

Victorian Humanity in Colonial Korea, Where Asians Did Not See Themselves as the Other

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VICTORIAN studies in recent years has evolved to encompass racial minorities that have been marginalized as the Other in the field's white-centered discourse.¹ The 2020 *Victorian Studies* special issue "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" questions the field's isolation from contemporary scholarship on justice for people of color.² "The Wide Nineteenth Century"—a special issue published by *Victorian Literature and Culture* in 2021—foregrounds the importance of recognizing linguistic and cultural diversity beyond Europe and nonwhite Victorians as well as nonhuman species.³ This critical trend expresses the field's sound self-reflection on the hierarchical binaries structuring "Victorian humanity," which the 2014 *Victorian Review* forum on this topic identified as a product of the exclusion of racial Others, the urban poor, the disabled, and nonhuman animals.⁴ In this article, I invite you to complicate this presence of nonwhite races as the Other in Anglo-American Victorian studies by displacing you into the colonial Korean critique of the Japanese Empire, where both the colonizer and the colonized were people of color. What would it have been like to read Victorian literature in colonial Korea, where Asians saw themselves not as racialized Others but as fellow human beings, to search for an alternative humanity in the face of Japanese colonization?

Korea became a protectorate of Japan in 1905, was formally annexed by the Japanese Empire in 1910, and remained colonized until Japan succumbed to the Allied Forces in 1945.⁵ During Japanese colonization, Japan constructed an image of Koreans as an uncultured or premodern people and implemented educational policies indoctrinating students with this idea.⁶ For example, the mission statement of Keijo Imperial University, established in 1924, was "to foster loyal, smart, and useful

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imperial subjects who will serve the nation through their deepened knowledge and personal development” modeled on Japan’s purportedly advanced civilization.⁷ Despite the fact that the university’s official purpose was tailored to the needs of the Japanese Empire, one Japanese professor who taught English literature there noted that the university’s Korean students “ardently sought to find their nation’s liberation and freedom in their study of foreign literature.”⁸ Though Victorian studies had not yet solidified as a field in colonial Korea, many English texts, especially those by Victorian writers, were translated from Japanese into Korean and were read widely by Koreans who wanted to find an alternative humanity in the face of Japanese rule.⁹ A quick review of literary magazines and newspapers published in Korea from 1900 to 1945 (see, for example, [fig. 1](#)) as well as the *Bulletin of the Keijo Imperial University English Association* ([fig. 2](#)) reveals that more than a quarter of the top twenty English writers read in colonial Korea were from the Victorian era.¹⁰ In these nascent Victorian studies in colonial Korea, two concepts—self and environmental subject—shape Victorian humanity.

The concept of “self-help” was introduced to Korea through partial translations of Samuel Smiles’s book *Self-Help* (1859), which appeared in fragments in the 1900s and 1910s.¹¹ Unlike Victorian contemporaries’ application of self-help to the lower-middle and working classes’ potential for self-fulfillment both on individual and national levels, the initial Korean adaptations of Smiles’s *Self-Help* in the 1900s mostly focused on chapter 1, “Self-Help, National and Individual,” which emphasized the interrelation of individuals’ self-training and national progress. Turn-of-the-century Korean readers were particularly attuned to Smiles’s emphasis on individual “character” and the codependence between “national progress” and “individual industry, energy, and uprightness.”¹² Koreans who first introduced Smiles’s book understood “character” as *Sooshin* (修身) in the Confucian message *Sooshin-jae-ga-chi-gook-pyung-chun-ha* (修身齊家治國平天下), which asserts that the individual’s capacity for self-governance is an essential constituent of national peace and the nation’s sustained growth.¹³ The “Self-Strengthening Korea Committee” (Dae-han-zagang-hwei; 大韓自彊會; 대한자강회) used Smiles’s term “self-help” (translated as 自助) to support the necessity of achieving independence through collective efforts of self-reliant individuals, publishing articles that address this point in their monthly magazine (大韓自彊會月報; 대한자강회월보).¹⁴

The concept of “self” as liberal subjectivity (i.e., an autonomous, progressive personhood self-reflective of one’s actions and thoughts)

[illegible]

Figure 1. Table of contents in *Jokwang* (조광; 朝光; morning light) 6, no. 3 (March 1, 1940), Sungkyunkwan University Library, 10.4 in. x 8.6 in., ink on paper, reprinted.¹⁵

gained more currency after Korea was officially annexed by Japan in 1910. Choi Nam Sun, who translated and published the first half of Smiles's book in 1918 (fig. 3), sharpened the word's meaning to encourage Korean youth to value themselves and look ahead to the future despite their loss of national independence.¹⁶ Notably, Choi's Korean translation of *Self-Help*, which was based on Nakamura Masanao's Japanese translation published in 1871, included Choi's own preface, appendixes, and short chapter introductions.¹⁷ In these, Choi conceptualizes the self both as (a) a locus whose empirical perspective enables the entire world to exist and (b) a self-reliant individual whose perseverance cultivates spiritual growth and ultimately results in the self-strengthening energy and industry shown by "modern heroes" (近世の英雄) who lead civilization into continuous advancement.¹⁸ Choi's application of this progressive, empowering model of the self to Korean youth's personal development urged them to recognize an alternative humanity emphasizing self-governing individuality aligned with their yearning for national liberty while also critiquing Japanese colonization euphemized as modernization.¹⁹

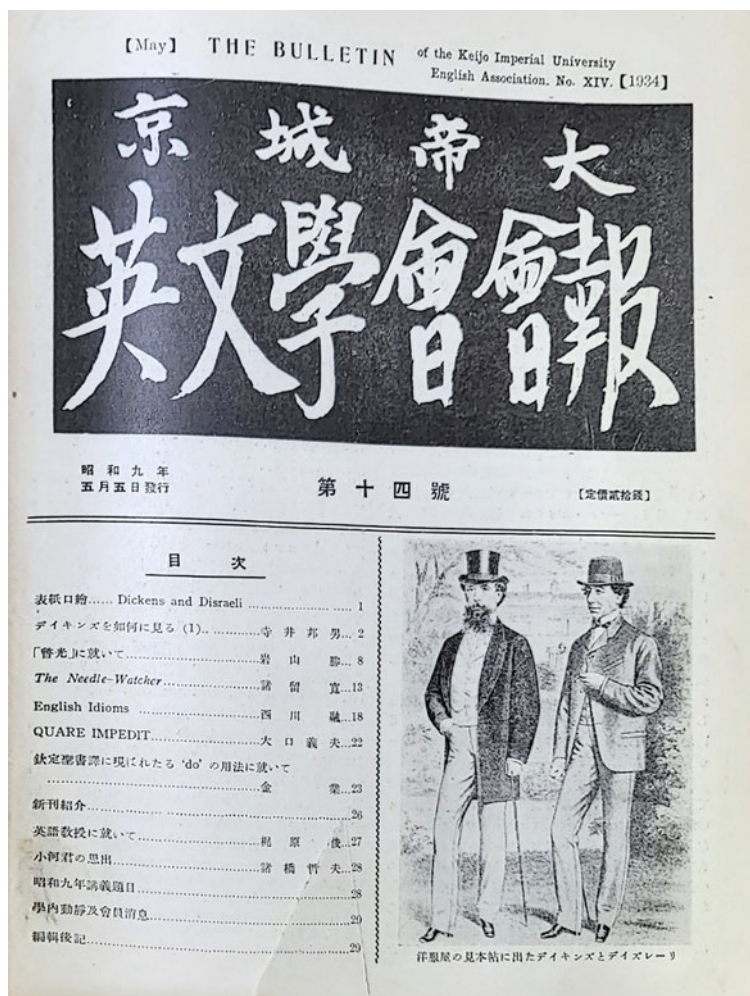


Figure 2. Title page of *The Bulletin of the Keijo Imperial University English Association* 14 (May 1934), Seoul National University Library, 9.8 in. x 7.3 in., ink on paper.²⁰

To readers of Victorian literature in colonial Korea, the human was also an environmental subject who exists in connection with and under the effect of ecological and social surroundings. In his review of “Nature in English Poetry” published in 1929, Jung In Sup notes that the East Asian literary tradition ascribed primary importance to nature within which human life was a subsidiary subject, whereas the reverse was true in Western art until the Romantic and Victorian eras.²¹ Among the Victorian naturalists discussed by Jung, Thomas Hardy was among the most widely discussed writers in journals and newspapers published in colonial Korea.²² Kim Hwan Tae in his essay “Tess in May” and

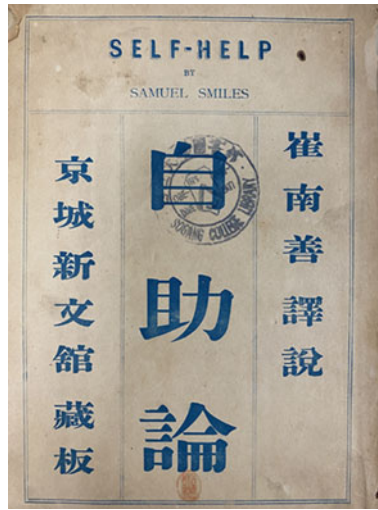


Figure 3. Title page of *Self-Help* (自助論), translated by Choi Nam Sun (崔南善), Sogang University Library, 5.7 in. x 8.6 in., ink on paper.²³

Iwayama Masaru in “Nature in *Tess*” claim that nature in Hardy’s works is alive and has its own subjectivity or an “Immanent Will”—a purposeless force of the universe.²⁴ In an extensive study of Hardy serialized over a month in a daily newspaper, Yang Joo Dong argues that the environment—which for Yang encompasses both nonhuman nature and human society—presented in Hardy’s novels provides more than a background: it structures the plot.²⁵ Yang does not touch on the generic limitations of the realist novel dealing with the cosmic, ecological scale of nature, as does recent scholarship on Hardy by Aaron Rosenberg and Elizabeth Carolyn Miller,²⁶ but he astutely examines how Hardy portrays human “character” as a byproduct of the interaction between humans and the environment.

The Victorian humanity that readers in colonial Korea discovered in Victorian texts asks contemporary scholars located around the globe to think about how we can shift the locus of our critical perspective to undiscipline, widen, and decenter Victorian studies through a “transimperial” lens promoting “planetarity” in our reading. The “transimperial,” as Sukanya Banerjee argues, invites us to look into interimperial relations of and across empires in coeval terms and to be attentive to the locational dynamics rooted in places.²⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s proposal for “planetarity” encourages us to harness an awareness of relationality and alterity against homogeneous globalization.²⁸ Taking cues from Banerjee’s and Spivak’s arguments, I suggest that we look outward to

read Victorian literature in relation to other empires, from the other side of the planet. Doing so requires us to see the British nineteenth century as “multisited and polyvocal” and to “lateralize ‘Victorian Britain,’ to think of widening in coeval terms” alongside less-considered non-Western cultures and histories.²⁹ It will also necessitate “multilingualism” that does not necessarily prioritize anglophone reading³⁰ and highlights “geospecific” dynamics that intervene in the process of translation.³¹

Reading Victorian literature outside the British Empire in a setting where race is not a factor of discrimination or othering deemphasizes the centrality of British national narratives and redirects our attention from the binary frames of colonial alienation to transimperial solidarity.³² In colonial Korea, a reader’s race did not necessarily exclude them from the emotion that Irish writers or white Victorian characters felt as humans.³³ When Korean readers of nineteenth-century English literature used the term “Victorian,” it did not have connotations of empire, nor was it a homogenizing or demarcating category. Rather, it connoted cultural pride and liberalism that enabled Korean readers to develop alternative models of humanity that resisted the Japanese modernity that stigmatized them. Critiques of society abounding in Victorian and Edwardian novels such as H. G. Wells’s that Koreans discovered in their reading³⁴ may have inspired them to criticize Japanese propaganda such as *Nae-sun-il-choi* (內鮮一體), which attempted to force Koreans into complete identification with Japanese culture alone.³⁵ By relocating Victorian studies to a global context in which the “Victorian” empire exists in relation to other empires rather than at its core inside its peripheries, we can rediscover the unifying solidarity of Victorian literature that empowers its readers as humans regardless of their race, beyond the assumed violence of marginalization implied in the term.

In his short note “The Necessity of World Literature” published in *Sonyeon*,³⁶ Choi Nam Sun writes:

The waves near Incheon contain the salt from the Mediterranean Sea; the sound waves of trains echoing in Baekdusan have brought dry air from Siberia; dust from the Sahara is dropping from blacks’ shoes walking in the streets of Jongno; and the forest in Namsan breathes the air that was once breathed by white people in Europe. Aha, the sky and earth in our peninsula have never been purely domestic or isolated from the rest of the world. . . . As this shows, reading world literature does not mean to know about the world out there, but to know ourselves—Dae-Han (大韓).³⁷

Echoing his words, I ask you, wherever you are located, to read Victorian literature to know yourself.

NOTES

Writing this article was a journey accompanied by my dear colleagues who inspired me and helped me read in multiple languages from multiple angles. My sincere thanks are due to Sukanya Banerjee, Ok Jin Seo, Kyoung-Lee Kim, Jae Young Park, Jong-Keyong Kim, Jordan Wingate, Samantha Morse, the fellow panelists at the MLA panel “Victorians in Location,” and the editors of *Victorian Literature and Culture*. I was finally able to appreciate my reading skills in Korean (fluent) and Chinese characters (intermediate with a dictionary), which initially did not seem to be relevant to Victorian literature when I first read *Jane Eyre* in Korean as a child.

1. I am using the term “Other” in a sense that refers to the process of othering through which nineteenth-century European travelers and novelists located and defined their sovereign subjectivity in relation to black natives or racially ambiguous characters they saw or described in their writings. See Pratt, “Scratches,” 119–22; Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur,” 247, 252–57; Spivak, “Third Women’s Texts,” 250–54, 258–59; and Ashcroft et al., *Post-Colonial Studies*, 154–58.
2. Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong, “Introduction: Undisciplining Victorian Studies.”
3. Banerjee, Fong, and Michie, “Introduction: Widening the Nineteenth Century.”
4. See, for example, Huzzey, “Slave Trade”; Young, “Comprehending the Slum-Dweller”; Sweet, ““A Human Bundle””; and Hamilton, “Hajjin.”
5. M. Lee, “Japanese Compulsory Annexation,” 79–102.
6. M. Lee, “Japanese Compulsory Annexation,” 113–20.
7. “Keijo Imperial University Mission Statement,” quoted in Y. Kim, *Modern Korean Literature*, 211. On the curricula and history of Keijo Imperial University, see Lee and Choi, *Reevaluating Keijo Imperial University*, 58–63, 105–9. On the education in the English department there, see Y. Kim, *Modern Korean Literature*, 210–22.
8. Sato, “Notes on the College of Humanities,” 406. Korean students at Keijo Imperial University formed the “Keijo students league for anti-imperialism” and led some independence movements with their supportive Japanese cohorts. See Lee and Choi, *Reevaluating Keijo Imperial University*, 181–249.

9. The initial import of English literature relied on basic introductions that offered the author's biography, notes on quotations, and excerpts in translation. Starting from the late 1920s, high models of literary criticism appeared in Korean literary magazines and newspapers. The number of academic essays on British writers doubled in the 1930s (133 in the 1920s to 270 in the 1930s), but in the 1940s, the total number of academic essays on British writers decreased dramatically because of Japan's strict censorship prior to decolonization in 1945. For more information, see B. Kim, *Western Literature in Korea*, 1:98–99, 1:178–79, 1:361–64, 2:204–8, 2:785–86; and W. Kim, *Choi as a Translator*, 53–54.
10. The ratio increases to almost 50 percent of the top ten if we look for British writers critiqued in academic articles. For the comprehensive list of essays about English literature read in colonial Korea, see B. Kim, *Western Literature in Korea*, 1:7–78, 1:104–69, 1:189–364, 2:9–202, 2:775–85.
11. Smiles's preface and some contents are introduced in *Joyangbo* (조양보) in 1906, and the first chapter was introduced in *Suwoo* (서우) in 1907. Choi Nam Sun translated and introduced some parts of Smiles's *Character*, especially chapter 5, "Courage," in his literary magazines *Sonyeon* and *Chungnyeon* in 1909. See Ryu, *Choi Nam Sun*, 94; and H. Choi, *Self-Help and Modern Korea*, 44–48.
12. Smiles, *Self-Help*, 16.
13. H. Choi, *Self-Help and Modern Korea*, 26.
14. See 박은식, "自强與否의 問答," 대한자강회월보 4 (1906): 1–3 and 원영의, "自助設," 대한자강회월보 13 (1906), quoted in H. Choi, *Self-Help and Modern Korea*, 34–35.
15. Literary magazines and newspapers I reviewed after checking B. Kim's annotated bibliography and my own research are *Sonyeon* (소년; Boys), *Chungnyeon* (청년; Youth), *Kaybyeok* (개벽; Dawn), *Jokwang* (조광; Morning Light), *Chosunilbo* (조선일보), *Dong-a Ilbo* (동아일보), *Haewaymoonhak* (해외문학; Foreign Literature), *Taesumoonyeshinbo* (태서문예신보; News on Great Western Literature), among others. As shown in the table of contents in [figure 1](#), which includes "Tess in May," "Lawrence's Works and Ideas," and "Where Is Eastern Culture Going?," these magazines published literary and critical essays on foreign literature and sociocultural issues as well as creative literary writings in Korean.
16. N. Choi was an active leader-scholar who co-drafted the March 1st Korean Declaration of Independence, founded literary magazines

such as *Sonyeon* and *Chungnyeon*, and was imprisoned for almost three years. Unfortunately, however, he turned pro-Japan in the later stage of his career. On Choi's biography, see "Choi Nam Sun." It is the early, patriotic Korean N. Choi that I quote and promote, not the Japanized Choi who persuaded Korean students to serve for Japan in the Sino-Japanese wars and the Pacific War in the 1930s and the 1940s.

17. See "Preface" (自助論序), "The Translator's Philosophy of *Self-Help*" (譯自助論敍言數則), "Ten Commandments to the Youth" (少年讀者에게 10條), and "Notes" (弁言) in *Self-Help* (自助論), translated by N. Choi. Choi also wrote about Smiles's *Character* in his essays "Records of Smiles's Book Chapters" (스마일즈 書節錄), "Translation of Smile's Book Chapters" (스마일즈 書節譯), and "On Courage" (勇氣論). See Kim and Ha, "Choi's *Self-Help*," 95–112.
18. The quotation "modern heroes" (近世的 英雄) appears in "Ten Commandments to the Youth," 15. Besides the "modern heroes" described in Smiles's book, Choi also introduced the "Byronic hero" by introducing and translating Byron's poems, especially highlighting the image of the ocean featured in Byron's poems. See J. Park, "Ch'oe Namsŏn and Byron," 41–57.
19. Yet Choi's promotion of liberal subjectivity and his translation of *Self-Help* published in 1918 were opposed by those who were leading independence movements from socialist perspectives and gradually lost popularity in the 1920s. Ryu, *Choi Nam Sun*, 99, and H. Choi, *Self-Help and Modern Korea*, 40–66.
20. *The Bulletin of the Keijo Imperial University English Association* (京城帝大英文學會會報) was a small literary magazine published and shared by the English department at Keijo Imperial University, which is now Seoul National University. Issues 1–15 (published in the years 1929–1935) are available at the Seoul National University Library webpage. The journal was written in the Japanese alphabets combined with Chinese characters. Many thanks to Seo Ok Jin *halmuni* and Kim Kyoung-Lee *sunsaengnim* for their help in translating. Victorian writers studied in this journal include Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Alfred Tennyson, Katherine Mansfield, et al. The caption translates to "Dickens and Disraeli as Models in a Tailor's Sample Book." The table of contents includes "How to Read Dickens," by Terai Kunio (2), "On [Rossetti's] 'Sudden Light,'" by Iwayama Masaru (8), "About the Use of 'Do' in Bible Translations," by Kim Up (23),

- and “The List of Courses Taught in So-ah Year Nine [1934]” (28), among others.
21. I. Jung, “Nature in English Poetry” 31, quoted in B. Kim, *Western Literature in Korea*, 1:342.
 22. See B. Kim, *Western Literature in Korea*, 1:358–61, 2:203–4, 2:785.
 23. The book was written in the Korean alphabet along with Chinese characters. Please note that I am following the Korean convention of putting the last name first in this article except in the acknowledgments and some endnotes where I am using first name initials to distinguish between multiple Chois, Kims, Parks, and Lees.
 24. H. Kim, “Tess in May,” 217; Iwayama, “Nature in *Tess*,” 7, translated by K. Kim.
 25. Yang, “Novelist Thomas Hardy” (December 17, 18, 21) and “Thomas Hardy’s Style” (December 26).
 26. Rosenberg, “Infinitesimal Lives”; Miller, “Dendrography and Ecological Realism.”
 27. Banerjee, “Transimperial,” and “Who, or What, Is Victorian?”
 28. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, 71–102.
 29. Banerjee, Fong, and Michie, “Widening the Nineteenth Century,” 3, 7.
 30. On the field’s “resistan[ce] to multilingualism,” see Reeder, “Toward a Multilingual Victorian Transatlanticism,” 172.
 31. See Bubb in this special issue. A good example of this is Choi’s Korean translation of Samuel Smiles’s *Self-Help*, which I have explained earlier.
 32. I have borrowed “transimperial solidarity” from Banerjee. She accurately identified the key focus of my thesis and encouraged me to develop it further in her feedback email.
 33. Irish writers such as Bernard Shaw and W. B. Yeats were frequently read and mentioned in the colonial Korean media. Also popular was female domestic life described by the Brontës, George Eliot, and Elizabeth Gaskell. See B. Kim’s list of British writers introduced in modern Korea in his books. In her analysis of Scottish emigrants’ journeys to Americas in this special issue, Josephine McDonagh points out that the migration of Scottish emigrants examined in their “local contexts” may fall outside the conventional expectations of “domination and control” that shaped academic discourse on settler colonialism. Likewise, in the case of colonial Korea as I examine it here, race is not necessarily a discriminatory binary.
 34. D. Paek, “Recent Western Literature,” 5; “H. G. Wells the Vandalist”; “H. G. Wells”; K. Kim, “Chosun’s Interest in Contemporary English

- Literature,” 111–12; and Go, “Recent Trends in English Literature,” *Yeomyung* (黎明) 1, no. 2 (Feb 1, 1926) quoted in B. Kim, *Western Literature in Korea*, 1:250–51.
35. On Nae-sun-il-choi, see C. Park, *Independence Movements in Korea*, 316–20.
36. Choi, “Necessity of World Literature,” 393. I am using the word “literature” here in a sense that refers to the body of knowledge, not literary literature.
37. South Korea’s Korean name is 대한민국 (大韓民國; Dae-Han-Min-Gook). The original text is as follows:

濟物浦口에 漲來하난 波浪은 이의 地中海水의 [鹽]分이 浪和아왔고 白頭山
外에 響動하난 汽笛은 오래 西北利風의 燥氣를 傳播하얏난데 鐘路街衢에는
‘사하라’ 沙漠의 細砂가 黑軀子의 靴底에서 落下하고 南山樹木은 ‘유로파’
中原의 炭氣를 白人의 口裏로서 受吸하니, 於乎, 우리 半島도 이의 純粹한
朝天朝地下에 잇슴이 아니로다. . . . 此로써 觀하면 世界的智識을 取得
함은 世界를 知하려함이 아니라 곳 우리 大韓을 知함이오.

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