

SHOULD KOREA GOVERN HERSELF?

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KOREA, long a hermit nation, then submerged for thirty-five years in the Japanese empire a forgotten nation, has now emerged as world news.

Anthropologists are undecided about the origin of the Korean people. Some think they are related to both the Malays and the Polynesians. Apparently they are distinct from both the Chinese on one side and the Japanese on the other. Although they took their culture from the Chinese and have throughout the ages admired the wisdom of the sages of the Middle Kingdom, their language is entirely different from that of China, their costume to this day is distinctive, many of their customs and habits differ widely from those of neighboring peoples, and physically the Koreans differ, being larger and slenderer than the Japanese and not so big and sturdy as the Manchurians to the north. To most foreigners all Orientals look much alike, but for an Oriental it is usually easy to tell at a glance the nationality of a man on the street eventhough dressed in foreign clothes. If he sits, eats, or works, the whole world can see the difference. Chinese sit on chairs, Japanese on their heels, Koreans cross legged. Japanese and Chinese drink tea at every opportunity from morning to night; Koreans are not tea drinkers. Across the Korean straits men in dark *kimono* swing their loads from carrying poles on their shoulders; beyond the rivers that divide Korea from Manchuria, Chinese in indigo blue sway to similar cargo; south of the rivers white robed Koreans bend under the burdens, on the carrying frames on their backs.

Koreans are proud of the fact that their history goes back for a period of about four thousand years, at which time a wise man by the name of Tangoon is said to have come from China to Korea, where he taught the inhabitants agriculture and other arts and became the founder of the nation. Later they adopted the Chinese written character and took into their language the whole vocabulary of that country. More than a thousand years later they passed on the Chinese written character and something of the culture developed in Korea based on that of China and the teachings of Confucius, to the unlearned people of the Nipponese islands, a people still considered by the Koreans as a race only recently emerged, and that not completely, from barbarism.

Following the precepts of Confucius and Mencius, Korea pays respect to ancestors, parents, the aged, and the ruler, and

admires the scholar, the man of wisdom, as the man of achievement, after whom follows in the social scale the farmer, the producer of goods, then the merchant, the distributor of goods, and last of all the soldier, who neither produces nor distributes but destroys. The West smiles at the topsy-turvy East and continues to admire the successful business man and to make heroes of its soldiers.

Korea had her scientists, to whom bear witness the remains of an ancient astronomical observatory claimed to be one of the oldest in the world. The world's first encyclopaedia was published in fifty volumes in the Korean language, and books were printed from movable type in Korea fifty years before they were in Europe.

Centuries ago a progressive Korean ruler, concerned that, on account of the difficulty of mastering the thousands of Chinese written characters, many of the people remained illiterate, appointed a committee of learned men to invent a system of writing simple enough for women to read. Seated in a temple courtyard, at a loss how to proceed, one of them, observing the pattern of the lattice work in the temple door, took from it the idea of the simple forms of the letters of the Korean alphabet, whose twenty-five letters and their combinations are purely phonetic and said by those in a position to know to be the second most scientific in the world. There is no spelling to be learned and any one can learn to read in a few hours. Naturally it takes longer to master the vocabulary and, especially for a foreigner, the delicate but important matter of honorifics.

Koreans are a shrewd and patient people who may be led but are not easily driven. Before superior force they bow, but with the tongue in the cheek, and not even the diligent efforts of the "dangerous thoughts" section of the Japanese police were successful in making them into good Japanese citizens. A Korean has a fairly accurate idea of what his neighbor's opinion is while being decidedly canny about expressing his own. Privacy and secrecy are alike unknown in the Orient. The Korean, if asked his opinion of any one, no matter how evil, does not say anything against him but is a past master at "damning with faint praise." After all, he has to live with the man, and why make an enemy?

Owing to her geographical situation Korea has many times been a battlefield. The armies of China, Russia, and Japan have fought on her soil, and she herself has been repeatedly invaded from across the straits by her warlike Nipponese neighbors. The Koreans, though they are a peaceful people without a navy or standing army and have never attacked

anyone, nevertheless defended themselves to such good purpose that they retained their independence, a small nation of twenty millions, amongst populous neighbors, for many hundreds of years.

In the sixteenth century one of the most disastrous of the invasions of Korea took place under the most famous Nipponese commander of all time, Hideoshi. The country was overrun, Korean works of art and historical relics were carried away to Japan or systematically destroyed to such an extent that Korea has never fully recovered from the effects. Among the various types of beautiful pottery for which Korea had long been famous was one made in only a few villages, the method of manufacture being a family secret passed on from generation to generation. Hideoshi transported every man, woman, and child from those villages to Japan, where their descendants live to this day and have made world famous the Satsuma ware of Japan invented in, and stolen from, Korea. After seven years' struggle the Koreans finally defeated their enemies and drove them off by the use of gun powder and iron clad "turtle" ships that sailed in among the fleet of Nippon and sank most of it.

One of Japan's wars with China was fought in Korea and led to its subjugation. After defeating China, the Nipponese, instead of withdrawing, remained where they were, exerting more and more pressure until they finally forced the emperor to sign over the country to them, murdered the empress who opposed them, and in 1910 annexed the country.

Until the system was abolished by the Japanese, every village had its teacher who taught those who came to him, usually on his own veranda, and though schools for higher education were scarce, so was complete illiteracy. The new rulers, over a period of thirty-five years, provided primary schools up to grade six for about twenty per cent of the children of the country, while there were government middle schools in the provincial capitals and a few other centres. Mission schools, most of them older than the government institutions, were more and more restricted and controlled until by the time the ultra-nationalistic movement preceding the war had begun, they had practically all gone out of existence. Three colleges and a medical school carried on by missions and Koreans together provided almost the only opportunities for higher education for Korean students, the enrolment in the government colleges being almost altogether Japanese, while it was made practically impossible for a Korean to go abroad for study.

Some of the arts of modern Korea are brass work, lacquer ware, mother-of-pearl inlay, wood carving, pottery, silk weaving, and embroidery.

of eight-five per cent of the inhabitants. Fishing, lumbering, mining, fruit growing, raising of silk worms, and manufacturing are the other chief industries. Many natural resources are still undeveloped. Minerals abound especially in the north, where are the large hydro-electric works carried out by the Nipponese as part of their war potential. How much of the power and manufacturing plants remain to-day is a matter of speculation. Agriculture is more important in the southern part of the country, and part of the present economic difficulties is due to the loss of natural exchange of products between the more industrial north and the agricultural south.

Why have not the Korean people with their love of learning progressed further? Several factors have contributed to this result. The low economic standards that have prevailed for centuries made it difficult for most people to do anything but struggle for a bare existence. These in turn are largely due to the small amount of land farmed by the great majority of farmers, because the paternal holdings have been divided and redivided among the family. No amount of labor will produce a very abundant living for a family from two or three acres of land, and many have no more than this. Besides, the country is so mountainous that the area of arable land is small compared to the population.

Another reason for Korea's backwardness derives from her history. Her early experiences with other nations having been of such a painful nature, she resolved to avoid trouble by withdrawing from contact with other countries. Korea being convinced that her own peaceful ways were better than the ways of war, this self-imposed isolation prevented her from receiving the stimulus of modern ideas as early as she otherwise would. By the time she realized that other parts of the world were making progress while she remained stationary, the mental inertia developed through long centuries of self complacency was sufficient to prevent rapid acceptance of new ideas. The zeal of young reformers was opposed by the nobles, even as in Europe, for they foresaw in the new ideas the loss of their own power. Before the struggle had been won by the progressive party, Korea found herself reduced to a state of vassalage by Japan, and progress for Korea by Koreans was at an end.

The system of taxation prevailing throughout the centuries was an effective check to progress. Under the emperor, who was an absolute monarch, the provincial governors and other officials received no salary but were required to pay into the treasury certain sums raised by taxes. There was no fixed rate, and what could be raised over and above the amount turned in went to

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local officials, who saw to it that their own nests were well lined. Under this system any one who lived in a larger or better house than his neighbor, who acquired a bigger farm, or showed any sign whatever of prosperity was obviously able to pay more taxes, and these were duly collected. If, on the other hand, he appeared more poverty-stricken than others, it was assumed that he was hoarding and must have large sums hidden away, from which he could well afford to make a generous gift to the treasury. Under this system any effort to improve one's circumstances was folly. Initiative was stifled effectively and progress prevented.

Under the Nipponese the system differed, but the result remained the same. The better paid positions were reserved for the Japanese, the Koreans being ineligible. There was thus not much advantage in special efforts to improve one's circumstances, but attempts were positively dangerous. Any Korean who became at all prominent in any way, even in the church, (there was of course no political party) was accused of "dangerous thoughts" and put out of circulation. Under the system of justice that prevailed, an accused person was considered innocent until he proved himself innocent. It is not easy to disprove an accusation of dangerous thoughts. Seven years in prison was the usual sentence, which was quite long enough to enable the public to forget the prominent person and to discourage others from such ambitions. This is one reason why to-day there are many parties in Korea and no influential leaders. It takes time for leadership to develop and the people to learn whom they can trust.

The people had no part in their government save what had been exercised from the earliest times in the local affairs of the villages. Public meetings were not allowed except with special police permission, and with spies and police present. In the years preceding the war even this privilege was withdrawn. All organizations with international connections, such as the Sunday School Association and the Christian Endeavor Society were first banned; later purely local ones were abolished. There is left nothing in Korea in the nature of a united group or organization except the Christian church, which had been for centuries the largest and most influential body in the country; and because of this, it was feared and persecuted. In and through the church many thousands of people received their first and only training in democratic government and parliamentary procedure. Illiterate not being tolerated in the church, the Christians as a whole are the most enlightened and progressive group in Korea to-day, so that it is not surprising to find a large proportion

of them being appointed to posts of importance under the military government in South Korea.

Even in the darkest days of her subjugation Korea did not become Japanese, and though abandoned by the League of Nations and apparently forgotten by the world, she continued to cherish the hope that some day she might again be independent and free. Bitter was the disappointment when the allied announcement was made that she was to be under a commission for a period of five years. She was eager to try her wings, and any delay was irksome.

When even that plan fell through, and instead of being under a Soviet-American commission, she has been rent in two, the people of the two sections are prevented from travelling or even communicating freely with one another, exchange of their products is impossible, and two different forms of government have been set up, the Korean people cannot be blamed very much if they feel they have gained little by their liberation.

Are they ready to govern themselves? They are anxious to try, inexperienced it is true, but other nations have had to learn for themselves how best to run their own affairs, and what other way is there to learn? Our English speaking peoples took generations to work out the degree of democracy they have achieved, and it is not to be expected that others will accomplish as much in a short time. It will take time for leaders to develop, to gain the confidence of the people, for people to learn whom they can trust, to learn how to govern themselves.

The autocratic rule of an absolute monarch and the stern oppression of the Japanese have both been found intolerable. To-day in that small country communism and democracy, the latter under the handicap of being imposed by a military government of occupation, are both being tried out. Koreans are being presented with the opportunity of seeing for themselves which they prefer. It is to be hoped they will be given the opportunity to choose.

Self government for Korea should be a much simpler and easier thing to achieve than in many other countries, notably Palestine or India. In Korea there is no racial problem, no religious antagonism, no barrier of language, no class division of any consequence, and the people have been one united nation for centuries. They think of their country as one, their people as a unit. The longer the present artificial division remains and the further the ways of the two sections diverge, the more difficult it will be to come together and the more problems there will be to face. If self government is to have a reasonable chance in Korea the present division cannot come to an end too

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Division and strife in Korea would make her a danger to the world.

Yes, Korea should be allowed to govern herself, and the more she is given the opportunity the better. She will make mistakes, of course. What nation has not? She, like others, learns by her mistakes. Those who have known Korea's humiliation, look forward to the time when she once stands erect, a nation among the nations of the world.