

Research on the Great Exhibition in London and Its Significance

Abstract

Through the demonstration of the Great Exhibition, British people began to reflect upon the social problems due to the lack of humanism character. Industrial technology developed with the lack of art and humanism factors. Industrial economy grew but the environmental resources were destroyed. The living standards of the world were improved while the international relations were confronted with crisis. Britain attempted to find a harmonious way to develop the Industrial civilization by setting up arts and vocational education, reviving and rebuilding the humanism tradition.

Key words: the Great Exhibition, the defects of Industrial civilization, revival of humanism

The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations was an international exhibition that took place in London, United Kingdom, 1851. It was the first world exposition of culture and industry. The birth of the Great Exhibition happened under the specific historical background and cultural context with its specific historical significance.

一、The Proposal of the Great Exhibition

The proposal of the Great Exhibition and its final implementation had sophisticated social background and historical process.

The background for the birth of the Great Exhibition

1. Expositions held in European continental countries. In 1798, France began to hold national exposition of industrial works. The rapid development of industrial technology in European continental countries brought British people great pressure. Therefore, in 1849, Henry Cole and a young designer went to the 11th French Industrial Exposition. On June 30th, he reported to Prince Albert on the information he had collected and managed to get attention and support from all sides of society.

2.Support from British Royal Family. Prince Albert took the position of Chairman of Royal Society of Arts in 1844, which was good news to promote arts exhibition. In 1845, the council of the Society decided to hold an international exhibition. On March, 1847, the first national exhibition was held with the next successive years of successful exhibitions. On January, 1848, Sir Henry Cole prepared a prospectus for an international exhibition. On September 6, 1849, *The*

¹ YU Wenjie, Professor and doctoral tutor of History School, Nanjing University; vice-chairman of World Modern History Research Association of China.

Times commented positively on the support for the exhibition from industrial and commercial circles. On January 3, 1850, a Royal Commission of 24 members was founded and announced to public by the Queen herself.

The Process of the birth of the Great Exhibition

1. Advancing the proposal

On June 30, 1849, Royal Society of Arts in Buckingham Palace, National Exposition Committee, construction company and Prince Albert held a meeting together and advanced a proposal on Britain hosting the Great Exhibition. Seven rules were laid down as following:

- A. The exhibits were grouped into four main categories—Raw Materials, Machinery, Manufacturers and Fine Arts.
- B. Choose a specific type of building as the exhibition hall.
- C. The site for the exposition should be in Hyde Park.
- D. The state is responsible for this international exhibition and sending the invitations.
- E. The committee provides money award to encourage the exhibitors.
- F. Form the Royal Commission for the Exhibition.
- G. The Society of Artists is responsible for raising funds for the exhibition.

2. Designing the Building

Building Committee of Exhibition, founded at the end of 1849, invited all countries to design for the building. Within three weeks, the committee received 245 entries, including 38 submissions from abroad. 68 entries were awarded with honor but no winner. The site had not been confirmed until an accident happened. On June 29, 1850, Robert Peel was thrown from his horse accidentally and died four days later. Peel supported the exhibition to be held in Hyde Park before he died, so his sudden death made his plan more appealing to people. The exhibition building must be removable, which can hold about 10d000 people and display the exhibits from all over the world. Joseph Paxton, a gardener, submitted his design plan according to those requirements with a promise to finish it within 9 days. On July 15, 1850, the building committee accepted Paxton's design plan with the cost of 79800 pounds. Therefore, a historical masterwork, dubbed by Douglas Jerrold, a reporter, as "the crystal palace" was born. The construction of the crystal palace began on September 26, 1850. It was completed within 6 months.

3 The Process of the Exhibition

On January 3, 1850, Royal Commission for the Exhibition was formed. Queen Victoria invited the international community in the name of state. At 9 a.m., May 1, 1851, the crystal palace opened its door for about 50 million people from all over the world who gathered in Hyde Park for the opening ceremony of the Great Exhibition. At 11:30, 9 royal carriages left Buckingham Palace for Hyde Park to join the grand opening ceremony of the Great Exhibition. When the bell

rang for 12 o'clock, Queen Victoria and the royal entourage walked into the crystal palace. Flags of all countries were hung in the crystal palace. Visitors crowded into the palace where all kinds of exhibits from different countries were displayed. About 18000 exhibitors took part in the exhibition with more than 100000 exhibits displayed. Later, the exhibits were classified to display according to the 30 definitions. A specific committee of experts was formed for each category of exhibits to supervise and review. At the end of the exhibition, 5084 awards were given by the review committee, including 3045 awards for foreign exhibits. Altogether the exhibition admitted 6039159 visits. On October 14, 1851, the Great Exhibition held the closing ceremony.

4 Relocation of the Crystal Palace

Shortly after the Great Exhibition, a company headed by Paxton bought the Crystal Palace at the price of 70000 pounds, which was relocated from Hyde Park to Sydenham, the southeastern part of London, with its scale expanding. The new Crystal Palace was opened in June, 1854, attracting more than 40000 visitors including the Queen. Within the next 30 years, about 2 million people every year came to visit. On 30 November 1936, the Crystal Palace was burned down by a big fire. When Winston Churchill inspected the scene of the fire the next morning, he said it was an end of an era. Musgrave, 1995, p.6.

5 China's Participation

Thanks to Edward Bowring, an official of British Trade Commission, China got the opportunity to take part in the Great Exhibition. Edward Bowring took over the job of commission's secretary due to the illness of former secretary Henry. Edward's father, John Bowring, who later became Hong Kong Governor, and Colonel Reid, Prince Albert's secretary who also once was British overseas governor looked together for the Chinese exhibits and finally put Chinese manufactures on the exhibition.

China Pavilion was located in south area of aisle, with exhibits like chinaware, bronze ware, silk, jadeware, cotton, timber, tea, preserved fruits, stationery, screen and ivory carving. Hu Ji Rong Si was awarded with a medal for its excellence and received a gold medal and a silver one awarded by Queen Victoria. Xu Deqiong (1822-1873, aka Ruiheng or Rongcun) was a comprador in British trading firm. When he was informed in the spring 1851, he packed his products for the exhibition and won honor for Chinese people.

二、 Problems Revealed by the Great Exhibition

The Great Exhibition revealed the problems of techniques, ecology, ethics and emotions brought by economic growth.

Challenges Faced by British Industrial Technology

The challenges were mainly from the European continental countries like France and Germany. The constant display of industrial manufactures and the fast

growth of precision instruments and chemical technology of these two countries gave them the leading role in the world industrial civilization history.

The exhibits from the United States, the former colony of UK, were of particular concern. 5048 American manufacturers took more than 500 exhibits with them, including the highly acclaimed McCormick reaping machine. On 13 October 1851, Karl Marx wrote to Engels, praising the American success in the exhibition, especially American gum, weapons, machinery, silver version camera and luxuries. Also, art decoration was very important.

The Lack of Art and Humanity in Industrial Manufacture

The Great Exhibition aroused concerns among people about the lack of art as well as humanity in the industrial production. The apathy of machines and the economic desire prevailed in the society. According to Alan Bullock, Britain developed the Industrial civilization at the cost of losing the traditional moral faith and humanity. From the filthy drain it poured out the flow of Industrial revolution which irrigated the whole world. From the dirty sewer the shiny gold flowed. Here, humanity developed to its greatest extent yet in its most brutal way. Here, civilization demonstrated its miracle and the civilized people became practically savages. (Alan Bullock, *The Humanist Tradition in the West*, Joint Publishing House, 1997, p.133).

The Destroy of Environmental Resources Caused by Economic Development

John Ruskin once said: how much land of Britain are you planning to transform into coal mines, brick kilns and quarry in the next 50 years? The answer is quite clear. Let me picture this for your extreme success: coast after coast, the whole British Isles are covered with chimneys so densely that they can compete with the masts of Liverpool docks. In the fields of Britain, you can not see any grass, trees or gardens. What you can see is a small quantity of corns planted on the roofs and reaped by fog. There is no room on the ground for roads so if you want to take a walk outside you have to jump to the elevated roads from the roof of mills or go through the tunnels beneath the floor of your house. The sun is blocked by smog so people can not enjoy sunshine and have to work hard under the oil lamp. (*Selected Writings of John Ruskin*, translated by Wang Qingsong, etc. Joint Publishing House, 1999, pp. 237-238)

The International Conflicts Caused by the Competition in Resources and Markets

Due to the competition in the markets and resources, war broke out between Russia and Turkey in 1853. British people opposed British government being involved in the war. According to William Morris, the aim of Britain pushing the aggressive foreign policy was to suppress the national liberation movement of Slavonic people in Balkan Peninsula, protect the British colony system in India and increase the interest income of Turkey bond holders. However, in these wars, it was British civilians especially the working class that was confronted with disaster, hunger and death. Philip Henderson. *William*

Morris: *His life, Work and Friends*, Norwich, Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1967, pp.173-174.

三、 The Significance of the Great Exhibition

On 6 November 1851, the Royal Commission submitted a summary report to Queen. It was said by the report that all expectant goals of the exhibition were successfully achieved and it promoted the development of Industrial technology and international communication. The report also advised that the surplus of the exhibition should be used to promote the cooperation among all lines of human labor and international communication.

Benefit on the Communication among Different Regions and Nations

According to Paul Young, the Great Exhibition made the world a great family, which reconstructed the development way of world history, built the new order of Victorian Age and realized the century-old dream of globalization. Paul Young, *Globalization and the Great Exhibition*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p.94, 17, 1. The Great Exhibition promoted not only the development of British Industrial manufacture and technology, but also the communication between nations and globalization. As is known to all people, the Great Exhibition was far beyond Britain, European continental countries or British Empire. It also exceeded Germany, Russia, the Ottoman Empire, China and Australia etc. It helped integrate the whole world, promote the communications between regions and nations and globalization, and revive the religion and humanism tradition. J.A. Auerbach, *Britain, the Empire, and the World at the Great Exhibition of 1851*, Ashgate, 2008, p.18.

Benefit on the Education of Arts and Technology

The Great Exhibition had a surplus of 186000 pounds. Prince Albert suggested that the money be used to develop the exhibition, arts education and vocational and technical education. According to his suggestion, 50000 pounds should be used to buy a piece of land in South Kensington and set up four institutions to expand the influence of the exhibition and promote the development of Industrial technology education. Arts and crafts education set up by Henry Cole put their center in Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1853, British government established Science and Technology Department in South Kensington to manage the crafts education, as well as sponsor the secondary technical education, in order to cultivate the arts and crafts talents needed by the country development.

The Great Exhibition began the new era of harmonious cooperation between technology and arts in the form of industrial technology exposition. It was an era of technology and machine civilization from 1851 to 1910. After the Great Exhibition, people thought more about technology and economic growth. People began to seek a balance between arts and technology after WWI. The focus was technology and art civilization from 1920 to 1939. After WWII, human civilization was confronted with the challenge of ecological environment. The theme was technology and eco-civilization since 1958.

Benefit on the Growth of Social Class

The Great Exhibition promoted the communication and cooperation between the working class and industrial capitalists. In the meantime, it also boosted industrial manufacture, science and technology, product packaging and sales, and the formation and growth of the new social class – the consumer group, which fundamentally changed the structure and class of British society, led to the division and growth of two social classes – proletariat and bourgeoisie, and accelerated British historical transition from the era of manufacture and consumption to a society of service.

E. P. Thompson once said: in 1832, the existence of the working class was a great deal in British politics. It was a long history to form the social classes and further develop the relationships between them. As is known to all, Prince Albert took the position of Chairman of the Society to Improve the Condition of the Working Class in 1844 and he thought the participation of the working class was a key factor for the success of the Great Exhibition. Robert Stephenson, *the Great Exhibition its Palace and its Principle contents*, Routledge & Co., 1851, p.49.

The labor and the social role change were demonstrated fully in such a big exposition. During the Industrial Revolution, there were only three kinds of the working people—manufacture workers, agricultural laborers and servants. After the Great Exhibition, craftsman, factory workers, construction workers, packer and salesman began to emerge. Industrial capitalists and commercial capitalists began to diversify. In the meantime, the so-called middle class began to change. The working class and the middle class began to realize that they belonged to different interest groups. Francois Bedarida, *A Social History of England 1851-1975*, London, Translated by A. S. Forster; Methuen, 1979, p.38. This meant the growth of class and its consciousness in the process of the formation of different classes.

Benefit on the Renaissance of Religion and Humanism

Queen Victoria wrote in her diary on 1 May 1851: today is the greatest and the most glorious day of our life. What makes me proud and delighted is that my dear Albert is associated with this day forever... the creator of this peace festival unites the arts and industry from every corner of the world. After the Great Exhibition, it became a historic trend to advocate the cultural tradition and humanistic character. In this context, the 19th century British Arts and Crafts Movement developed in many domains with profound cultural meaning, such as philosophy, literature, arts, etc. According to K. Livingstone and other western scholars, it was a new renaissance with its focus on crafts. (K. Livingstone, *International Arts and Crafts*, A & V Museum, 2006 p.228.)

The reflection upon Industrial civilization and the revival of humanism tradition began much earlier than the Great Exhibition. A. W. N. Pugin suggested in his book in 1834 that the medieval civilization especially the Gothic religious arts be revived based on the change of a village during 400 years. The most important practice of this idea was the redesign and construction of Parliament House in 1835. After the Great Exhibition, people were clearly aware of the greatness of machine civilization as well as the fear of it. That is because people began to understand that Things seen: The Earth is a Lord's; Things unseen: Love

not the world. (Things seen: The Earth is a Lord's; Things unseen: Love not the world; Geoffrey Cantor, *Religion and the Great Exhibition of 1851*, Oxford university Press, 2011, p.129\137.)

John Ruskin, 1819-1900, opposed industrial civilization and advocated the revival of tradition and socialism. American ideologist Roland N. Stromberg gave high marks in his book *An Intellectual History of Modern Europe*: British socialism came not from Karl Marx but John Ruskin. John Ruskin's life also had some beautiful stories. In Oxford, there were several places left with memories of John Ruskin for Lucy. William Morris, 1834-1896, advocated the happy manual labor. He wrote *News from Nowhere*, edited socialism journals, befriended with Karl Marx's daughter and practiced socialism under the influence of the great socialists Karl Marx and John Ruskin.

C.R. Ashbee 1863-1942, gave up his family fortune and took the way as Ruskin and Morris did. He advocated Arts and Crafts Movement and enhanced Ruskin's socialism ideology and Morris's socialism practice. He turned it into a socialism belief and became a mature socialist.

More importantly, the Great Exhibition left us a lot of precious cultural heritage and historical memories: the Crystal Palace, Victoria and Albert Museum, to name a few. Though the Great Exhibition has already been the past, the humanistic spirit and the historical landscape it left us will be with us forever.

Conclusion

The Industrial exhibition is still going on, along with the fast growth of Industrial civilization. Meanwhile, in this modern world, there still exist national interest, conflicts and clashes, wrestling of groups, war and death. So we wonder where we can find our cultural tradition, our religious faith, our ethic morals, our humanistic emotions and our happiness.