



KOREAN TALES:

BEING A COLLECTION OF STORIES
TRANSLATED FROM THE KOREAN FOLK LORE

Translated by **HORACE NEWTON ALLEN**

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PREFACE

REPEATEDLY, since returning to the United States, people have asked me, “Why don’t you write a book on Korea?” I have invariably replied that it was not necessary, and referred the inquirers to the large work of Dr. Griffis, entitled “Corea, the Hermit Kingdom,” which covers the subject in a charming manner.

My object in writing this book was to correct the erroneous impressions I have found somewhat prevalent—that the Koreans were a semisavage people. And believing that the object could be accomplished best in displaying the thought, life, and habits of the people as portrayed in their native lore, I have made these translations, which, while they are so chosen as to cover various phases of life, are not to be considered as especially selected.

I also wished to have some means of answering the constant inquiries from all parts of the country concerning Korean life and characteristics.

People in Washington have asked me if Korea was an island in the Mediterranean; others have asked if Korea could be reached by rail from Europe; others have supposed that Korea was somewhere in the South Seas, with a climate that enabled the natives to dispense with clothing. I have therefore included two chapters, introductory and descriptive in character, concerning the subjects of the majority of such questions.

“Globe trotters,” in passing from Japan to North China, usually go by way of the Korean ports, now that a line of excellent Japanese steamships covers that route. These travellers see the somewhat barren coasts of Korea—left so, that outsiders might not be tempted to come to the then hermit country; perhaps they land at Chemulpoo (the port of the capital, thirty miles distant), and stroll through the rows of miserable, temporary huts, occupied by the stevedores, the pack-coolies, chair-

bearers, and other transient scum, and then write a long article descriptive of Korea. As well might they describe America as seen among the slab shanties of one of the newest western railroad towns, for when the treaties were formed in 1882 not a house stood where Chemulpoo now stands, with its several thousand regular inhabitants and as many more transients.

H. N. ALLEN.

WASHINGTON, D. C., July 1, 1889.

INTRODUCTORY

KOREA, Corea, or Chosen (morning calm) occupies the peninsula hanging down from Manchooria and Russian Siberia between China and Japan, and extending from the 33d to the 43d parallels of north latitude.

The area, including the outlying islands, is about one hundred thousand square miles. The population, according to the most reliable estimate, is a little more than sixteen millions. Yet, as the people live in cities, towns, and hamlets, the country does not seem to be thickly settled.

The climate varies much at the extremities of the peninsula, owing to the fact that the southern portion is somewhat affected by the warm southern currents that give Japan its tropical climate, but which are warded off from Korea proper by the Japanese islands. The climate of the central and northern provinces is much the same as that of the northern central United States, with fewer changes. The large river at the capital is not uncommonly frozen over for weeks at a time during the winter, so that heavy carts pass over on the ice. Ice is always preserved for general use in summer.

The country is decidedly mountainous, and well watered. Heavy timber abounds in the northeast. The valleys are very fertile and are well tilled, as the people are mainly devoted to agriculture.

The mineral resources have only been developed in a crude way, yet sufficiently to demonstrate the great wealth of the ore deposits. Especially is this true in reference to the gold mines.

The most pessimistic visitors to Korea are unstinted in their praise of the beautiful scenery, which is fully appreciated by the natives as well. From ancient times they have had guidebooks setting forth the natural charms of particular localities; and

excursions to distant places for the sole purpose of enjoying the views are a common occurrence.

The King rules as absolute monarch. He is assisted by the Prime-Minister and his two associates—the ministers of the Left and Right. Next to these come the heads of the six departments of Etiquette and Ceremonies, Finance, War, Public Works, Justice, and Registration, with the heads of the two new departments that have been added as the result of the opening up of foreign intercourse—the Foreign (or outside) Office, and the Home (or interior) Office. This body of officials forms the grand council of the King.

Each of the eight provinces is ruled by a governor, who has under him prefects, local magistrates, supervisors of hamlets, and petty officials, so that the whole scale makes a very complete system and affords no lack of officials.

There are several special officers appointed by the King, one of whom is the government inspector, whose duty it is to go about in disguise, learn the condition of the people, and ascertain if any magistrate abuses his office and oppresses the people unjustly. Any such he may bring to speedy justice.

The present Dynasty has existed 498 years. Being founded by a revolting general named Ye, it is known as the Ye Dynasty. The King's name, however, is never used. He is almost sacred to his people. Those officials of sufficiently high rank to go in before him bow to the ground in his presence, and only speak when spoken to; then they use a highly honorific language only understood at court.

The revenues are paid in kind, hence the annual income of an official may consist of a certain quantity of rice, and other products, in addition to his money compensation. The King, also, has the whole revenue resulting from the sale of the ginseng, for which the country is noted. This forms his private purse.

The currency is the common copper cash, worth some twelve hundred to the

Mexican dollar; though now that the new mint is in operation, copper, silver, and gold coins are being made. The old perforated cash will, however, be hard to supplant, owing to its convenience in small transactions.

Banks proper do not exist; though the government does a kind of banking business in granting orders on various provincial offices, so that a travelling official need not be burdened with much ready money. A number of large brokers at the capital assist in the government financial transactions.

All unoccupied land belongs to the King, but any man may take up a homestead, and, after tilling it and paying taxes on it for a period of three years, it becomes his own, and must be purchased should the government need it.

Deeds are given in the form of receipts and quit-claims by the seller. These may be registered with the local magistrate. Wills, as understood in western countries, are not executed; though a father wishing to provide especially for the children of his concubines may make a will, or statement, the proper execution of which devolves upon the eldest son.

Records of the births of males are kept, as are also records of deaths, but these are not always reliable. All males of fifteen years of age are registered at the Hang Sung Poo, or Department of Registration, which issues to them tablets bearing their name and address. Children are also generally provided with these tablets, to prevent their getting lost.

The people are well built and strong, as a rule. They are a loyal, contented race, not grasping, and rather too easy in disposition. They are intelligent and learn with great ease. Possessed of many characteristics in common with their neighbors, the Chinese and Japanese, they yet seem to have a personality indicative of a different parentage, which continually calls forth inquiry as to their origin. In some slight degree they resemble the aborigines of America, and it is believed that their ancestors came from

the north:—the question opens up a fertile field for study. Their written records are said to date back three thousand years. Their traditional first king descended from heaven five thousand years ago. With a civilization of such age they might well be excused for so long barring their doors against the new civilization of the young nations of the West. While, as a matter of fact, the difference existing between the two is more one of degree than essence, perhaps more vices may be found in the civilization of the West than are known to this people. And, with a few exceptions, the virtues taught by the modern civilization have been practised for centuries behind the bars of isolation that shut in this self-satisfied people.

The people dress in imported cotton sheetings mostly, padding them well with cotton wool for winter use, and using the plain bleached white, or dyeing the cloth a light shade of blue or green. Rice is the staple article of food in the central and southern provinces; wheat enters more largely into the diet of the northern people. Their cattle are as large and fine as may be found anywhere; the people eat much beef, and hides are a prominent article of export. Their houses are well built and comfortable; foreigners adapt them to their own use with little trouble. The houses are heated by means of a system of flues underneath the floor, which is made of large flagstone placed over the flues and well cemented; over all thick, strong, oil paper is placed, making a rich, dark, highly polished floor, through which no smoke can come, though it is always agreeably warm. The houses are all one story, built around a court, and several sets of buildings, each within a separate wall, usually make up a gentleman's compound. The buildings are covered with a thick layer of earth and capped with tile laid on in graceful curves. This roof insures coolness in summer. The rooms are made almost air-tight by the plentiful use of paper on the walls outside and in, as well as for doors and windows.

There are three great classes in Korea: the nobility, the middle class, and the

commoners. A commoner, not of the proscribed orders, may rise to nobility by successfully passing the competitive examinations. The officials are appointed from the noble classes.

The language is peculiar to the country, and while written official documents are done in the common character of China and Japan, the spoken language of neither of these people is understood in Korea. The native language of Korea possesses an alphabet and grammar, and is polysyllabic, thus resembling English more than it does Chinese.

In religious matters the Koreans are peculiar in that they may be said to be without a religion, properly speaking. Prior to the advent of the present dynasty, Buddhism reigned, but for 498 years it has been in such disfavor that no priest dare enter a walled city. They still maintain temples in the mountains, but exert but little if any influence. In morals the people are Confucionists, and their reverent devotion to their ancestors may serve in part as a religion. In times of distress they “pray to Heaven,” and seem really to be very devoutly inclined.

Christianity came into disfavor through the indiscretion of its early teachers. The distrust is slowly passing away now, and missionaries are openly employed in doing the educational work that must precede any successful attempt to secure the adoption of beliefs so radically different from all existing ideas.

Some of the results of the outside intercourse that has been indulged in for the past eight years may be mentioned. A maritime customs service, under the charge of American and European officers, is in very successful operation. So is a hospital, supported by the government and operated by American physicians, gratuitously furnished by the American Presbyterian Mission. The government supports a school for which American teachers are employed. American military officers have charge of the reorganization of the army and conduct a school for the purpose of instructing the

young officers. A mint, machine-shops, powder-mills, silk filatures, an electric light, and a telegraph and cable line are some of the new institutions recently adopted and, as a rule, now in successful operation. Steamships have also been purchased more for the purpose of transporting tribute rice than as a nucleus for a navy. In regard to the relations existing between Korea and China the reader is respectfully referred to a paper delivered before the American Oriental Society by the Chinese scholar, W. W. Rockhill, U. S. Secretary of Legation at Peking, and contained in Vol. III. of the Society's publications for 1888. In his preface Mr. Rockhill says:

“The nature of Korea's relations with China has for the last thirty years been a puzzle for Western nations. Were they—with the ambiguous utterance of the Chinese Government before them that ‘Korea, though a vassal and tributary state of China, was entirely independent so far as her government, religion, and intercourse with foreign States were concerned’—to consider it as an integral part of the Chinese Empire, or should they treat it as a sovereign state, enjoying absolute international rights?

“The problem was practically solved by the conclusion of the treaty between Japan, and later on the United States, and Korea, but this has not materially altered the nature of the relations existing for the last four centuries, at least between China and its so-called vassal. That China has, however, derived profit from the opening of Korea to the commerce of nations, there can be no doubt, for she, too, being at liberty to conclude treaties with Korea and open this new market to her merchants, has done so, like other nations, though she has chosen to call her treaty by the euphonious name of ‘commercial and trade regulations for the subjects of China and Korea’, and her diplomatic representative in Seoul, ‘Minister Resident for political and commercial affairs.’ What China's relations with Korea were prior to the opening of the latter kingdom by the treaty of 1883, I propose to show in the following pages, taking as my authorities official Chinese publications and writings of men in official position.”

KOREAN TALES

DESCRIPTIVE

SEOUL—THE CAPITAL

As “Paris is France,” so Seoul may be said to be Korea, for it is the centre from which nearly every thing for the country either originates or is disseminated. Officers ruling over country districts usually have their “house in town,” and expect to spend a portion, at least, of their time within the walls of the capital. While some of the provincial capitals are said to contain more people and to be more celebrated for certain reasons, Seoul is the home of the King and the Mecca of his faithful subjects. A description of this city may, therefore, answer for all. The capital is a city of some 300,000 inhabitants, half of whom, perhaps, live in the extensive suburbs without the walls. It lies in a basin of granite sand, surrounded by high mountains and their projecting ridges, over which climbs the high, thick, encircling wall of masonry; pierced at convenient points by massive, pagoda-roofed gates, amply strong enough for defense against the weapons of war in use at the time of building this great relic of seclusion.

The city is traversed by broad avenues from which runs a perfect labyrinth of narrow streets. Originally none of these streets were less than twenty feet wide, and some of the avenues leading up to the imposing gates of the palaces are even now a good two hundred feet in width. But the streets have all been encroached upon by the little temporary thatched booths of the petty retail dealers, so that, with the exception of the approaches to the palaces, the line is broken, the streets made tortuous, and only here and there a broad open spot indicates the original width of the thoroughfare. Originally every street was furnished with its sewer—open in the smaller streets,

while the avenues were drained by great covered sewers of stonework. Occasionally the proprietor of one of the little temporary booths would put a foundation under his structure, bridging over the sewer, until now the streets have in many cases become mere crooked alleys, and but for the bountiful rains, the excellent natural drainage, and the character of the soil, the mortality would be very great instead of being less than in ordinary American cities. No attempt is made towards street decoration, as that would attract the attention of thieves. The magnificent grounds of a nobleman, with their artificial lakes, flower gardens, water-worn pillars of ancient rock and quaintly twisted trees, may be enclosed by a row of tumble-down, smoke-begrimed servant-quarters that would never indicate the beauty to be found hidden within its forbidding exterior.

Travellers never seem to realize that a street in the East is apt to be but a “way” between two points, and as the usual Oriental odors greet their nostrils and their eyes rest on the dirty servants and their dirtier hovels, they at once denounce the whole town.

There is attraction enough, however, in a Korean street for any one who is in search of strange sights. Looking down one of the broad thoroughfares of Seoul from a point on the city wall, the sun’s rays, falling on the light-colored gowns of the pedestrians as they saunter along amid the bulls and ponies, produce a kaleidoscopic effect that is certainly charming. Passing down into the throng it will be seen to be made up mostly of men, with here and there a group of common women, each closely veiled with a bright green gown, made like the long outer garment of the men, and possessing little sleeves of crimson. This strange garment is never worn, but is always used as a covering for the fair (?) face. Tradition teaches that in ancient times, when wars were frequent, veils were discarded and these gowns were worn by the wives and sisters, that, in case of sudden call to arms, they could be given to their husbands and brothers

to be worn to battle—hence the red sleeves, upon which the gory sword was to be wiped.

The peculiar gauze “stove-pipe” hat of the men, about which so much has been said, also has its origin in tradition, as follows: In ancient days conspiracies were common; to prevent these an edict was issued compelling all men to wear great earthenware hats, the size of an umbrella (type of the mourner’s hat in Korea today, except that the latter is made of finely woven basket-work). This law became very odious, for in addition to the weight of the hats, not more than a very few men could come close enough together to converse, and even then spies could hear their necessarily loud whispering. Little by little, therefore, the law began to be infringed upon till the people got down to the present airy structure of horsehair, silk, and bamboo.

Another story is, that petty wars being too frequent between rival sections, all men were compelled to wear these umbrella hats of clay. In case one became broken the possessor was punished by decapitation—naturally they stopped their fighting and took good care of their hats till the law was repealed.

The custom of wearing white so extensively as they do is also accounted for by tradition. Mourning is a serious business in Korea, for on the death of a father the son must lay aside his gay robes and clothe himself in unbleached cotton of a very coarse texture. He wraps his waist with a rope girdle, and puts on the umbrella hat, which conceals the whole upper portion of his person. For further protection against intrusion he carries a white fan, and, should he smoke, his pipe must be wrapped with white. For three years he must wear this guise and must do no work, so that the resources of even a large and prosperous family may be thus exhausted.

Should a king die, the whole nation would be compelled to don this mourning garb, or rather they would be compelled to dress in white—the mourning color. Once, during a period of ten years, three kings died, necessitating a constant change of dress

on the part of the people and a great outlay of money, for a Korean wardrobe is extensive and costly. Tradition has it, therefore, that, to be ready for the caprice of their kings in the future, the people adopted white as the national color.

The nobility and wealthy persons who can afford it, dress in rich gayly colored silks, and even the common people add a little blue or green to their outside robes, so that when they wander about over the beautiful green hills in their favorite pastime of admiring the natural beauties of a remarkably beautiful and well preserved landscape, their bright gowns but add to the general effect. And a long procession of monks emerging from their high mountain temple and descending along the green mountain path might be taken for a company of the spirits with which their literature abounds; especially will this be the case if, as is common, the region of the temple is shrouded with clouds.

But little of home life is seen along the streets, and the favored ones who may pass the great gates and traverse the many courts which lead to the fine inclosures of the nobility would see but little of home life, as the women have quarters by themselves, and are only seen by the men of their own family.

It is pleasant, however, to see the little groups of the working class sitting around the fire which is cooking their evening meal and at the same time heating the platform of paper and cement-covered stones which form the floor of their bed chamber, and on which they will spread their mats and sleep. They will all be found to be smoking, and if tobacco was ever a blessing to any people it is to the lower classes in Korea, who find in it their greatest comfort. No one could see the solid enjoyment taken by a Korean coolie with his pipe without blessing the weed.

As the fires burn low, and one by one the smokers have knocked the ashes from their pipes and sought the warm stone floor, a deep stillness settles over the profoundly dark city. The rich, deep notes of a great centrally located bell ring out as the

watchman draws back a huge suspended beam of wood, and releasing it, lets it strike the bronze side of the heavy bell, from which vibration after vibration is sent forth upon the still night-air.

Some weird music, which has been likened to that of Scotch bagpipes, is heard from the direction of the city gates, and the traveller, who is still threading the streets to his abode, feels thankful that he has arrived in time, for now the massive gates are closed, and none may enter without royal permission. The street traveller will also hasten to his home or stopping-place, for between the ringing of the evening chimes and the tolling of the bell to announce the approach of dawn, all men must absent themselves from the streets, which then are taken possession of by the women, who even then, as they flit about from house to house with their little paper lanterns, go veiled lest some passing official should see their faces.[1]

The midnight stillness is broken by the barking of countless dogs, but as cats are in disfavor their serenades are seldom heard. Another sound is often, in busy times heard throughout the whole night. It is peculiar to Korea, and to one who has lived long in the country it means much. It is the drumming of the Korean laundry. To give the light-colored gowns their highly prized lustre they must be well pounded; for this purpose the cloth is wrapped around a long hard roller which is fixed in a low frame, two women then sit facing each other with, in each hand, a round, hard stick, something like a small baseball bat, and they commence beating the cloth, alternating so as to make quite a musical tinkle.

Heard at some distance this rhythmic rattle is not unpleasant, and one is assured that in the deep night that has settled so like a pall over the city, two persons are wide-awake and industriously engaged, while, when the tapping ceases for a bit, one is comforted with the thought that the poor things are enjoying a rich bit of gossip, or welcoming a friend who is more fortunate in having finished her ironing in time to

enjoy the freedom of the night.

Inside the Palace the night is turned into day as nearly as can be done by the electric light. The business of the government is mostly transacted at night that the wheels of administration may run smoothly during the day. At sundown several lights may be seen on the summit of the beautiful ever green south mountain which forms the southern limit of the city; as does a grim stony peak on the north serve a similar purpose on that side. The south mountain faces the Palaces. It also commands a good view of the outlying peaks, upon some of which, situated in suitable localities, are stationed watchmen, so placed as to command a view of others farther and farther removed; thus forming lines from the distant borders of the country to the capital. On these peaks small signal-fires are nightly kindled, and as the lights are seen by the watchman on the south mountain, he builds the proper number of fires upon little altars in full view of the Palace. Then a body of gray old officers go in before His Majesty, and bowing their heads to the floor, make known the verdict of the signal-fires, as to whether peace reigns in the borders or not. Soon after this the officials assemble and the business of the government begins, the King giving his personal attention to all matters of importance.

There are three palace inclosures in the city, only one of which is occupied. One is an old ruined place that was built for the use of a ruler who chanced to be regent for his father, and as he could not reside in the Palace proper this smaller place was prepared for him. The buildings now are in ruins, while the large grounds are used by the foreign silk expert as a nursery for mulberry-trees.

The present Palace includes some hundreds of acres, and is the home of more than three thousand attendants. The grounds are beautifully diversified by little lakes of several acres in extent, one of which surrounds a magnificent and stately pavilion, supported on great stone pillars,—a fine picture and description of this, and other

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