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## "The Sole Guardians of the Art Inheritance of Asia": Japan at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair

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“The Sole Guardians of the Art Inheritance of Asia”:  
Japan and China at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair

On a frigid winter night in St. Louis in 1903, a man named Blackmer sat in a deep, brocade-covered chair sipping brandy and puffing on a thick cigar in front of a crackling fire. He was an experienced exposition planner who had gained his reputation at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, and his hosts were entrepreneurs interested in the operation of lucrative concessions at the upcoming St. Louis World's Fair. A "Chinese Concession [would be] a failure," Blackmer asserted. "People won't go. [It would be] the most *uninteresting* thing I've ever seen." A Japanese concession, he explained, "would be a winner ... because the interest of the world is centered on Japan."<sup>1</sup>

Blackmer was right. The Japanese had the attention of the world and earned bemused respect both on and off the St. Louis fairgrounds. They transformed their country into a military industrial power complete with an expansionist agenda and mastered the Western mode of exhibitionary **[End Page 675]** practice in the grandiose world's fairs of the imperial era. From Blackmer's point of view, compared with the Japanese the Chinese embodied what Timothy Mitchell (after Edward Said) has called the "Orientalist reality," a Western construction that continued, in 1904, to depict the Chinese as an unchanging Other defined by inadequacies. The Japanese, according to Blackmer, were "winners" because they, along with Western nations in the St. Louis Exposition in 1904, applied what Mitchell has called the "modern representational order" and effectively assigned the Chinese subordinate status in the game of colonial competition.<sup>2</sup>

This was an era of international arm-wrestling in which losing countries were eclipsed, and China had been losing for some time. After the Opium Wars, it endured unequal treaties with Great Britain, France, and Russia, followed by the United States. China then went on to lose first the Sino-French War and then the Sino-Japanese War. Japan emerged from this same aggressively imperialist period much stronger than China but justifiably continued a defensive posture against Western encroachment. Although Japan took possession of Formosa and other Chinese territory after the Sino-Japanese War, its victory was mitigated by the Triple Intervention, and the Japanese were threatened by the U.S. seizure of the Philippines during the Spanish-American War. In 1900, when Japanese troops entered Peking with the Western powers in response to the Boxer Rebellion, it was apparent that the Japanese sought to measure up on the Western scale. And as Blackmer gave the St. Louis fair planners a piece of his mind, Japan prepared for both the fair and a war with Russia that would be fought on Chinese soil.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning with an overview of the 1904 St. Louis fair, followed by a consideration of related Japanese publications produced for an English-reading audience from the same era, I will investigate the ways in which the Japanese, for self-promotion purposes, used Western methods of display, journalism, and literature to take advantage of China's vulnerability. They did this to raise their international status from defamed Oriental to respected colonial power. As the exposition forum was designed by Western imperial powers to communicate their hegemony, the Japanese saw the St. Louis fair as a way to consolidate a dominant position in the Far East. They did this by participating in a system of signification in which objects and people were arranged in exhibits to suggest a world cultural hierarchy, rendering the **[End Page 676]** world readable and manageable from the colonizers' point of view.<sup>4</sup> I will demonstrate that the Japanese enacted this exhibitionary ordering at the St. Louis fair to promote a new, alternative reading of Japan's political position, one that assigned it the titles of imperial nation and colonial power: the protector of Chinese territory and...

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