changes were noted and described: the shift with the invention of the musket from a feudal emphasis on cavalry and individual physical prowess in hand-to-hand combat to a new accent on strategy and tactics [...] presented the rationale and methods for developing a modern army as practiced in the West and Japan, covering in detail such areas as recruitment, training, conduct and discipline, officers, weapons, military medicine, and expenses." (Eckert 2016:47)

Yu also emphasized Enlightenment ideals (Eckert 2016) such as the individual rights and equality of all people regardless of gender (Yuh 2021), age, or social class, ideas almost unheard of in the Korean society of those times. Other ideas expressed by Yu were in regard to aspects of city life, architecture (Yoon 2009), public health (Min & Park 2017) and religious freedom (Park 2012), his note, according to Park, "[...]provided a more favorable environment for the spread of Christianity, especially for future Protestant missionaries. Most of these later

missionaries worked with relative freedom, often closely with the royal families" (Park 2012:88). In order to reach a wide audience, Yu wrote his book in a mixture of classical Chinese (the language of the elite) and Hangul Korean script, a writing style called gukhanmun (Lim 2014), so that not only officials but also the emerging educated public could read it. According to Lim, "The gukhanmun style used in Seoyu gyeonmun was a pioneering form of writing that, in terms of syntax, vocabulary, and sentence and paragraph construction, was highly consistent compared to the forms of writing that were later developed" (Lim 2014:108). Seoyu Gyeonmun thus became a manifesto for Korea's enlightenment movement, Finch describing it as "'undoubtedly the most influential Korean treatise on modernization in the closing years of the Choson era" (Finch 2002:20). Its impact was profound, Yu Kil-chun's ideas inspired other Koreans to lead the country into the modern world, directly informing the reform agendas of the 1890s.

If Yu Kil-chun's travelogue was a call to reform, Park Jeong-yang (1841–1905) produced a more targeted account aimed at Korea's policymakers. Park was a senior statesman who in 1887 became Joseon's first diplomat to the United States (Kang & Hahm 2018). During his time spent abroad, Park compiled a detailed study of American civilization titled Misok Seubyu (미속습유, "Observations on American Customs"). Written in classical Chinese as a report to King Gojong, Park's work systematically described 44 aspects of American society that he had witnessed between January and November 1888. These ranged from political institutions (democracy, the legal court system, diplomatic practices) to social infrastructure (public education, the press and media, arts and culture, modern goods and technologies) (Lee 2022). According to Lee:

> "Misoksupyu is a record of observations that introduces various aspects of modern institutions and material culture, including the geography, industry, finance, customs, and history of the United States, divided into 44 categories and a total of 90 entries, presented without a preface. At times, Park Jeong-yang adds his own commentary. While some of the content is based on his personal observations as an envoy, most of it was written with reference to books from China, Japan, and the United States. It is presumed to have been created to supplement and systematize the contents of Mihengilgi (Diary of the American Journey). Because it would have been difficult to clearly organize and

> summarize everything, he observed in the U.S. using only a diary format, Misoksupyu was written in an actively complementary relationship with Mihengilgi."[2] (Lee 2022:2016)

Park Jeong-yang's purpose was didactic and diplomatic: he wanted the Korean monarch and officials to identify lessons that could be used to improve Joseon's governance and its relations with foreign powers. In effect, Misok Seubyu served as a briefing on Western modernity for Korea's decision-makers who were in a critical situation, as according to Lee (2022) " by the late 19th century, achieving national prosperity and military strength, along with self-reliant independence, had become Joseon's most urgent and essential goals"[3] (Lee 2022:234). Indeed, King Gojong's court in the 1880s and 90s was grappling with how to reform internally and maintain independence externally, and Park's observations of American republican government and society offered valuable knowledge. Lee (2022) admits Park Jeong-yang to play an important role in national politics, claiming that "the Western experiences of Park Jeong-yang and his delegation were in effect reflected in the direction and policy design of Joseon during its transition to modernity"[4] (Lee 2022:235). Together, Yu Kil-chun and Park Jeong-yang's works marked the dawn of Korean travel literature about the West, offering new concepts and comparative insights to Korean intellectuals.

1.2. Mission to Europe and the Gwangmu Reform

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[2] Personal translation of the original text: " 『미속습유』는 미국의 지리, 산업, 재정, 풍속, 역사를 비롯한 각종 근대적 제도와 문물을 서문없이 총 90문항 44개 항목으로 나누어 소개한 견문서이며 때론 박정양 자신의 논평도 곁들이고 있다. 공사의 견문에 의한 것도 있지만 대부분 중국·일본·미국의 책을 참고하여 쓴 것으로 『미행일기』의 내용을 상세하고 체계적으로 보완하기 위한 저작물로 추측된다. 일기형식의 글만으로는 미국에서 자신이 견문한 바를 일목요연하게 정리·종합하기 어려웠을 것이기 때문에, 『미속습유』는 『미행일기』와의 상호 능동적인 보완관계 속에서 저작되었다고 할 수 있다."

[3] Personal translation of the original text: "19세기 말 부국강병과 자주독립이 조선이 이루어야 할 지상 과제임 자명하였다."

[4] Personal translation of the original text: " 박정양과 그 일행의 서구 경험이 근대 전환기 조선의 방향성과 정책 구상에 사실상 영향을 준 만큼 [...]"

Another key figure bridging Korea and the West was Min Yong-hwan (1861–1905), a high-ranking official who wrote travel diaries from two diplomatic missions to Europe, on in Russia, and one in the United Kingdom, in the 1890s. Min Yong-hwan was a royal official and advocate for reform, regarded well by his contemporaries. Finch claims that "Min was considered to be the only official in the Choson administration, apart from his political ally Han Kyu-sol, whom the Korean people trusted" (Finch 2002:4), continuing to say that he appeared "to have been an exception in that both Koreans and Westerners alike considered him to be a man of integrity" (Finch 2002:4). Seeking greater international support for Korea's sovereignty, in April 1896 King Gojong dispatched Min Yong-hwan as a special envoy to attend the coronation of Czar Nicholas II in Russia. The journey took Min and his delegation on an arduous round-the-world trip: from Incheon to Yokohama, from there across the Pacific to Vancouver, cross-country through North America by rail, and by ship to Europe, ultimately reaching St. Petersburg in May 1896 (Finch 2002). The following year, in 1897, Min was sent to London to represent Korea at Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebrations. These missions exposed Min Yong-hwan to the biggest imperial powers of the West. He kept detailed diaries of his travels, sections of which having titles like Haech'ŏnch'ubŏm "Sea, Sky, Autumn Voyage", and Sagusokch'o "Additional Notes of an Envoy to Europe" (Finch 2002). In these writings, Min described everything from military parades and modern navies to urban infrastructure and social customs in Russia, Britain, and other countries he visited. The effect on him was powerful: witnessing the industrial might and national unity of the great powers made Min an advocate for a rapid modernization in Korea, upon his return home in late 1897, becoming a supporter of reform at court. He was involved in the Gwangmu Reform policies of the Korean Empire (the period of intensive modernization under King Gojong after 1897). Historical accounts note that Min was an "advocate of domestic modernization and reform until his death in 1905" (Finch 2002:16), advocating for a modern navy, reestablishment of coastal defence, reorganizing the military, and proposing numerous reforms, such as improvements regarding the governance of Seoul and the justice system. Although not all his proposals were realized, Min's persistence shows how profoundly travel had shaped his worldview. He became a supporter of the Independence Club (독립협회) after

1896, aligning himself with other pro-Enlightenment figures like Yu Kil-chun. Min's travel experiences made him believe that Joseon had to reform. For instance, he saw modern education systems abroad and highlighted to need for Korea to establish public schools. When Japan tried to annex Korea through the Eulsa Treaty in 1905, Min Yong-hwan was among the few officials who opposed it to the end, and in a final act of protest, he committed suicide after writing pleas to Western envoys asking for help in preserving Korea's independence (Finch 2002). We can see from this tragic end that Min Yong-hwan's engagement with the West was driven by the conviction that Korea could survive only by embracing the strengths of Western modernity and Western support against Japanese aggression.

1.3. A New Woman's Journey: Na Hye-sok in the 1920s

Na Hye-sok (1896–1948), artist and feminist writer, became the first Korean woman to travel around the world. Already famous in Korea as a pioneer of women's rights and Western-style painting, Na Hye-sok embarked on a three-year tour of Europe and the United States in 1927 together with her husband. This journey, which lasted until 1929, was unprecedented for a Korean couple, and especially for a woman at that time (Kyung 2017, 2019). Na Hye-sok documented her experiences abroad, her observations later having a significant cultural impact upon her return to colonial Korea. Her travelogues, published in newspapers and magazines after her return, shed light on everything from everyday European family life to art and social norms, all seen through the eyes of a Korean "new woman". Through her writings, Na Hye-sok started questioning the rigid gender norms and social restraints on Korean women by comparing them with the relative liberation she observed in the West.

The influence of Na Hye-sok's journey on Korean society, especially on intellectual discourse about the "New Woman", was substantial. The "New Woman" was a Korean magazine in which "articles on new woman were conflicted, contentious, and even divisive in nature, where the traditional and the modern, Korean gender concepts and Western feminism, co-existed, intersected, and even clashed" (Kim 2013:59). Na's essays and subsequent writings used her travel experiences to advocate for women's independence and critique Korea's patriarchal double standards. According to Kim, her

> "stay in Europe served as an occasion to raise her social and feminist consciousness. She acquired firsthand knowledge about the liberal aspects of Western family life, husband-wife relationships, and customs when she boarded for about three months from November 1927 at the home of Felicien Challaye (1875–1967), professor of philosophy at Sorbonne" (Kim 2002:16)

Upon her return to Korea, she started writing about Western ideals, one of her pieces being, for instance, "Pullanso kajongun olmana tarulkka" (How Different French Families Are), in which she highlights the "need to reform Koreans' clothing, food, and housing accentuated by her growing feminist consciousness begun through her direct exposure to Western society and its culture" (Kim 2002:19). Later, she began publishing her stories in Samch'o'lli, under the title "Records of Travel to Europe and America" (Kim 2002). Moreover, a few years after returning, Na published her notorious piece "A Confession about My Divorce" (1934), in which she openly discussed her extramarital affair, the one that had occurred during her time in Paris and led to her divorce, and denounced the fact that only women, not men, were harshly stigmatized for such behavior in Korea (Kim 2002). In that essay, she explicitly contrasts Western and Korean attitudes: Korean society's unforgiving treatment of her versus the more permissive or equal view of male and female sexuality she had seen abroad, saying:

> "Korean women with modern education, namely, sinyosong, are to be pitied. Their personal situation is full of trouble and complication, since they have to grow up, marry, and take care of their families under a feudal family system. Their half-baked knowledge causes disharmony between older and younger generations and only adds misery. . .
> The mentality of Korean men is incomprehensible. Although they don't keep their sexual purity, they demand it from their wives or other women, and even sexually violate them. In the West or even in Tokyo, people understand and respect each other's lack of sexual purity, if they themselves don't possess it. Isn't it common for a man to protect a woman's sexual purity while also violating someone else's? . . ." (Na Hye-sok in Kim 2002:23)

Na's travel-inspired societal critiques built on an ongoing dialogue that Korean reformers had started in the 1890s: even in the Independence Club's newspaper

in 1896, writers argued for female education and emancipation in Korea. Na Hye-sok, a generation later, personified this New Woman ideal by actually experiencing life in the West and bringing back concrete examples to fuel the conversation on gender equality. Her bold life and writings inspired younger women and provoked men to rethink women's roles. Though Na Hye-sok's personal story ended in scandal and tragedy, being ostracized after her divorce, and dying in poverty, her travelogues left an important legacy as early expressions of Korean feminist thought shaped by direct exposure to the West. They showed that travel literature was not only the domain of male officials and scholars; it could also amplify a woman's voice in critiquing society and imagining new possibilities for social norms.

2. WESTERN TRAVELERS TO KOREA: SHAPING IMAGES OF THE "HERMIT KINGDOM"

2.1. Encountering Joseon: Isabella Bird and Percival Lowell in the 1880s–90s

In the late 19th century, as Korea opened its ports and signed treaties with Western powers, foreign travelers began to venture into this long-mysterious land. Their published accounts offered the first substantial introduction of Korea to Western readers. Among these, the works of Isabella Bird (Bishop) and Percival Lowell stood out for their popularity and lasting impact.

Isabella Bird (1831–1904) was a celebrated British travel writer who came to Korea in the mid-1890s. Bird arrived during a dramatic period marked by the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95) and internal palace intrigues, and she traveled extensively through the Korean countryside as well as the capital. Her two-volume book Korea and Her Neighbours was published in 1898 and quickly became one of the most detailed English-language portraits of Korea of that era, and, as Jungmann claims, "Even today Isabella Bird's Korea and Her Neighbours is probably the most well-known account of that country by a Western visitor of the late nineteenth century" (Jungmann 2023:9). Bird's narrative combined adventure with ethnography: she described journeys by boat and pony, encounters with bandits and remote villagers, and careful observations of Korean customs, dress, housing, and governance (Bird 1898). As a Victorian woman traveler, Bird had a unique perspective – she often mingled with Korean

women who were inaccessible to male observers, and she brought a sympathetic yet Protestant missionary-influenced sensibility to what she saw. Scholars note that Bird "sustained a neutral perspective on Korean culture" (Park 2008:24) in many aspects, praising elements of daily life and the character of the people, but she was quite negative toward Korean religious practices (such as shamanism), reflecting her Christian viewpoint (Park 2008). Bird was generally regarded as an "accurate observer" (Banerjee 2022) who was interested in natural and social phenomena. She was praised for her careful descriptions, noting that she purposely chose travel destinations that were "coming into public notice", so that her reports would have "timely and practical interest" for readers back home (Banerjee 2022). Korea in the 1890s fit this mold: it was increasingly in the geopolitical spotlight, and Bird's book significantly informed the English-speaking public about Korea's "recent vicissitudes and present position," as her subtitle put it.

Bird's influence on Western understanding of Korea was multi-faceted. First, her engaging travelogue satisfied Western curiosity about a country then dubbed the "Hermit Kingdom." She provided rich detail on Korea's landscape and people at a time when such information was scarce in the West, as she herself claims "it is a difficult country to write upon, from the lack of books of reference by means of which one may investigate what one hopes are facts" (Bird 1989: Author's Prefatory Note). Her vivid storytelling – for example, describing a lively scene of villagers crowding around her boat on the Han River (Bird 1989:107-108), made Korea real and relatable to readers, moving it beyond an unknown land. Second, Bird's work subtly shaped attitudes toward Korea's political situation. She chronicled the turbulent events she witnessed with a measure of objectivity and compassion for Koreans (Jungmann 2023). Without overtly taking sides, Bird highlighted the plight of a nation caught between rival empires, which elicited sympathy among some Western readers. Finally, Bird had considerable credibility, as an experienced traveler and fellow of the Royal Geographical Society (Gartlan 2011), her words carried weight. British and American officials posted in Seoul read her book, and it informed scholarly and missionary writings for years. In sum, Isabella Bird's account gave the Western public one of its first comprehensive images of Korean life, a mix of admiration for the land and people, criticism of its yangban elite about which she says:

> "For among the curses of Korea is the existence of this privileged class of yang-bans or nobles, who must not work for their own living, though it is no disgrace to be supported by their relations, and who often live on the clandestine industry of their wives in sewing and laundry work." (Bird 1989:113)

and superstition, and cautious optimism that external influence (including missionary Christianity and Japanese reforms) might uplift Korea, as she claims:

> "Barriers of indifference, superstition, and inertness exist, and whatever progress is made will probably be chiefly through medical missions, showing Christianity in action, and native agency, and through such schools as I have already alluded to, which leave every feature of Korean custom, dress, and manner of living untouched, while Christian instruction and training are the first objects, and where the gentle, loving,' ennobling influence of the teacher is felt during every hour of the day." (Bird 1989:68)

A contemporary with Bird, Percival Lowell (1855–1916) provided American audiences a different but complementary perspective on 19th-century Korea. Lowell visited Korea briefly in 1883–84. He had the advantage of entering Korea in the company of the very first official Korean mission to the U.S. to which he served as foreign secretary and interpreter on their American tour in 1883 (The New York Times 1883). Afterward, Lowell stayed in Seoul for several months, immersing himself in local culture. In 1886, he published Chosön: The Land of the Morning Calm, one of the earliest English-language books on Korea. Unlike Bird's lengthy and detailed account a decade later, Lowell's account was briefer and perhaps more romanticized, but it offered keen observations of Korean society at a pivotal moment just after the country's opening. Lowell wrote about the beauty of Seoul's surrounding mountains, the intricacies of Korean court ceremony, having even met King Gojong, and everyday scenes such as the crowded streets and markets of the capital (Lowell 1886). He also documented customs like the isolation of women and the lives of Korean women from an outsider's perspective (Suh 2013). He writes about the status of women, lamenting that they were largely unseen and unheard in public life:

> "More properly, we may speak of it [her status] as her want of position; for the principle is, in Korea, hardly more than a negation, and, like negations,

> generally has been most influential, not in what it denies, but in what the absence of it has permitted to take its place. . . . In other words, the withdrawal of the influence of woman from the social system has not had destructive effect upon that system which might have been anticipated for it; for in Korea woman practically does not exist. Materially, physically, she is a fact; but mentally, morally, socially, she is a cipher" (Lowell 1886 in Suh 2013:12)

Such comments influenced Western views by portraying Korea as a conservative, even benighted, society in need of change, particularly in areas of gender relations and social structure. Lowell's book, sprinkled with early photographs he took made a strong impression. It introduced Americans to the term "Land of the Morning Calm" to describe Korea, emphasizing its serene beauty but also implicitly its stagnant calmness. Between them, Isabella Bird and Percival Lowell offered late-Victorian readers a window into a Korea on the verge of modernization. Their travelogues had influence beyond mere entertainment; they became source material for later writers and policymakers.

2.2. Travel Writing in the Colonial Era (1900s–1930s)

After Japan formally colonized Korea in 1910, the nature of Western travel to Korea shifted. The peninsula became part of the Japanese Empire and was often accessible only via Japan. Western visitors in the 1910s–1930s, ranging from tourists and writers to diplomats, frequently arrived on Japanese steamships or the Trans-Siberian Railway, and they typically toured Korea under the guidance of Japanese authorities. Travel literature from this colonial period reflects a changing tone: many accounts were filtered through Japanese colonial propaganda, while a few served as critical counterpoints documenting Korean resistance. At the time, one common thread was the development of tourism in colonial Korea, actively promoted by the Japanese. A lot of information available to the Western public about Chosen[5] was controlled by The Japan Tourist Bureau, who published English-language guidebooks promoting the sights of "Keijō" (Seoul) and other places in Chosen. For example, a 1917 tourist guide in

[5] The name given to the Korean Peninsula during the Japanese colonial period.

English encouraged travelers who had visited Japan to extend their journey to Korea and to witness the rapid changes under Japanese rule (Maldonado 2020).

> "A tourist who has visited Japan proper only is not justified in saying that he has already completed sightseeing in Japan until he has visited Chosen, now a part of Japanese Empire by peaceful annexation. After having enjoyed his tour in the charming "Land of the Rising Sun," he should come to the "Land of the Morning Calm" and make acquaintance with the old attire, peculiar customs, and distinctive architecture of this "Hermit Kingdom" which is no longer shut off from the rest of the world, but is now passing through a great and rapid change under the progressive policy of the Japanese administration." (Japan Tourist Bureau Chosen Branch 1917:1-2 in Maldonado 2020:185)

Many Western travelers during this era took such advice. They often stayed at the Chosen Hotel in Seoul and followed itineraries that highlighted Japan's colonial achievements, such as new railroads, government buildings, schools, of course alongside ancient Korean landmarks like Gyeongbok Palace or the Gyeongju relics. As a result, a significant number of short-term travelogues by Westerners in the 1920s echo a similar narrative: they marvel at Korea's quaint past, then note the improvements brought by Japanese administration (Maldonado 2020). Historians analyzing these accounts have found that because among these travelers "very few had contact with Koreans" (Maldonado 2020:204) outside the colonial establishment, they "sometimes tended to describe Koreans as part of the landscape rather than as individuals" (Maldonado 2020:204) often repeating stereotypes fed to them by their Japanese guides. In other words, Koreans appeared in such writings more as colorfully dressed, passive figures (Goldschmidt 1927) in the background of a modernizing colony, rather than as active agents. This literature reinforced an image of Korean people stagnant, tacitly justifying Japan's "civilizing" mission (Powell 1922, Drake 1930). It contributed to Western apathy toward Korea's loss of sovereignty, many readers simply assumed Japan was modernizing Korea for the better, an impression conveyed by some travelogues.

One important example includes the travel writings of Carl W. Grebst, a Swedish journalist who toured Korea in 1912. Grebst admired the new order under Japan and described Koreans in a somewhat patronizing tone, noting their poverty and simplicity while crediting Japanese efforts to develop the

economy (Park 2008). This kind of travel literature had an impact on Western audiences by normalizing Japanese rule in Korea. Western readers who had scant prior knowledge of Korea would encounter these travel narratives and begin thinking of Korea as an exotic place which was improving under Japan's tutelage. The political effect was that few in the West questioned or challenged Japan's presence in Korea during those years; travelogues inadvertently served as soft propaganda.

However, not all Western accounts during the colonial period toed the Japanese line. A minority of travelers and expatriates in Korea produced writings that sympathized with the Korean people and critiqued Japanese colonialism, influencing certain Western circles to take a different view. One prominent figure here is Homer B. Hulbert (1863–1949), an American missionary who, although first arrived in Korea in the 1880s and lived there for decades (making him more a long-term resident than a transient traveler), he wrote in a genre accessible to Western audiences, blending travel narrative with political commentary. His book on Korea "The Passing of Korea" (1906) was essentially a lament over Korea's subjugation, published just as Japan's protectorate took hold. In it, Hulbert walked readers through Korea's history, culture, and the series of events that led to its "passing" into Japanese control (Hulbert 1906). He portrayed Koreans as a proud, capable people suffering injustice, and he criticized the international community, especially the United States, for abandoning Korea, urging it within the final words of his book to offer its support:

> "My discussion of these forces is […] partly to awaken the American people to the duty that lies upon them. The Koreans need help […]" (Hubert 1906:466)

Other Western writers echoed Hulbert's sympathetic stance. For instance, Frederick A. McKenzie, a British journalist, traveled to Korea multiple times and witnessed Japanese brutalities during the 1907 anti-colonial uprisings. He wrote Korea's Fight for Freedom (1919), which, much like a travelogue of rebellion, detailed the March 1st 1919 Independence Movement. As far as other aspects of the Korean society are concerned, he viewed people in a positive manner (Park 2008). His accounts provided a more accurate on-the-ground picture for historians.

In summary, Western travel literature on Korea during the colonial period diverged into two streams: a dominant one that reinforced the narrative of benevolent Japanese modernization (thus dampening any international criticism of colonialism), and a smaller one that highlighted Korean resistance and appealed to Western conscience. Both streams had their audiences and effects in the West, contributing to a complex legacy of perceptions by the time World War II and Korea's eventual liberation (1945) arrived.

3. THE IMPACT OF TRAVEL LITERATURE

3.1. The Impact of Travel Literature on Korean Audiences

The travel writings of Koreans who ventured abroad in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had a transformative impact on Korean society's evolution. These works functioned as conduits for new ideas, sparking social and intellectual change in multiple areas.

One of the roles travel writing has in Korea was to stimulate reform movements and to create modernization debates. The most immediate impact of Korean travel literature was on politics and reform. Upon publication, texts like Yu Kil-chun's Seoyu Gyeonmun became blueprints for reformers. Yu's assertion that Korea was an equal sovereign nation and his explanation of how Western nations achieved wealth and power provided ideological ammunition for the 1894 Gabo Reform (Kim, bu.edu). In fact, many key reforms of that time mirrored Yu's suggestions: the abolition of the old class system, replacement of the lunar calendar with the Gregorian calendar, the establishment of a postal system, and modern institutions of finance and education (Kim, bu.edu). Yu Kil-chun's writings had explicitly advocated such measures (e.g. equality of commoners, changes in customs) and thus "played an important role in the revolution" of 1894 (Kim, bu.edu). Likewise, Park Jeong-yang's and Min Yong-hwan's travel reports did not go unnoticed. Min Yong-hwan, inspired by what he saw abroad, personally pushed for military upgrades, bureaucratic reorganization, and infrastructural projects (Finch 2002). The Independence Club (1896–1898), Korea's first quasi-democratic civic organization, has as members and supportets returnees from abroad (including Yu Kil-chun and Min) who contributed essays and speeches quoting their travel experiences.

Through this Club, they debated how to implement Western political models in Korea. This shows how travel-derived knowledge was immediately deployed in public discourse to promote change. Even after Japan's annexation, the memory and writings of those traveler-reformers continued to inspire underground activists and educators.

Secondly, travellogues influenced views on gender and education. Korean travel literature also had a significant social and cultural impact, particularly in challenging traditional views on gender roles and education. As noted, one of the striking themes that Korean travelers brought back was the status of women in the West. Yu Kil-chun wrote in Seoyu Gyeonmun about the Western belief in the individual rights of all people regardless of gender (Yuh 2021), a radical notion in a society where women were largely confined to domestic roles. This contributed to early advocacy for girls' education in Korea. Indeed, in 1886 Korea saw the opening of its first school for girls (Ewha School, by American missionary Mary Scranton), and by the 1890s newspapers were supporting women's education and participation, a discourse clearly influenced by reports of how Western nations were strengthened by educated women as mothers and partners (Suh 2013). For example, an Independence Club article contrasted Western women who contribute to family prosperity through knowledge with status of Korean women at those times:

> "a column titled "Aeho a nyoˇ ron!" (Alas, our women!) describes 'the poor Korean woman' as a prisoner, confined in jail without the right of freedom—nothing but a blind, uneducable fool. Compared with Eastern women, who lacked social rights and benefits, Western women were portrayed as receiving privileges from society including the same rights men enjoyed. While the Western women performed the roles of a wife properly, by taking part in household matters with their husbands, educating children, and ensuring that the family flourished, Eastern women were no more than 'the slave of man' who took charge of odd jobs around the house." (Suh 2013:15)

This comparison, drawn from travel observations, provided a powerful argument for change. The eventual emergence of the "New Woman" movement in the 1920s, advocating women's rights, education, and social freedoms, drew directly from earlier travel-inspired enlightenment ideas. Na Hye-sok's travelogues in the 1930s refreshed these ideas with examples from Europe,

causing a generation of Korean women to question patriarchal norms. It is telling that Na Hye-sok's magazine writings were widely discussed in urban society; even as many condemned her, they could not ignore the issues she raised about the double standards for men and women (Kim 2002).

In summary, Korean travel literature between the 1880s and 1940s was a catalyst for internal change. It challenged old assumptions and offered a menu of possibilities drawn from the West, constitutional government, modern schools, equal rights, advanced technology, new social customs. Korean readers and leaders selectively adopted and adapted these ideas in what became a contested but consequential transformation of Korean society.

3.2. The Impact of Travel Literature on Western Audiences

Just as travel writing influenced Korean audiences, the accounts of European and American travelers in Korea had significant effects on Western perceptions, policies, and engagements with Korea. These impacts can be discerned across several dimensions as well, one of them being shaping Western public perception and knowledge. For the vast majority of Westerners in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, travelogues were the main source of information about Korea. The importance of this cannot be overstated: at a time when mass media and information dissemination was in its infancy and few Westerners had direct experience of Korea, a single popular book could effectively define Korea's image in the West. Isabella Bird's and Percival Lowell's works, for instance, allowed Western society to paint an image of Korea of those times. Bird's detailed narrative, emphasizing Korea's rural beauty and the complex situation of the 1890s, gave readers a sense of empathy and interest in Korea's fate. Her engaging style, "lively, personal" (Banerjee 2022) made the reading experience memorable and the information accessible. Western audiences, especially those in Britain and the U.S. who followed travel literature closely, came to see Korea as a real place with real people. Lowell's book similarly provided Americans with a fascinating peek into a little-known kingdom; it likely stirred the imagination of young scholars and adventurers. At the same time, these travel narratives also solidified certain stereotypes or generalizations. Lowell's commentary on the low status of Korean women (Suh 2013) and the overall stagnation of Korean society gave Western readers an impression of a nation "left behind" in progress.

Such perceptions fed into an Orientalist perspective of Korea as a timeless, unchanging land, setting it apart as fundamentally different from the dynamic West. This ambivalence in perception, oscillating between admiration for Korea's picturesque qualities and doubt about its capacity for self-modernization, was largely a product of what Western travelers chose to highlight.

Travel writings attempted to influence government policy and diplomatic attitudes. Travel literature occasionally had direct or indirect influence on Western diplomatic stances toward Korea. One direct channel was through travelers who were themselves connected to government. For example, George Curzon, a British statesman, visited Korea in the 1890s as part of a grand tour of Asia and wrote about it in his book "Problems of the Far East" (1894). Curzon's account, read by British policymakers, reinforced the view that Korea was a weak state destined to fall under a stronger power (Park 2002). Such narratives contributed to a policy of non-intervention, essentially Britain and other powers deciding not to actively support Korean sovereignty, having been persuaded that Korea was incapable of standing alone. On the American side, Hulbert attempted to translate travel narrative into policy action, urging the U.S. to uphold its guarantee of Korean independence from the 1882 treaty (Bradley 2009). While Roosevelt, influenced by strategic calculation and perhaps doubting Korea's viability did not act on Hulbert's pleas.

CONCLUSION

From the late 19th century through the mid-20th century, travel literature formed a critical link between Korea and the West, transmitting ideas and impressions that would influence both societies. For Koreans, the firsthand accounts of distant lands written by Korean travelers to the west like Yu Kil-chun, Park Jeong-yang, Min Yong-hwan, and Na Hye-sok were revelatory. They shattered the confines of the "Hermit Kingdom" mindset and brought new intellectual currents, notions of citizen equality, constitutional governance, women's emancipation, and technological progress, directly into Korean debates on reform and modernization. These works helped inspire concrete reforms and nurtured a generation of leaders who would carry the torch of enlightenment and, later, national resistance. In a time of existential crisis for Korea, travel

literature offered both a mirror and a window: a mirror showing Koreans how they were seen by the outside world, and a window through which they could envision a different future by learning from abroad. The social and cultural transformations in Korea, such as the emergence of the "New Woman", the erosion of class barriers, the rise of modern schools, all were influenced by those early travel writers and the Western models they introduced.

Conversely, for Western audiences, travelogues by explorers, diplomats, and missionaries formed the predominant narrative of Korea's story on the world stage. They taught the West about Korea's rich culture and its struggles, often evoking fascination, sympathy, or sometimes disdain. These narratives could enlighten, as with Isabella Bird's empathetic account, or mislead, as with propagandistic tourist guides under Japan. Collectively, however, they meant that Korea was not totally lost in obscurity; a literate Western public was aware that beyond China and Japan there was a distinct nation with its own identity and aspirations. Travel literature influenced how foreign powers treated Korea, whether as an object of colonization, a field for missionary salvation, or a friend in need of support was frequently colored by what authors had written. The political indifference that enabled Korea's colonization could have been influenced by travel accounts dismissing Korea's capacity for self-rule, whereas the humanitarian advocacy that later supported Korea's independence owed much to sympathetic accounts highlighting Korean resilience and injustice under colonial rule.

In bridging two very different worlds, the travel writers of this period became agents of change and cultural mediators, as ultimately, the story of historical travel literature between Korea and the West is a story of cross-cultural influence, of how personal journeys and the written word helped reshape and understand societies. It teaches us that travel is never just about places, but about the exchange of ideas and values. The late 19th to mid-20th century was a formative era for Korea's engagement with modernity and for the West's understanding of East Asia.

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