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978-1-108-04575-9 - Korea and Her Neighbours: A Narrative of Travel, with an Account of the Recent Vicissitudes and Present Position of the Country: Volume 1

Isabella Bird

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER

IN the winter of 1894, when I was about to sail for Korea (to which some people erroneously give the name of "The Korea"), many interested friends hazarded guesses at its position,—the Equator, the Mediterranean, and the Black Sea being among them, a hazy notion that it is in the Greek Archipelago cropping up frequently. It was curious that not one of these educated, and, in some cases, intelligent people came within 2000 miles of its actual latitude and longitude!

In truth, there is something about this peninsula which has repelled investigation, and until lately, when the establishment of a monthly periodical, carefully edited, *The Korean Repository*, has stimulated research, the one authority of which all writers, with and without acknowledgment, have availed themselves, is the Introduction to Père Dallet's *Histoire de l'Église de Corée*, a valuable treatise, many parts of which, however, are now obsolete.

If in this volume I present facts so elementary as to provoke the scornful comment, "Every schoolboy knows that," I venture to remind my critics that the larger number of possible readers were educated when Korea was little more than "a geographical expression," and had

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not the advantages of the modern schoolboy, whose “up-to-date” geographical text-books have been written since the treaties of 1883 opened the Hermit Nation to the world; and I will ask the minority to be patient with what may be to them “twice-told tales” for the sake of the majority, specially in this introduction, which is intended to give something of lucidity to the chapters which follow.

The first notice of Korea is by Khordadbeh, an Arab geographer of the ninth century A.D., in his *Book of Roads and Provinces*, quoted by Baron Richofen in his work on China, p. 575. Legends of the aboriginal inhabitants of the peninsula are too mythical to be noticed here, but it is certain that it was inhabited when Kit-ze or Ki-ja, who will be referred to later, introduced the elements of Chinese civilisation in the twelfth century B.C. Naturally that conquest and subsequent immigrations from Manchuria have left some traces on the Koreans, but they are strikingly dissimilar from both their nearest neighbours, the Chinese and the Japanese, and there is a remarkable variety of physiognomy among them, all the more noticeable because of the uniformity of costume. The difficulty of identifying people which besets and worries the stranger in Japan and China does not exist in Korea. It is true that the obliquity of the Mongolian eye is always present, as well as a trace of bronze in the skin, but the complexion varies from a swarthy olive to a very light brunette.

There are straight and aquiline noses, as well as broad and snub noses with distended nostrils; and though the hair is dark, much of it is so distinctly a russet brown as to require the frequent application of lampblack and oil to bring it to a fashionable black, while in texture it varies

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THE KOREAN PHYSIQUE

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from wiriness to silkiness. Some men have full moustaches and large goatees, on the faces of others a few carefully-tended hairs, as in China, do duty for both, while many have full, strong beards. The mouth is either the wide, full-lipped, gaping cavity constantly seen among the lower orders, or a small though full feature, or thin-lipped and refined, as is seen continually among patricians.

The eyes, though dark, vary from dark brown to hazel; the cheek-bones are high; the brow, so far as fashion allows it to be seen, is frequently lofty and intellectual; and the ears are small and well set on. The usual expression is cheerful, with a dash of puzzlement. The physiognomy indicates, in its best aspect, quick intelligence, rather than force or strength of will. The Koreans are certainly a handsome race.

The physique is good. The average height of the men is five feet four and a half¹ inches, that of the women cannot be ascertained, and is *disproportionately* less, while their figureless figures, the faults of which are exaggerated by the ugliest dress on earth, are squat and broad. The hands and feet of both sexes and all classes are very small, white, and exquisitely formed, and the tapering, almond-shaped finger-nails are carefully attended to. The men are very strong, and as porters carry heavy weights, a load of

¹ The following are the measurements of 1060 men taken at Seoul in January 1897 by Mr. A. B. Stripling:—

	Highest.	Lowest.	Average.
Height	5 ft. 11 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.	4 ft. 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.	5 ft. 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.
Size round chest . .	39 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.	27 in.	31 in.
„ head	23 $\frac{1}{2}$ „	20 „	21 $\frac{1}{2}$ „

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100 pounds being regarded as a moderate one. They walk remarkably well, whether it be the studied swing of the patrician or the short, firm stride of the plebeian when on business. The families are large and healthy. If the Government estimate of the number of houses is correct, the population, taking a fair average, is from twelve to thirteen millions, females being in the minority.

Mentally the Koreans are liberally endowed, specially with that gift known in Scotland as “gleg at the uptak.” The foreign teachers bear willing testimony to their mental adroitness and quickness of perception, and their talent for the rapid acquisition of languages, which they speak more fluently and with a far better accent than either the Chinese or Japanese. They have the Oriental vices of suspicion, cunning, and untruthfulness, and trust between man and man is unknown. Women are secluded, and occupy a very inferior position.

The geography of Korea, or Ch’ao Hsien (“Morning Calm,” or “Fresh Morning”), is simple. It is a definite peninsula to the north-east of China, measuring roughly 600 miles from north to south and 135 from east to west. The coast line is about 1740 miles. It lies between 34° 17’ N. to 43° N. latitude, and 124° 38’ E. to 130° 33’ E. longitude, and has an estimated area of upwards of 80,000 square miles, being somewhat smaller than Great Britain. Bounded on the north and west by the Tu-men and Am-nok, or Yalu, rivers, which divide it from the Russian and Chinese empires, and by the Yellow Sea, its eastern and southern limit is the Sea of Japan, a “silver streak,” which has not been its salvation. Its northern frontier is only conterminous with that of Russia for 11 miles.

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GEOGRAPHICAL CONFIGURATION

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Both boundary rivers rise in Paik-tu San, the "White-Headed Mountain," from which runs southwards a great mountain range, throwing off numerous lateral spurs, itself a rugged spine which divides the kingdom into two parts, the eastern division being a comparatively narrow strip between the range and the Sea of Japan, difficult of access, but extremely fertile; while the western section is composed of rugged hills and innumerable rich valleys and slopes, well watered and admirably suited for agriculture. Craters of volcanoes, long since passed into repose, lava beds, and other signs of volcanic action, are constantly met with.

The lakes are few and very small, and not many of the streams are navigable for more than a few miles from the sea, the exceptions being the noble Am-nok, the Tai-dōng, the Nak-tong, the Mok-po, and the Han, which last, rising in Kang-wōn Do, 30 miles from the Sea of Japan, after cutting the country nearly in half, falls into the sea at Chemulpo on the west coast, and, in spite of many and dangerous rapids, is a valuable highway for commerce for over 170 miles.

Owing to the configuration of the peninsula there are few good harbours, but those which exist are open all the winter. The finest are Fusan and Wōn-san, on Broughton Bay. Chemulpo, which, as the port of Seoul, takes the first place, can hardly be called a harbour at all, the "outer harbour," where large vessels and ships of war lie, being nothing better than a roadstead, and the "inner harbour," close to the town, in the fierce tideway of the estuary of the Han, is only available for five or six vessels of small tonnage at a time. The east coast is steep

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and rocky, the water is deep, and the tide rises and falls from 1 to 2 feet only. On the south-west and west coasts the tide rises and falls from 26 to 38 feet!

Off the latter coasts there is a remarkable archipelago. Some of the islands are bold masses of arid rock, the resort of sea-fowl; others are arable and inhabited, while the actual coast fringes off into innumerable islets, some of which are immersed by the spring tides. In the channels scoured among these by the tremendous rush of the tide, navigation is oftentimes dangerous. Great mud-banks, specially near the mouths of the rivers, render parts of the coast-line dubious.

Korea is decidedly a mountainous country, and has few plains deserving the name. In the north there are mountain groups with definite centres, the most remarkable being Paik-tu San, which attains an altitude of over 8000 feet, and is regarded as sacred. Farther south these settle into a definite range, following the coast-line at a moderate distance, and throwing out so many ranges and spurs to the west as to break up northern and central Korea into a congeries of corrugated and precipitous hills, either denuded or covered with *chapparal*, and narrow, steep-sided valleys, each furnished with a stony stream. The great axial range, which includes the "Diamond Mountain," a region containing exquisite mountain and sylvan scenery, falls away as it descends towards the southern coast, disintegrating in places into small and often infertile plains.

The geological formation is fairly simple. Mesozoic rocks occur in Hwang-hai Do, but granite and metamorphic rocks largely predominate. North-east of Seoul are great

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CLIMATE AND FAUNA

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fields of lava, and lava and volcanic rocks are of common occurrence in the north.

The climate is undoubtedly one of the finest and healthiest in the world. Foreigners are not afflicted by any climatic maladies, and European children can be safely brought up in every part of the peninsula. July, August, and sometimes the first half of September, are hot and rainy, but the heat is so tempered by sea breezes that exercise is always possible. For nine months of the year the skies are generally bright, and a Korean winter is absolutely superb, with its still atmosphere, its bright, blue, unclouded sky, its extreme dryness without asperity, and its crisp, frosty nights. From the middle of September till the end of June, there are neither extremes of heat nor cold to guard against.

The summer mean temperature at Seoul is about 75° Fahrenheit, that of the winter about 33°; the average rainfall 36.03 inches in the year, and the average of the rainy season 21.86 inches.¹ July is the wettest month, and December the driest. The result of the abundant rainfall, distributed fairly through the necessitous months of the year, is that irrigation is necessary only for the rice crop.

The fauna of Korea is considerable, and includes tigers and leopards in great numbers, bears, antelopes, at least seven species of deer, foxes, beavers, otters, badgers, tiger-cats, pigs, several species of marten, a sable (not of much value, however), and striped squirrels. Among birds there are black eagles, found even near Seoul, harriers, peregrines (largely used for hawking), pheasants, swans, geese,

¹ These averages are only calculated on observations taken during a period of three and a half years.

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spectacled and common teal, mallards, mandarin ducks, turkey bustards (very shy), white and pink ibis, sparrow-hawks, kestrels, imperial cranes, egrets, herons, curlews, night-jars, redshanks, buntings, magpies (common and blue), orioles, wood-larks, thrushes, redstarts, crows, pigeons, doves, rooks, warblers, wagtails, cuckoos, halcyon and bright blue kingfishers, jays, snipes, nut-hatches, gray shrikes, pheasants, hawks, and kites. But until more careful observations have been made it is impossible to say which of the smaller birds actually breed in Korea, and which make it only a halting-place in their annual migrations.

The denudation of the hills in the neighbourhood of Seoul, the coasts, the treaty ports, and the main roads, is impressive, and helps to give a very unfavourable idea of the country. It is to the dead alone that the preservation of anything deserving the name of timber in much of southern Korea is owing. But in the mountains of the northern and eastern provinces, and specially among those which enclose the sources of the Tu-men, the Am-nok, the Tai-dong, and the Han, there are very considerable forests, on which up to this time the woodcutter has made little apparent impression, though a good deal of timber is annually rafted down these rivers.

Among the indigenous trees are the *Abies excelsa*, *Abies microsperma*, *Pinus sinensis*, *Pinus pinea*, three species of oak, the lime, ash, birch, five species of maple, the *Acanthopanax riciniifolia*, *Rhus semipinnata*, *Elæagnus*, juniper, mountain ash, hazel, *Thuja orientalis* (?), willow, *Sophora Japonica* (?), hornbeam, plum, peach, *Euonymus alatus*, etc. The flora is extensive and interesting, but, with the excep-

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MINERALS AND MANUFACTURES

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tion of the azalea and rhododendron, it lacks brilliancy of colour. There are several varieties of showy clematis, and the *millefleur* rose smothers even large trees, but the climber *par excellence* of Korea is the *Ampelopsis Veitchii*. The economic plants are few, and, with the exception of the *Panax quinquefolia* (ginseng), the wild roots of which are worth \$15 per ounce, are of no commercial value.

The mineral wealth of Korea is a vexed question. Probably between the view of the country as an El Dorado, and the scepticism as to the existence of underground treasure at all, the mean lies. Gold is little used for personal ornaments or in the arts, yet the Korean declares that the dust of his country is gold; and the unquestionable authority of a Customs report states that gold dust to the amount of \$1,360,279 was exported in 1896, and that it is probable that the quantity which left the country undeclared was at least as much again. Silver and galena are found, copper is fairly plentiful, and the country is rich in undeveloped iron and coal mines, the coal being of excellent quality. The gold-bearing quartz has never been touched, but an American Company, having obtained a concession, has introduced machinery, and has gone to work in the province of Phyöng-an.

The manufactures are unimportant. The best productions are paper of several qualities made from the *Brousonettia papyrifera*, among which is an oiled paper, like vellum in appearance, and so tough that a man can be raised from the ground on a sheet of it, lifted at the four corners, fine grass mats, and split bamboo blinds.

The arts are *nil*.

Korea, or Ch'ao Hsien, has been ruled by kings of the

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present dynasty since 1392. The monarchy is hereditary, and though some modifications in a constitutional direction were made during the recent period of Japanese ascendancy, the sovereign is still practically absolute, his edicts, as in China, constituting law. The suzerainty of China, recognised since very remote days, was personally renounced by the king at the altar of the Spirits of the Land in January 1895, and the complete independence of Korea was acknowledged by China in the treaty of peace signed at Shimono-séki in May of the same year. There is a Council of State composed of a chancellor, five councillors, six ministers, and a chief secretary. The decree of September 1896, which constitutes this body, announces the King's absolutism in plain terms in the preamble.

There are nine ministers—the Prime Minister, Minister of the Royal Household, of Finance, of Home Affairs, Foreign Affairs, War, Justice, Agriculture, and Education, but the royal will (or whim) overrides their individual or collective decisions.

The Korean army consists of 4800 men in Seoul, drilled by Russians, and 1200 in the provinces; the navy, of two small merchant steamers.

Korea is divided into 13 provinces and 359 magisterial districts.

The revenue, which is amply sufficient for all legitimate expenses, is derived from Customs duties, under the able and honest management of officers lent by the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs: a land tax of \$6 on every fertile *kyel* (a fertile *kyel* being estimated at about 6½ acres), and \$5 on every mountain *kyel*; a household tax of 60 cents per house, houses in the capital enjoying immunity;