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Author(s): Homer B. Hulbert

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THE ENFRANCHISEMENT OF KOREA.

BY HOMER B. HULBERT.

THESE are red-letter days for the little empire of Korea. Never since the year 1122 B. C. has she known complete independence until within the past few months. During all those years there was never a time when her allegiance was not demanded by one or other of her neighbors, and when influences and forces, over which she had no control, were not moulding her to their own designs. To-day she owes allegiance to no one, and no power stands behind the throne to threaten or cajole its royal occupant into any course of action that does not meet with his own approval. It may not be uninteresting to follow out the steps which have led to this result.

When the Manchus, in the middle of the seventeenth century, overran Korea, brought the king to bay in the mountain fortress of Nam-han and there forced an abject surrender, they set up a stone on which was carved the evidences of Korea's vassalage to China. In one sense it was vassalage, and in another it was not. China never claimed the right to regulate her internal policy nor to meddle with her foreign policy. Her attitude toward the peninsular kingdom has always been that of a patron rather than that of a master. She more than once disclaimed responsibility for Korea's misdeeds, and disavowed any active interest in the affairs of the peninsula. From time immemorial it has been customary for Korea to send an annual embassy to Peking to present the compliments of the King and offer some small token of allegiance. While the Emperor accepted these signs of vassalage, he never took upon himself to do more than advise in regard to Korean affairs.

Such was the condition of affairs in the peninsula when in 1864 the present King, now Emperor, came to the throne. The

deceased King had left no heir and the duty of nominating his successor devolved on the one who should secure possession of the royal seals. The Queen Dowager Cho entered the apartment where the King lay dying and succeeded in getting the seals from the Queen, who did not dare to refuse, since the Dowager was her senior. As successor to the throne a boy twelve years of age was nominated, who belonged to a collateral branch of the royal family. At that age he was, of course, not able to handle the reins of government, and his father, the celebrated Tai Wun Kun, became Regent until he should attain his majority. This Regent was a man of indomitable will, striking personality and tenacity of purpose. Whatever may be said of his mistakes, his rule was never less than strong. Royalty in Korea has often been so surrounded and hedged in that the nominal ruler has had little to do in the work of administering the government, but it was not so in his case. He was the actual as well as nominal ruler.

One of the first questions that came up after his assumption of the Regency was in reference to the opening of Korea to foreign influences. This question was introduced in a way that delayed the opening of the country for at least a decade and a half. Roman Catholic mission work had been carried on in Korea for nearly a century, sometimes by native converts alone, but more often by French priests, who entered the country early in the century. From the very first it was a proscribed religion, and at four different times severe persecutions have decimated the Church. In 1839 three French missionaries were executed. France, beyond sending threatening letters, did nothing by way of reprisal, and this naturally gave Korea a false sense of security, for she thought that what France did not do she could not do. For a full decade before the accession of the Regent to power, the government had been in the hands of a party that, while not favorable to Christianity, adopted a tolerant position. With the death of that King, however, the reins of power passed over into the hands of a party that was violently opposed to Christianity, and trouble was sure to follow. It is not certain that the Regent was at first inimical to the Church, for we are told by those who are conversant with the history of those days, that on one occasion he was about to use the Bishop as a commissioner to the Russians in the north, in order to persuade them not to push the matter of reciprocity of trade across the border. It is not un-

likely that the Regent was only negatively opposed to the Romanist propaganda, but he was forced to stronger measures by the party which had put him in power. However this may be, the matter came to a crisis when the Bishop and eight of his companions were seized and thrown into prison, from which they were brought forth only to meet the executioner's axe. Soon a French fleet, under the command of Admiral Roze, appeared off the coast of Korea and sent messengers to the court demanding redress for the murder of the nine Frenchmen. As this was not answered, the Admiral landed his forces on the island of Kangwha and stormed the town. But he had miscalculated the strength of the Koreans, and after a considerable party of his men had been entrapped among the mountains and severely handled, he set fire to the town, re-embarked his troops and sailed away, leaving the Koreans to believe that they had been victorious. A general persecution was then ordered, and during the next three years ten thousand Christians were killed, not counting those who perished among the mountains from cold and hunger while trying to evade the persecutors. Thus it appears that Korea's first introduction to foreign powers resulted in her hardening herself to all outside influences and determining to preserve her seclusion.

Shortly before the coming of the French, an American schooner, "General Sherman," had approached the shores of the northern province for the purpose of finding an opening for trade, and though warned by the government to desist, forced its way up the Ta-dong River on a high tide and grounded above the inner bar. The natural result was that the officers and crew were all massacred by the mob, with the acquiescence of the government. In 1871 the United States government took the matter up and sent an expedition under the command of Admiral Rogers to make an attempt to induce the Korean government to conclude a treaty of peace and friendship. A surveying party from the fleet was fired upon by a Korean fort on Kangwha, and a party was promptly landed and the fort taken, though every man of the garrison was shot down in the process. The mistake of the French was repeated, and when the Koreans saw the fleet sail away to China they felt sure that another of the great powers of the West had been humbled. The Regent erected a monument in the center of the city, on which was in-

scribed a fierce denunciation of any man who should dare mention the subject of treaties with the "barbarians."

In 1873 the Regent was compelled to retire, for the King had long ago reached his majority and a new party had arisen, with the Queen as its patron. The cardinal point in the policy of this party was opposition to every plan of the Regent, in consequence of which the Japanese demand for the ratification of a treaty was acceded to and the document was signed at Kang-wha. In 1882 occurred the soldiers' rebellion, during which the Queen fled south for safety and the Regent was put back in power. The ousted party appealed to the Chinese for help, not because they liked the Chinese, but because without their help they could not regain their lost position. A Chinese force arrived, the Regent was spirited away to China and the Queen returned to Seoul and her party to control.

From this time on, Chinese influence was overwhelming in the peninsula. A strong effort was made in 1884 to put it down, but without success. The Chinese had not, before 1882, laid claim to a right to interfere in Korean internal affairs, but now that an opportunity presented China resurrected her ancient claim to full suzerainty and tried to show the world that Korea was a vassal as well as a tributary state. She broke her convention with the Japanese by sending troops to Korea without first notifying the Japanese Government and the Japanese made this a *casus belli*.

The immediate net results of the war to Japan may be summed up as follows: (1.) The independence of Korea is guaranteed; (2.) Japan shows the world her military power; (3.) the weakness of China is demonstrated; (4.) Japan gets a large indemnity. But China's necessity was Russia's opportunity. By forcing Japan to retrocede the Liao-tung peninsula, Russia established a claim upon China which she has not failed to press. It was a double opportunity, for it cleared the way for her advance to the Yellow Sea, and it relieved her of all fear of armed opposition from China. It appears, then, that while Japan gained fame and a few dollars, Russia gained an ascendancy in Peking that was worth more than fame and a war indemnity. It might have been expected that Japan would maintain her ascendancy in Korea, but here fortune went against her. She miscalculated the endurance of the king, and one fine morning Japan awoke to the fact that the king was cozily housed in the

Russian Legation. From that moment Japanese influence was dead in Korea. The last semblance of her power had gone. Her money and time had been wasted, for the nominal independence of Korea looked dim that morning when the sun rose upon the Russian Legation turned into a palace.

And now a new aspect has been given to Korean affairs. After gaining the overwhelming ascendancy in Korea, after placing her agents at the head of Korean finances and in charge of her army, and that without fear of resistance from any power, Russia suddenly abandons the ground, withdraws her supervision of the finances and the army, and puts everything back into the hands of the Korean government. To-day Korea stands at a point which she had never attained before. From 1122 B. C. she was China's vassal until 1894 A. D. From about 500 A. D. until 1870 Japan claimed suzerainty also, and enforced it from time to time. From 1894 until 1896 Japan directed affairs in Seoul, and from 1896 until a few weeks ago Russia has been all-powerful. But to-day the definite withdrawal of Russian supervision leaves Korea an absolutely independent power for the first time in her history of over three thousand years.

It is hardly pertinent to inquire into the reasons for Russia's abandonment of Korea. They are probably known only in the council-chamber of the Czar. Many conjectures have been made; her more important work in China, her desire to propitiate the Korean people who are so violently opposed to her work there, the desire to conciliate Japan, and thus secure her neutrality in case of war. All these have been put forth as the reasons for the move, but none of them seems to fit the case perfectly. The last is, however, the most plausible. Whatever the reason may be, we can rest assured that it is in perfect accord with her policy of steady advance in the East, and that it does not mean the ultimate abandonment of any coign of vantage. If she abandons Korea to-day it is only to gain some greater advantage at some other point or at some other time.

As Korea sets out in the course of absolutely independent empire it is of interest to inquire what her equipment is and on what forces she may depend in carving out a career.

In the first place the spoils system is one of the heirlooms of the realm. From time immemorial the sweets of office have been the most tempting thing that Korean life had to offer. It has

been the swiftest if not the only road to fortune, and nepotism is a recognized principle in the distribution of the good things. This has been specially true since the year 1575, which beheld the formation of the great political parties. They originated in a petty quarrel between two of the officials, and such a thing as a platform or a policy has never been known among them. Their only reason for existence is that they facilitate the redistribution of the offices when there is a change of administration, or when, by hook or crook, the "outs" become the "ins." If a man wants to gain office he must join one or other of these parties and become identified with them.

Secondly, Koreans have the same low opinion of a military career that prevails in China, and which always did and always will make a strong army an impossibility. When to become a soldier is to drop into well-nigh the lowest social stratum, and when military rank always gives way to civil rank, no man who aspires to make a career for himself will enter the army. It is only a possible stepping-stone to something better, and so good discipline and good service are alike impossible. Every soldier knows his general would leave the service in a moment if a civil office of corresponding grade were open to him; the general knows that every soldier who would become possessed of an acre of land or enough money to stock a street booth would desert the army. As a consequence the army shares with the Buddhist monasteries the distinction of being the receptacle of the indolence and worthlessness of the country.

These are the two disadvantages under which the kingdom works, and they form, indeed, a heavy handicap; but in spite of it all there are many hopeful factors which tend to neutralize these factors.

In the first place the removal of all superintendence of a foreign nature removes a temptation which parties have been subjected to, of leaning up against the foreign power and acting in an arbitrary way, knowing that their backers would support them. To-day every party stands on its own footing and enjoys the moral support of no outside power. This may prove a benefit or it may prove an unmitigated evil. A few years ago it would probably have proved the latter, but during the last two years there has been a rapid education of the people of Korea through the columns of *The Independent*, a paper in the native speech of Korea, edited

by a naturalized American citizen who is of Korean birth. The Koreans have come to know what good government might be, and no party would be rash enough to ignore a popular demand for decent administration if that demand were loudly made. There is to-day such a thing as public spirit among a large class of the Korean people, and it is sure to increase rather than diminish. It is to be hoped that absolute independence and consequent responsibility will have a sobering effect upon party rapacity, and that the Koreans in power will try, at least, to carry out the plans for the betterment of the country which foreign superintendence has pointed out.

Again, Korea possesses a customs service that is excelled nowhere in the world. At its head are Englishmen, Frenchmen, Italians and representatives of other Western lands who, while not interested in politics, exert a powerful influence for good upon the whole management of the country. The five open ports of Korea may expect to become model settlements, as three of them, indeed, already are. The growing import and export trade is slowly leavening the whole interior of Korea and enlightenment cannot but result. The growing coastwise trade, by rendering local famines next to impossible, will make less probable such popular uprisings as that of the *Tong-haks* and the "Righteous Army," for these originated, as all uprisings in Korea do, in lack of food. This, in turn, should render less necessary the maintaining of a standing army. Only such force would be necessary as the thorough policing of the country would demand.

The industrial enterprises which have sprung up in the peninsula are of great importance, although they are as yet limited to less than half a dozen ventures. The railroad that is soon to be opened between the capital and its seaport will be an object lesson that cannot fail to have great influence in giving the people a taste for modern things. The mining concession in the north is breaking down the ancient prejudices of the people who, from the earliest times, have feared the evil spirits of the earth more than they have coveted the wealth that lay hidden beneath. The electric street car plant that is on its way from America will introduce the Koreans to the greatest mechanical mystery of the century, and, by showing them the limitations of their own knowledge and skill, will make them push forward to the attainment of better things.

Educational enterprise has secured a sound footing in the country. A thorough English school is doing much to lay the foundation for and to give a taste for a general education, as distinguished from the narrow curriculum of the Chinese classics, which as yet forms the whole of a Korean education. A normal school under foreign instruction is preparing men to take in hand the work of public instruction throughout the country as fast as the prejudices of the people will permit. Schools for French, Japanese and Russian also flourish, and the government seems to realize that these diverging lines of education are necessary to the welfare of the country. Mission schools are doing much to popularize the pursuit of a well rounded education as well as to instil the principles of Christian morality into the minds of the people.

It may be confidently believed that there lies in store for Korea no social cataclysm like that which swept over Japan thirty years ago, and which has borne such marvelous fruit. The Korean is more like the Chinese. Whatever changes come, they will come gradually, after being tested thoroughly; but once having come they will remain. There will be no such reaction as that which Japan has seen during the past half decade. The conservative temperament is not all bad. Social inertia is as natural and as necessary as physical inertia.

The way of a bird in the air, of a snake on a rock and of a man with a maid are all proverbially difficult things to prophesy about, but perhaps not more so than the turn that political events will take in the far East. Whatever happens, Korea will be an interested spectator, perhaps an active factor. Now that all foreign control has been thrown off, it is difficult to see what combination could draw Korea into the maelstrom of war, unless it be that she might form fighting ground for others. Perhaps we may apply to Korea the words used by Pere Hyacinthe, in speaking of Judea: "*The Little States!* They are constituted by the hand of God, and I trust in Him that they never will be removed. He has placed them between the Great States as a negation to universal empire, a pacific obstacle to the shocks of their power and the plots of their ambition."

HOMER B. HULBERT.