Imagination and Construction of Cultural Identity: A Comparative Study of Different Reports on the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition

Yan Liu

Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guandong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

ABSTRACT
The 1876 Philadelphia Exposition was held with the intention to celebrate the 100 years anniversary of the independence of the country. To this Exposition, China submitted 720 packed crates of exhibits and a customs official by the name of Li Gui, who was entrusted with the task of writing a report. Li complains about the narrow space assigned to the Chinese Court, but is proud to say that “with careful arrangement, it looked glorious and magnificent,” and visitors from different countries “gasp in admiration with no exception.” However, in the reports written by Americans carried on The Atlantic Monthly, the Chinese exhibits are viewed in a totally different perspective. Whereas William D. Howells makes a hasty comment on the Chinese workers who were still busy unpacking during his one-week stay at the event, Edward H. Knight classifies many Chinese exhibits as “crude and curious inventions.” The Centennial Exposition serves as a space where different cultures meet; therefore, a comparative study of these reports will reveal how the One perceives the other in similar or different ways, and thus open a space for further thoughts as regards cultural stereotypes, cultural awareness and cross-cultural (mis)understandings.

KEYWORDS
Philadelphia centennial exposition; reports; cultural stereotypes; cross-cultural (mis)understanding

中文摘要
为纪念独立宣言签署 100 周年，美国于 1876 年在费城首次举办了万国博览会。中国寄送了 720 箱货物参展，并派出一位叫李圭的官员观摩博览会并撰写参展纪实。在这篇题为《美会纪略》的文章中，作者细致叙述了博览会的缘起和各国陈列馆的主要展品，他虽抱怨中国馆地方狭小，但却夸张说“布置有法，愈觉华美可观”。与此同时，美国《大西洋月刊》上刊登的数篇报道却呈现出截然不同的视角。豪威尔斯仅仅轻描淡写地提及他在博览会逗留的一周时间内，中国人一直在“忙着拆箱”；爱德华·奈特则把很多中国展品列为“粗糙而怪异的发明”之列。费城万国博览会作为中美文化交流史上的一个个案，提供了两个相互陌生的文化之间的相遇，对比上述报道可以观察到作者对待他国文化和母国文化的不同态度，引发人们思考想象他者与建构自我之间的联系，并以此洞悉文化刻板印象、文化认知以及跨文化误读与理解等相关学术问题。

CONTACT Yan Liu  liuyan@gdufs.edu.cn

© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
1. A space for cultural dialogues

With the intention to celebrate the 100 years anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the United States held its first international fair in 1876, that is, International Exhibition of Arts, Manufactures and Products of the Soil and Mine, which is popularly known as the Philadelphia Exposition or the Centennial Exposition. To this Exposition, China submitted 720 packed crates of exhibits and a customs official by the name of Li Gui, who was entrusted with the important task of writing a report on the event. Li’s “A Brief Report on the US Exposition,” written after the event, records in extensive details the origin and organization of the Exposition, together with the many exhibits that the participant countries have sent to display. Among the many interesting exhibits that he sees at the event, there is one particular object in the Australian Pavilion that attracts his attention, and he describes it in details as such:

The object is woven with blue and white cotton, thick and tough. It is a little over one chi in height, with wide top and narrow bottom, tailored to fit the upper part of a human body. I don’t know the function of this object. One clerk told me that this is a corset for woman, the purpose of which is to make a woman’s breasts protruding and her waist slender so that she looks more beautiful. He then asked me, “Do Chinese women wear this?” I told him, “In ancient China, it used to be a fashion for a woman to have a slender waist. It was known as the “Chu Palace Waist.” However, the protrusion of a woman’s breasts is not allowed in the Chinese custom. If a woman is born with small breasts and her breasts cannot be made protruding, what can be done?” He then replied, “That’s easy! Two other objects in the shape of bowls can be tied up above the waist to achieve the effect.” Alas! This custom probably aims at the same effect as foot binding in China, but the pain is worse than the latter. (Li, 2010, p. 41-42)

In the eyes of a Chinese who went abroad for the first time in his life, a foreign woman’s corset looked “exotic” and incomprehensible. Li Gui could not imagine the function of the object, neither its effect, since in the Chinese custom in which he grew up, it was not considered proper for a woman to exaggerate her breasts. What he could do was to compare this foreign object with a similar practice in China, that is, foot binding, both practices aimed at making a woman’s body more attractive through confining and transforming (or rather, deforming) it.

This instance stands as an interesting case in cross-cultural communication in that when two cultures meet, people of one culture tend to understand the other unfamiliar culture with reference to one’s own. Such comparisons and cross references provide a dialogic space to enable one to make judgment of the other and at the same time, reflect on one’s own cultural tradition. However, due to the disparities between two cultures, this dialogue sometimes ends in further misunderstandings.

Whereas Li Gui was writing a report on the Exposition, American scholars and journalists were also writing about what they saw at the same event. In fact, the Exposition was reported extensively in the United States since this was the biggest event of the time, running from May 10, lasting for six months, and attracting nearly 10 million visitors. Among all reports by Americans on the Exposition, those carried on The Atlantic Monthly (known as The Atlantic from 2004) from 1876 to 1878 are chosen as the object of the study in this essay, including
(1) “A Sennight of the Centennial” by William Dean Howells;
(2) “Characteristics of the International Fair,” a series of six essays by an anonymous writer; and
(3) “Crude and Curious Events/Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition,” a series of 12 essays by Edward H. Knight.

The choice of *The Atlantic Monthly* as the chief source of materials in comparison lies in the following aspects: Firstly, founded in 1857 and originally subtitled “A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics” (later “A Magazine of Literature, Science, Art, and Politics”), *The Atlantic Monthly* is one of the leading magazines in the US which aims at publishing reviews on current affairs in the above mentioned disciplines. The essays carried on this journal may exert a shaping influence on public opinions. Secondly, this magazine was based in Boston, a city which was developed by early settlers into a center of politics, industry, commerce, education, and culture very early in American history. Boston was among the first cities to publish newspapers and journals in the Colonial Period (Nevins, 1986, p. 44), and it was also the capital of the social reform in mid-nineteenth century (1986, p. 172), during which period the Centennial Exposition took place. Therefore, the journal based in Boston stood at the forefront of American social transformation and must be very sensitive to new events. Thirdly, this magazine drew a group of intellectuals close to its circle. It was financially and intellectually supported by the Saturday Club which included such men of letters as Ralph Waldo Emerson, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and the historians John Lothrop and William H. Prescott (Baym, 1998, I: 921). When the Centennial Exposition took place, the journal was 20 years old, with William Dean Howells as the chief editor. Therefore, the magazine was highly intellectual in its attitude and taste.

An exploration into the backgrounds of the writers of these reports provides further grounds for the comparison in this essay. “A Sennight of the Centennial” was written by William Dean Howells, who worked as assistant editor and then chief editor (1871–1881) of the magazine, and who “helped to mold public taste” (Chang, 2003, p. 118) with his voluminous critical works and reviews. The writer of the six-part “Characteristics of the International Fair” was unknown, but since it was carried on *The Atlantic Monthly*, it may well represent the magazine’s attitude and value judgment (Anonymous, 1876a–e, 1877). “Crude and Curious Events/Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition” was written by Edward H. Knight, an office clerk in the United States Patent Office based in Washington, D. C., whose duty was to write annual reports. At the Centennial Exposition, Knight was appointed as a member of the international juries and therefore had an opportunity to observe it in close quarters. In comparison, Li Gui had been working at the customs office in Ningbo for more than 10 years before being appointed as the reporter for the Exposition by Robert Hart, the Inspector-General of the Imperial Maritime Customs Service in China. To obtain a position in the government, Li, like many other people in China at the time, passed the Imperial Examination, which required basic and solid training in Chinese classics, and could thus be regarded as a person of learning.

According to the study of John Haddard, the attitudes of the American visitors toward the Chinese exhibits can be mainly categorized into two kinds, the Progressive and the Orientalist. Whereas “Progressives viewed the exposition as an opportunity both to celebrate domestic achievements and to assess the progress of
other countries,” the Orientalists “believed the East was not only different from the West, but beautifully so” (Haddard, 2000, p. 52). In my view, both attitudes involve a comparison between two cultures. On one hand, the Progressives hope that the advances that the US has made will promote the advances of other countries in the same direction; thus they will inevitably view the others with reference to their own achievements. The orientalists, on the other hand, in order to appreciate the beauty of the Orient, will naturally highlight the differences of the Other from itself, thus Otherizing the latter. Since the centennial exposition serves as a space where different cultures meet, the reports contain not only the “facts” that the writers have seen, but also carry their attitudes toward other cultures and toward their own cultures. A comparative study of these reports, therefore, will reveal how the One perceives the Other in similar or different ways and thus open a space for further thoughts as regards cultural stereotypes, cultural awareness and cross-cultural (mis)understandings.

2. The “exotic” Other

In all the reports under examination, the writers express their horror, sometimes admiration, toward the exhibits of other countries. In many cases, the objects on display in other countries’ departments are perceived as very “exotic,” different from what they are familiar with in their home countries.

Li Gui makes it clear at the beginning of his detailed account that “walking through the Exposition was as if being thrown into the market places of the major capital cities. The myriads of treasures were shocking to both the eye and the mind” (Li, 2010, p. 31–32). In Li’s report, the Chinese pronunciation of the name of the country, the United States, for example, is given before its alternative names of “America” and “the Stars and Stripes” (2010, p. 25). Li tells his country folks, most of whom may have never heard of or known of this country, that the country “lies back to back with China on the globe” (2010, p. 25). A special mention of the geography is significant here since geography alone can constitute a way of seeing. As the editors of Sinographies (2008) argue, it is “a way of resolving patterns in the real into an ideology whose major value … is not simply the map’s deft and totalizing place-fixing, but more: a paradigm of the ‘faraway’ in general” (x). Thus, the geographical opposite positions of the two countries denote tremendous differences between the two cultures. A description of the objects produced by a country that “lies back to back with China on the globe” constructs a picture of a culture that is “faraway.” Since the US is the host country of the Exposition, the American Pavilion occupies almost 30 or 40 percent of the entire Main Building, and houses 1588 kinds of objects, “very rich indeed” (Li, 2010, p. 36). After offering a list of the major objects on display, Li particularly describes the following items in the American Pavilion: an iron safe, a movable wooden closet, jewelries and diamonds, mineral products, two machine guns, a piece of artillery, a double barrel, and a collection of educational materials.

These objects to which Li has devoted much effort in describing show that his major concerns mainly lie in technical innovations, natural resources, weapons and education in the American Pavilion. He goes to great lengths in explaining the four kinds of weapons, including the shapes, the structures, the functions and the prices of each kind. When he notices that “European countries all flock to buy” the artillery (Li, 2010, p. 37), he makes the
following comments on the double barrel: “One will not worry about the danger of not being able to load the bullets in time if confronted with enemies in haste” (2010, p. 38). For a Chinese who has recently gone through the two Opium Wars, Li must have had bitter feelings toward the power of heavy weapons and is thus extremely concerned with the ability for self-defense against intruders. He sees the advancement in science and technology in these “modern” weapons since this is what is lacked in his home country. The iron safe and the movable wooden closet that are described in details are other examples of technical innovations that Li sees lacking in China. In fact, the advancement is not only manifested explicitly by the weapons and the technical equipment, but also implicitly in other displays. When he notices a large block of coal, for example, Li cannot help but imagine that it must have been unearthed and carried to the Exposition by wheeled vehicles.

Li Gui is equally shocked by Western food since most of the daily food that the Westerners eat is different from the Chinese tradition. He speaks highly of the wines made of grapes and other fruits. However, he says that the Chinese visitors pay no attention to butter, cheese and coffee (Li, 2010, p. 58). The special mention of butter, cheese and coffee as food unfavored by the Chinese because of their smell emphasizes the “exotic” qualities of Western food. As is accepted by many scholars of cultural studies, food is an important part of a culture and can exert an impact upon the characters of those who depend on it. “Food is literally transformed and becomes part of the human body” (Lien, 2004, p. 6); therefore, it is generally believed that what one eats may influence one’s character. Since “food is always locally embedded,” the production and consumption of food are closely related to the social and cultural context of a particular region (5). By distancing himself from the food that Westerners eat for a living, Li Gui enforces his own identity as a non-Westerner. Thus, even if he mixes himself physically at the Exposition with many foreigners, he is very conscious of his Chinese identity and cannot easily accept other cultural traditions.

Li Gui writes in details what he believes to be “shocking,” including weapons and technical innovations in the American Pavilion. Interestingly, in the eyes of American reporters, the Chinese objects on display are also “exotic.” In Edward H. Knight’s (1877a–1877h; 1878a–1878d) detailed account, the following Chinese exhibits are what he categorizes as “crude and curious”:

Musical instruments: clappers (Knight, 1877a, pp. 519–20), wood harmonicon (1877a, p. 526), gongs (1877b, p. 646), bell (1877b, p. 648–49), drums (tam-tam, standing drum, kettle drum, rattle drum, tambourine) (1877b, p. 653–59), hiuën (1877c, p. 24), bamboo flutes (1877c, p. 24), pipe or clarinet (1877c, p. 26), cheng (1877c, p. 32), guitars (three-stringed guitar, moon-guitar) (1877d, pp. 162–64), fiddles (two-stringed, four-stringed) (1877d, pp. 167–69), kni (“scholar’s lute,” dulcimer [heen-kni]) (1877d, p. 170), lute (1877d, p. 171)

Husbandry: drill (1877e, p. 314), sickle (1877f, p. 421), rice scoop (1877f, p. 423), rice cleaner (1877f, p. 424), rice hulling equipment (1877f, p. 426), mill (1877f, p. 429), irrigating equipment (1877f, p. 429), ginger cleaner (1877g, p. 559)

Baskets and Basket Work: baskets (rattan, bamboo) (1877h, pp. 696–97), hat (1877h, pp. 698–99), fan (1877h, pp. 701–2)

Cotton, Silk and Spinning: cotton gin (1878a, p. 20)

Weaving: loom (1878b, p. 231)
Furniture, Shoes and Toilette: bamboo foot-stool (1878d, p. 427), bamboo chair (1878d, p. 427), bamboo cat-cage (1878d, p. 427), bamboo baby-cage (1878d, p. 427), sandals (1878d, p. 429), shoes (1878d, p. 430)

The above Chinese exhibits that are considered “crude and curious” fall into six categories, containing 32 kinds and nearly 50 individual objects, vividly manifested by 33 illustrations. In the middle of the account, Knight constantly makes comments as Li Gui does in his account. For example, when he describes the Chinese bell, he makes a distinction that the word “strike” is used in Chinese to make the bell sonorous instead of “ring” in the English language. He then attempts to justify the use of this word by saying that “[t]heir bells are struck by hand to announce the hours, as they have no striking clocks” (1877b, pp. 648–49). The explanation that Knight offers simplifies, or even probably misinterprets the collocation between the verb and the noun in the Chinese language. To make matters worse, the fact that China does not have clocks suggests the “primitiveness” of the Chinese culture to the American readers. Knight makes it clear at the beginning of this voluminous account that “the primitive and peculiar instruments and machines of a people are largely the result of their special necessities and opportunities” (1877a, p. 517); therefore, they reflect the living conditions of the people who produce and use them. Knight’s point of view is in accordance with what is generally acknowledged by contemporary scholars of cultural studies with reference to the relationship between people, the objects they produce and the place where they live. In the first place, “culture” in commonly perceived as “a whole way of life” (Williams, 1992, p. 228), and as such, culture embraces the interconnectedness between human beings, their daily practices, and a custom that is gradually developed on the basis of daily practices. The above list of exhibits is on the one hand, the creative products of the Chinese, and on the other, a reflection of the Chinese way of life. As a result, the objects on display, as Knight clearly knows, “are among the most authentic tokens of the common or the diverse origin of their respective owners” apart from “illustrating the degrees of civilization” (1877a, p. 517).

Whereas Edward H. Knight collects the “crude and curious” objects in the Chinese Court, William Dean Howell finds the Chinese “in disorder and unreadiness,” still busy unpacking. During the one week of Howell’s stay at the Exposition, the Chinese finally managed to put on a display of their products, “the rich grotesquery of their industries had satisfactorily unfolded itself” (1876, p. 96–97). In his customarily satirical and arrogant tone, Howells further describes the Chinese as such: “… their looks, their motions, their speech, their dress, amidst the fantastic forms of those bedeviled arts of theirs, affected one like the things of a capricious dream” (1876, p. 97). The two words/phrases in the description, “grotesquery” and “bedeviled arts,” manifest Howell’s negative, even hostile, feelings toward the Chinese exhibits. He compares the things he sees to the things in “a capricious dream,” unrealistic, outlandish, and incomprehensible. He does not even bother to find out what they are. For an intellectual such as William Dean Howells who believes that the event is “the glorious triumphs of skill and invention” (1876, p. 96), the display in the Chinese Court may look too “grotesque” to be described in further details.

Unfortunately, William Dean Howells is not the only one who thinks that the Chinese exhibits look “grotesque,” the anonymous writer of “Characteristics of the International Fair” shares his viewpoint. The report contains six parts, each running 10 pages or so. In this long report, China is mentioned several times, but all briefly and
hastily. The writer says that “China strikes one as elaborately ugly and grotesque” (Anonymous, 1876a, p. 90), in a derogatory and unfriendly tone. Upon listening to how the Chinese speak, the writer sees “the demoniac grimaces and contortions … together with their hoarse, angry, unintelligible threats and curses” (Anonymous, 1876e, p. 733). These words suggest the writer’s extremely unpleasant encounter with the Chinese and the Chinese exhibition. The writer must have been very biased against an unfamiliar culture and its people. Unlike Li Gui who is willing to learn about another culture, this anonymous writer embraces a dislike and even hatred toward something that he is unfamiliar with. However, similar to Li Gui, this writer views the Other against his/her own tradition, as s/he says, “The familiar names and look of the American show-cases gave an extraordinary edge to the strangeness of the rest; the contrast was needful to the full effect” (Anonymous, 1876a, p. 88). Obviously, apart from the familiar things in the domestic department, all other exhibits look “strange” to the viewer.

3. The (un)real One

A traveler, upon meeting with another culture, will inevitably engage in cultural identification through comparisons and reflections (Yin, 2009, p. 13). This is fully reflected in the reports under discussion.

Li Gui constantly reflects on his home country when describing the objects that he sees at the Exposition. Sometimes he expresses his concern with the disadvantageous situation of China in comparison with other countries. Mostly he thinks of change, viewing the advancement as manifested in the technical exhibits as the models for China’s future development. He is especially impressed by the Machinery Hall, 80 percent of which houses the technical innovations produced by the United States (Li, 2010, p. 48). He intends to describe some practical ones in details; however, he finds “perplexed, not knowing what to start with” (2010, p. 49). One example in which Li shows his reflection on China’s situation upon seeing the exhibits in the American Pavilion is when he describes a water scooping machine which is able to guide water from one place to another. He then thinks of China which constantly suffers from either the overflow or the lack of water from rivers, especially in the Northwestern region where people find it difficult to irrigate their farmland. Seeing how efficient the machine works, Li believes that such a water scooping machine is “what is needed badly in water conservancy system” (2010, p. 50). In the 1860s, a little more than 10 years earlier than Li Gui went to the Exposition, a movement was initiated by some Chinese intellectuals and high officials in China, including Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang, Li Hongzhang, and Zhang Zhidong with the intention to strengthen China’s power by introducing Western learning. Living in an environment for social reform, Li must have felt strongly the need to change and to make progress. His admiration for the American technology carries his sincere hope for his own country’s improvement. This concern for technological innovations in the report drew the attention of Cabinet Minister Li Hongzhang who wrote a preface for Li’s report, stating that people with aspirations should think of their country far and great (Chen, 2010, pp. 72–73).

Another example for such reflections is found in the descriptions of the Woman’s Pavilion, the making of which totally depends on women, except for its design. Li is
surprised to find that the exhibits there are of a wide variety, some of which are extremely exquisite. He is also surprised to learn that all women in the Pavilion are happy to satisfy his inquiries and behave in an elegant manner. He later learns from an accompanying friend that in the West, “women are equal to men in the society and they have an equal opportunity to receive education as men. Therefore, women can make important proposals and participate in state affairs” (Li, 2010, p. 61). This arouses Li Gui’s curiosity and he compares Chinese women’s social status with that in the West: “In the West, it is happy to have a son in the family, and equally so to have a daughter … But it is not the case in China” (2010, p. 61). Li further reflects on the negative effects of a popular saying in China, which goes, “Innocence is the virtue of women,” and then admits that this saying “has destroyed Chinese women’s lives” (2010, p. 61). A natural way to change the situation is, of course, to educate women and to make them read and write. Only by doing so, “can the Chinese tradition of looking down upon women be changed and the Chinese custom of drowning baby girls be abolished” (2010, p. 61). In Li Gui’s time, only one school for girls was established in China, that is, Muchen Methodist Middle School for Girls founded in 1872 by two American missionaries in Peking. It was still very rare for a girl to receive public education in China. Upon seeing foreign women’s productions at the Exposition, Li realizes that women’s enlightenment is not only important to women themselves but also to the society in general. This realization improves his understanding of gender relations and social reform. However, he would have to wait for 22 years before the first girls’ school run by the Chinese was established in his home country, that is, Jingzheng Girls’ School in Shanghai, financially supported by a businessman called Jing Yuanshan.

Whereas Li Gui thinks of improving his home country in the area of science and technology, the Americans feel proud of their scientific and technological achievements. William Dean Howells, for example, is proud to narrate the Machinery Hall in details, at the entrance of which stands the Corliss Engine whose majesty remains “most distinct.” He describes how the engine functions, particularly with reference to a man who sits in a chair nearby, reading his newspaper in a leisurely way and only climbing up the staircase once in a while to add oil to “some irritated spot on the giant’s body” (1876, p. 96). After offering a very literary narration of the giant machine, Howells concludes by saying that no one can “fail to utter his pride and content” at its efficiency. He continues to say in a proud tone, “All that Great Britain and Germany have sent is insignificant in amount when compared with our own contributions; the superior elegance, aptness, and ingenuity of our machinery is observable at a glance” (1876, p. 96). In a similar way, the anonymous writer of “Characteristics of the International Fair” is also proud of the Machinery Hall which, he believes, “makes an extraordinary impression upon everybody, and probably those who understand nothing of what they see are more imaginatively affected than those who know all about valves and pistons” (Anonymous, 1876c, p. 358).

In a similar way to the Americans who are proud of their powerful machinery, Li Gui was proud of the exhibits of his home country, too. However, a disparity exists between how he sees the Chinese exhibits and how the same exhibits are perceived by the Americans. For a Chinese who was brought up in a country which thought highly of itself but refused to connect to the outside world before the mid-nineteenth century, Li Gui could not help feeling pompous in front of the Other. He proudly describes the huge tablet at the entrance of the Chinese Court, on which are written three big Chinese characters, “Da Qing Guo,” meaning “Great Qing Empire.”
Participation in this international fair, therefore, strengthens the Chinese awareness of a national identity (Hong, 2011, p. 12). Li Gui complains about the narrow space, but is proud to say that “with careful arrangement, it looked glorious and magnificent” (2010, p. 32). In contrast to the many objects of technical innovation on display in the American Pavilion, the exhibits in the Chinese Court “follow the Chinese custom, all hand-made and none propelled by machines” (2010, p. 32). The fact that none of the Chinese exhibits are propelled by machines is understood by Li Gui as something that he can boast of since it suggests that the Chinese have clever minds and nimble fingers. The same fact, however, is seen by many visitors as a sign of China’s lack of modern technology. The sharp contrast between the hand-made crafts in the Chinese Court and the machine-driven equipment in the exhibition of other countries is interpreted by many viewers with regard to the different societal conditions, that is, one being agricultural and the other industrial (Haddard, 2000, p. 72). In the reports carried on *The Atlantic Monthly*, some of the exquisite crafts by the Chinese are viewed in a very negative way since being agricultural is understood as being pre-modern, thus associated with primitive stage of development.

In Li’s record, the following objects are considered “the best among the exhibits of all countries,” including silk, tea, china, carved woodwork and cloisonné enamel; and second best include such objects as copper, lacquer, silver and bamboo (2010, p. 33). At the same time, he observes an absence of lotus and bamboo in the Horticulture Hall (2010, p. 59). For a Chinese who grew up and had been living on the south of the Yangtze River, Li must have been very familiar with these two plants. Not only have lotus and bamboo served as a geographical background of his life, but they have always been important literary and artistic motifs in Chinese art and literature that have nourished such men of learning as Li Gui. Therefore, in his eyes, such absence is “a true pity” (2010, p. 59). However, in the reports by Americans carried on *The Atlantic Monthly*, the bamboo objects are listed among the “crude and curious” inventions. Edward H. Knight especially mentions some musical instruments made of bamboo (1877c, p. 24), bamboo basket (1877h, p. 697), bamboo hat (1877h, pp. 698–99), and four kinds of bamboo furniture: foot-stool, chair, cat-cage, and baby-cage (1878d, p. 427). When he describes the bamboo baby cage, Knight expresses his suspicion of its function, since he believes that it is “not too solid when it is made up. A child could hardly be better off except in its mother’s lap or on the grass” (1878d, p. 427).

4. Cultural identities: imagined and constructed

When William Dean Howells describes the people that he sees at the Exposition, he cannot help make an exclamation, “[i]t would be interesting to know what they thought of us spectators” (1876, p. 97). This invitation calls for a reverse of the gazing action. Whereas the visitors view the exhibits and the people in the departments of different countries, the people return their gaze and view the spectators at the same time. Li Gui, for example, is both a person to look and to be looked at.

As analyzed in the previous sections, all writers of the different reports on the Centennial Exposition, Chinese or American, view the Other with reference to oneself. The intention of such gesture is to highlight the differences between cultures, thus distinguishing oneself among all cultures. All writers bear clear consciousness of their cultural identities; therefore,
the objects displayed in other countries’ departments are all described as “exotic” to a certain extent if viewed against their own culture. This instance of cultural encounter offers an exceptionally powerful footnote to the term of “culture” as “a differential concept,” used “to account for the apparent differences between communities of people” (Bauman, 1999, p. 24). In order to strengthen one’s own cultural identity, it is necessary to distinguish one’s differences from others, to keep a distance from others, and sometimes to Otherize. In the eyes of cultural studies scholar, Stuart Hall, “identities are constructed through, not outside, difference” (Hall, 2000, p. 17). He further explains, “it is only through the relation to the other, the relation to what it is not, to precisely what it lacks” that the one establishes itself. In this process, it is also necessary to exclude the Other and to render “outside” abjected (2000, pp. 17–18). This is reflected in Li Gui’s abhorrence of Western food, as well as in Edward H. Knight’s negative attitudes toward the “crude and curious” inventions of the Chinese. This is also reflected in Li Gui’s pity for the lack of lotus and bamboo in the garden, as well as in William Dean Howells’s comments on the grotesqueness of the Chinese art. By downgrading the value of other cultures, the One is able to strengthen its own cultural advantages. In Edward H. Knight’s account, the “crude and curious” objects are grouped by their functions; therefore, objects of similar functions from different countries are placed one after another. In describing the Chinese fans, for example, Knight makes comparisons between those produced in China and those produced in Trinidad, Brazil, Fiji and Angola (1877h, p. 701–2). In other cases, he draws examples from many other “marginalized” regions and cultures, including the Pacific Islands, the Africans, the Siamese, the North American Indians, and the Caribbean. He succeeds in asserting the American cultural awareness and strengthening a sense of superiority by debasing the products made in these “Other” countries. One’s cultural identity is affirmed by a deliberate attempt of Otherization of those that do not belong to one’s own cultural tradition.

In order to assert one’s cultural identity, an exaggeration of one’s own achievements is sometimes unavoidable, making the One unreal. This is manifested in Li Gui’s proud announcement that the Chinese Court looks “glorious and magnificent” (Li, 2010, p. 32), as well as in William Dean Howell’s claim that “no one can now see the fair without a thrill of patriotic pride” (2010, p. 107). This exaggeration also results in the differences in viewing the same thing by different people. After describing all the magnificent exhibits in the Chinese Court, Li Gui pompously announces, “From today on, it is known to the world that the Chinese are cleverer and more intelligent than the Westerners” (2010, p. 32). He did not expect that some of the objects that he was proud to narrate were viewed as primitive and uncivilized in the eyes of the Westerners. Neither did he imagine that all the beautiful musical instruments of intricate makings were only viewed by the Americans as a mark of a primitive stage of civilization, as Edward H. Knight remarks after introducing more than 12 kinds of Chinese musical instruments, “It seems probable that the Chinese lack of musical knowledge and of harmony prevents their obtaining from this instrument [cheng] all of which it is capable” (1877c, p. 32–33). Whereas the Americans are proud of the Hall of Machinery, at the entrance of which stands the Corliss steam engine which “powered thirteen acres of other machines for combing wool, spinning cotton, printing newspapers, sewing cloth, and doing many other kinds of work” (Weisberger, 1976, p. 437), the Chinese could only present their irrigating equipment, cotton gin and the loom, which still needed much manual labor to manipulate. Although Li Gui was proud to announce that the hand-made objects are a sign for the Chinese people’s deftness at fingers, it is very obvious that China was ostentatiously lagging
behind in an age when “[m]achine work replaced handwork as much as possible” (2010, p. 444).

The disparity between how One sees itself and how One is viewed by the Other shows that both the One and the Other are imagined. One sees what he/she would like to see, and believes what he/she would like the Other to be. Viewing has thus become an activity for increasing one's cultural awareness. A space such as the Centennial Exposition cannot resolve cultural misunderstandings since what is presented on display and what is interpreted and believed do not always go together. The Chinese exhibits were selected to represent the achievements of Chinese culture, but for nearly 60 years from 1851 to 1910, the Chinese exhibits at international fairs did not undergo many changes, with hardly any modern machines or technological products (Hong, 2011, p. 7). It is true that China was weak at technological innovations in these decades, but what it selected to represent Chinese culture decides the ways in which it is perceived by other cultures. Commenting on the significance of the Exposition, the anonymous writer of “Characteristics of the International Fair” says, “it fertilizes the common mind and in many cases gives the impulse to serious research. … But there is a still higher education in which the six months of the Exhibition ought to have done the work of an ordinary lifetime, by enlarging our views, uprooting our prejudices, and implanting the sense of universal brotherhood …” (Anonymous, January 1877, p. 100). The Exposition may have become successful in many aspects, but the prejudices resulted from cultural stereotypes will obviously take much longer time to overcome.

The above analysis is conducted with the intention to understand ideology behind representation and interpretation, and to understand how cultural identities are constructed through comparisons. On one hand, what objects to be selected as a representation of one’s cultural achievements shows how one thinks of one’s own culture. Since a cultural tradition is formed by repeating daily practices, the material objects produced by people in daily activities carry cultural values. The objects, therefore, become a representation of a tradition related to a particular cultural group. On the other hand, what one sees in material objects is a reflection of the viewer’s inner world, either admiration or condemnation. These attitudes, enforced by discourse and writing, will develop into collective imagination about another culture, which further develops into cultural stereotypes. The above two aspects constitute the politics of viewing which shapes one’s acknowledgment of one’s own identity and recognition of other cultural identities. A comparative study of the different reports on the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition scrutinized in this essay shows that both the One and the Other are imagined in the first place and later constructed through writing.

Notes
1. This essay was delivered as a keynote speech at The 10th Annual Congress and International Conference of the Sino-US Cultural Studies Association, China Comparative Literature Association, on October 29, 2016 at Guangzhou.
2. All factual data about the Philadelphia Exposition come from Stephanie Grauman Wolf, “Centennial Exposition (2013),” “The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia,” http://philadelphiencyclopedia.org/archive/centennial/, 2013, accessed July 12, 2016.
3. Chi is a Chinese unit of measurement, roughly 33 cm long.
4. As the legend goes, Emperor Ling of Chu Dynasty favored women’s slender waist. As a result, in order to please him, all his concubines and ministers in the court strived to make
their waists slender by going on a diet and tightening up their bodies. The fashion of having a slender waist is later referred to as “Chu Palace Waist.”

5. All quotations from Li Gui’s report are translated by the writer of this essay. For the original Chinese version, see Li Gui, “A Brief Report on the US Exposition,” *Experiences at World’s Expositions at the End of Qing Dynasty*, ed. Chen Zhanbiao (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2010) 25–74.

6. This Movement is known as Westernization Movement, or Self-Strengthening Movement, resulted in the establishment of a series of technically innovative institutions, such as Jiangnan Manufacturing Bureau (Shanghai, 1865), Jinling Arsenal (Nanjing, 1865), Foochow Arsenal (Mawei, Fuzhou, 1866), China Merchants Steam Navigation Company (Shanghai, 1872), Shanghai Cotton Mill (1880), and Kaiping Mines (Luanxian, 1881).

    Zeng Guofan (1811 – 1872), military leader of Hunan Army to suppress the Taiping Rebellion, and later the viceroy of Zhili (Beijing, Tianjin, Hebei, Henan, and Shandong); Zuo Zongtang (1812 – 1881), military commander and viceroy of Liangjiang (Jiangsu, Jiangxi and Anhui); Li Hongzhang (1823 – 1909), politician and diplomat, viceroy of Zhili and Minister of Beiyang; Zhang Zhidong (1837 – 1909), politician and viceroy of Liangjiang and Liangguang (Guangdong and Guangxi). In late Qing Dynasty, there were eight regional viceroyos in administration, and that of Zhili is regarded as the most important. These four viceroyos are considered as the “Four Famous Officials of the Late Qing” who promoted social reform.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

*Yan Liu* is professor of literature at Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (Guangzhou, P. R. China). Her fields of interest in research include American literature, Sino-foreign literary and cultural relations, cultural criticism, and gender studies. In addition to numerous articles, she has published *Sexual Difference: The Philosophical Vision of Luce Irigaray* (2010), *The Representation of Motherhood in Modern Western Plays* (2004), *The Influence of Chinese Culture in American Literature* (1999), and *Chinese Literary Thought in North America* (co-edited with Wang Xiaolu, 2008).

**References**

Anonymous (1876a, July). Characteristics of the International Fair, I. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 38(225), 85–91.

Anonymous (1876b, August). Characteristics of the International Fair, II. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 38(226), 233–239.

Anonymous (1876c, September). Characteristics of the International Fair, III. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 38(227), 350–359.

Anonymous (1876d, October). Characteristics of the International Fair, IV. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 38(228), 492–501.

Anonymous (1876e, December). Characteristics of the International Fair, V. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 38(230), 732–740.

Anonymous (1877, January). Characteristics of the International Fair, VI. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 39(231), 94–100.

Bauman, Z. (1999). *Culture as Praxis*. London: Sage Publications.

Baym, N. (1998). *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (Vol. 2, 5th ed.). New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
Chang, Y. (2003). *A Survey of American Literature* (2nd ed.). Tianjin: Nankai University Press.

Chen, Z. (ed.) (2010). *Experiences at World’s Expositions at the End of Qing Dynasty*. Beijing: The Commercial Press. 陈占彪编：《清末民初万国博览会亲历记》，北京：商务印书馆，2010年。

Haddard, J. (2000, Autumn). The Non-Identical Chinese Twins: Traditional China and Chinese Yankees at the Centennial Exposition of 1876. *American Nineteenth Century History*, 1(3), 51–100. 10.1080/14664650008567024

Hall, S. (2000). Who Needs Identity?. In P. Du, J. E. Gay, and R. Peter (Eds), *Identity: A Reader* (pp. 15–30). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Hayot, E., H. Saussy, and S. G. Yao (eds). (2008). *Sinographies: Writing China*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Hong, Z. (2011). World Expositions and the Shaping of the Chinese Concept of ‘State’ during the Late Qing Dynasty. *History Studies*, 6, 4–20. 洪振强：《国际博览会与晚清“国家”之形塑》，《历史研究》2011年第6期，第4-20页。

Howells, W. D. (1876, July). A Sennight of the Centennial. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 38(225), 92–107.

Knight, E. H. (1877a, May). Crude and Curious Events at the Centennial Exhibition, I. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 39(235), 517–529.

Knight, E. H. (1877b, June). Crude and Curious Events at the Centennial Exhibition, II. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 39(236), 645–659.

Knight, E. H. (1877c, July). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, III. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 40(237), 22–34.

Knight, E. H. (1877d, August). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, IV. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 40(238), 161–173.

Knight, E. H. (1877e, September). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, V. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 40(239), 305–316.

Knight, E. H. (1877f, October). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, VI. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 40(240), 420–430.

Knight, E. H. (1877g, November). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, VII. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 40(241), 548–560.

Knight, E. H. (1877h, December). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, VIII. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 40(242), 689–702.

Knight, E. H. (1878a, January). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, IX. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 41(243), 19–29.

Knight, E. H. (1878b, February). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, X. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 41(244), 224–235.

Knight, E. H. (1878c, March). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, XI. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 41(245), 288–301.

Knight, E. H. (1878d, April). Crude and Curious Inventions at the Centennial Exhibition, XII. *The Atlantic Monthly*, 41(246), 426–434.

Li, G. (2010). A Brief Report on the US Exposition. In Z. Chen (Ed.) *Experiences at World’s Expositions at the End of Qing Dynasty* (pp. 25–74). Beijing: The Commercial Press. 李圭：《美国纪略》，陈占彪编：《清末民初万国博览会亲历记》，北京：商务印书馆，2010年，第25-74页。

Lien, M. E., and B. Nerlich (eds). (2004). *The Politics of Food*. Oxford: Berg.

Nevins, A., H. S. Commanger, and J. Morris. (1986). *A Pocket History of the United States* (8th revised ed.). New York: Washington Square Press.

Weisberger, B. A. (1976). *The Impact of Our Past: A History of the United States* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Williams, R. (1992). Culture and Which Way of Life?. In A. Easthope and M. Kate (Eds), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (pp. 224–230). Buckingham: Open UP.
Wolf, Stephanie Grauman. Centennial Exposition (1876). The Encyclopedia of Greater Philadelphia. http://philadelphiaencyclopedia.org/archive/centennial/, 2013. Accessed 2016, July 12

Yin, D. (2009). Across the East and West Seas: Cultural Observation, Identity and Choice in the Diaries of Late Qing Diplomats to Western Countries. Beijing: Peking University Press. 尹德翔：《东海西海之间：晚清使西日记中的文化观察、认证与选择》，北京：北京大学出版社, 2009年。