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Korea and Koreans

IMPRESSIONS AND RESEARCH

ON

THE EMPIRE OF THE GREAT HAN

PART 1.

WITH 200 ILLUSTRATIONS FROM ORIGINAL PHOTOGRAPHS, 1 PLAN, 1 MAP

TRICHROMY TABLE BY P. A. GARIAZZO

BERGAMO

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INTRODUCTION Translated into English by Jeffrey Russell

Towards the end of October 1902, I was in Cefù on board the RN "Puglia", which had just received the order to return to Italy after an assignment of about eighteen months, brilliantly carried out, in Australian and Chinese waters. On the very day when the order was given, amid general rejoicing, to raise the "Homeward Bound" pennant - that symbol so dear to the hearts of sailors for whom it heralds the future joys of their distant home - I was unexpectedly instructed to leave the "Puglia" and board the RN "Lombardia", which was to take me to Korea, where the sudden death of Count Francesetti di Malgrà had left the post of His Majesty’s Representative at the Court of Seoul vacant.

And thus, just as the shores of my homeland seemed to be coming closer, fate turned me away from Italy towards Korea, inevitably a very sombre prospect at the time. I still had very vivid memories of a long visit I had paid, throughout the previous July, to my good friend Francesetti, whom I had left in excellent physical and moral shape, bold, serenely confident at the age of twenty-five, full of plans and hopes. I was greatly saddened by the thought that not only would I never see my friend again, but that I would have to assume the office he had so admirably fulfilled, and move among the things that had been his, in places where we had spent long and unforgettable hours together. Even now I cannot fully express the infinite sadness of those distant autumn days.

There was talk then in China of a very fierce epidemic which was said to have erupted in Seoul. There were hundreds of daily cases of cholera and now it seemed that typhus was killing people too - it was typhus that had so cruelly snatched the young Italian Consul in Seoul from his friends, his family and his homeland.

The earth itself had something sad and gloomy about it at the time. Under the leaden sky of Northern China, the waters of the Yellow Sea, so aptly named, appeared even browner and muddier than usual.

The "Lombardia" was due to depart on 2 November, but that day a very violent sirocco wind was blowing, a sure sign that beyond the promontory of Shang-tung navigation would not be possible, and so we postponed our departure to the following day. The wind died down in the night, and on the morning of the 3rd the "Lombardia" left for Cemulpo, the Korean port closest to Seoul, where we dropped anchor on the evening of 4 November.

On the evening of the 5th, accompanied by the good wishes and farewells of my colleagues from the "Lombardia", I left that ship for good and set off for Seoul. The next day, taking delivery of the Consulate from Count Fecia di Cossato, a naval lieutenant like myself, who had been stationed there by the Commander of the RN "Lombardia" as soon as the death of Count Francesetti occurred, I assumed the office to which the Government had appointed me.

Thus began my stay, which lasted about eight months, in one of the strangest countries on earth, which has given rise to much debate for many years, but still remains one of the least known to Western scholars.

As far as my limited talents allow, I tried to take advantage of this fortuitous stay to study different aspects of Korea and its people, and I will set out the results of my attempts in the following pages. What I have written, simply and with no pretensions at all, is nothing more than a faithful collection of impressions and research on a subject of great interest, which certainly deserves a more thorough treatment. And here allow me to add that I was not expecting my book to be topical. Little was being said of Korea when I was rearranging my notes to put them into book form; all I had in mind was to work quietly and patiently on a book that would offer a faithful and complete picture of that distant Empire.

Then events crowded in upon us, and public attention was abruptly focussed once more on the Far East. Pressed on all sides, I found myself obliged to rush through the publication of a work which the multiple cares of my office did not allow me to carry out as I would have wished.

As a result my work is published today in a very different form from what I had initially wanted. These pages will contain nothing, or next to nothing, that has not been written already in one or other foreign language, but they constitute the first Italian book on the subject. It is a fact that until now very little has been published in Italian on Korea; apart from the translation of a German work, we have nothing but a very limited number of studies, some original, some mere compilations or more often translations, scattered throughout the volumes of various journals or annals of scientific societies, and therefore available to a limited readership.

So, in writing these pages, I found myself not just taking the first step along an unexplored path - the first step, as we know, being always the most difficult - but having to tread a new and tiring path with the demon of haste constantly at my heels. I hope this will earn me the reader's indulgence.

If nonetheless this work can still lay claim to some merit, it is to be found in the abundant illustrations, for the most part original, which the Graphic Arts Institute, with the care and skill which are its hallmark, was able to produce from my photographs. I can say with absolute certainty that in this respect the work is truly innovative, for never, in Italy or elsewhere, has a book on Korea contained a greater number of illustrations.

I must therefore express my sincere thanks to that excellent Institute, which has taken such care with every detail of the artistic side of the publication. Before ending this introduction, I must also thank the talented painter P. A. Gariazzo, who produced the originals of the beautiful three-coloured illustrations which adorn this work; my only regret is that the demands of publication prevented the reproduction of all of the beautiful illustrations he prepared.

Finally, I must acknowledge the great help which a number of publications on Korea have given me in compiling the text, in particular the *Opisanie Korea* (Description of Korea) published by the Russian government, the *Korean Repository*, a monthly publication of inestimable value that was published in Seoul in 1892 and from 1895 to 1898, and its successor the *Korea Review,* which began publication in 1901 under the able direction of Prof. H. B. Hulbert, one of the most passionate scholars of Korea and its people.

SHORT PRELIMINARY NOTES.

*Where is Korea? - First news of the Korean peninsula - Korea and Italy - Mountains, rivers and ports - Climate - Mines, fauna and flora - Korean anthropometry - Physical beauty and moral deficiency.*

If I am to believe what I read in the preface of books, printed in England as well as in the United States, about Korea, it would seem that the public in both those countries does not have a very clear idea, generally speaking, of where Korea is to be found. Dr. Allen, in his *Korean Tales,* recounts that he was asked in Washington if Korea was not by chance a Mediterranean island, while others who talked to him were under the vague impression that it lay somewhere in the Coral Sea. Mrs. Bishop, in her *Korea and its Neighbors*, tells us that, as she was preparing to leave for Korea, some of her friends, guessing where it might be, placed it at the equator, some on the Black Sea and some in the Greek archipelago. Many other authors tell similar stories and use the excuse for a long and detailed lesson in Korean geography.

In Italy, God willing, we are not quite so ignorant. Although we constantly complain, not without reason, that the study of geography is neglected in our country, I do not think that nowadays even poorly educated Italians are unaware of Korea's location. I would certainly risk looking ridiculous if, for example, I were to say that the East Asian peninsula stretching from the 34th to the 43rd parallel north of the equator and from the 124th to the 131st parallels east of the Greenwich meridian, between the Yellow Sea and the Sea of Japan, is Korea.

However, it must be admitted that most people's general knowledge stops there, and so some limited geographical information might not be completely superfluous before continuing.

News of the Korean peninsula did not reach Europe until the second half of the seventeenth century, when the Dutch mariner Hendrik van Hamel published in Rotterdam the story of his captivity, together with several of his companions, in that distant land following the shipwreck of their vessel. However, his account was not very good, due perhaps to his station in life - Hamel was a helmsman on board the *Sperwer*, who certainly did not consider himself either a geographer or a writer - or to the very sad circumstances in which he had to spend his years in Korea, and his account was necessarily vague and incomplete.

The years passed and for almost two centuries the efforts of all navigators to unravel the mystery of those regions were unsuccessful. It is only in the second half of the XIXth century that we find for the first time, in the extensive Introduction of the *Histoire de l'Eglise de Corée*, published in Paris by Father Dallet in 1874, a comprehensive and accurate enough account of the geography, history, customs and habits of the Korean nation, based on the reports of the apostolic missionaries present in Korea from 1835 onwards.

A few years later, in 1881, Professor Griffis, of the University of Tokyo, also published a work on Korea, *Korea the Hermit Nation*, making use of much of the material collected by Fr. Dallet, and only adding new material in its historical part, drawn essentially from Japan or derived from Japanese, Chinese and Korean sources.

For many years these two works by Dallet and Griffis contained the most exact written information available to Western readers on the Korean peninsula. It is a curious fact that neither of these authors had ever set foot in Korea, whereas subsequent works by travelers who had visited the country were very inferior.

Meanwhile, Korea was gradually opening up to trade with the West: an initial treaty was signed in 1883 with the United States, followed shortly afterwards by treaties with England, Germany, Italy, Russia and France, and geographical studies naturally benefited from the relations thus established with the "Hermit Nation".

Travel for scientific purposes across the peninsula gradually became more frequent, so that today Korea can be said to be fully known, although much remains to be done to ensure that our knowledge is scientifically accurate.

The current state of knowledge about Korea is admirably set out in the *Description of Korea* compiled by the Finance Ministry of the Russian Empire and published by the same department in Petersburg in 1900.

I will have several opportunities in the following pages to discuss topics of geographical interest in more detail, so in these preliminary notes I will confine myself to what is strictly necessary to help the reader gain a general idea of the country that concerns us.

The Korean peninsula is bordered in the north by Manchuria and eastern Siberia, from which it is separated by the two rivers Yalù (Am-nok) and Tumen; it lies between the Sea of Japan in the east and the Yellow Sea in the west; in the south, the strait of Korea separates it from Japan.

Its general shape is reminiscent of Italy. Like Italy, it is generally mountainous: the very high massif of Pek-tu San, "the white-capped mountains", puts us in mind of the Alps, while the chain which includes the Diamond Mountains (Tek San) and which runs the length of the peninsula could well be called the Korean Apennines. In the Tatong river we might see the Korean Arno; in the Han, the Tiber; and in the island of Quelpart, Sicily. Just as in Italy, there is a very marked difference between the western and eastern coasts of Korea: the former is very indented and full of good harbours, while the latter is uniform, monotonous and unsafe. Korea also has its Tuscany in the province of Ciulla Do, known as the Garden of Korea both for its fertile soil and its beautiful landscapes; and its Piedmont in the northern province of Pyeng-An Do, whose inhabitants are more familiar with the harsh conditions of war than the mildness of the liberal arts, and which still today supplies the nation with its best fighters, the celebrated braves of Pyeng-yang.

The peninsula is well watered by numerous rivers. In addition to the Yalù and Tumen, which from their source to their mouth form the northern border of the country, separating Korea from Manchuria and the provinces of eastern Siberia, we should note the Ta-tong, which flows into the Yellow Sea at the open port of Cinnampò; the Han, commercially the most important of Korea's rivers, which also flows into the Yellow Sea near the country's leading port Cemulpo, after passing a short distance from the capital Seoul; and finally the Nak-tong, which flows from north to south to its mouth in the Strait of Korea at the new and well-known port of Massampò.

The peninsula's lakes are few and unremarkable: the Tal-ti alone, near Pek-tu San, deserves a mention.

On the other hand, there are numerous ports and those now open to foreign trade are especially noteworthy: Cemulpo, Mokpò, Cinnampò, Massampò, Fusan, Wonsan (Ghensan), Kunsan and Song-cin. A serious drawback found in most of those located on the Yellow Sea coast is the very strong tide, sometimes as high as ten meters, which greatly limits the depth of water available for ships to drop anchor, forcing them to remain a considerable distance from the coast.

The climate varies considerably from one part of the peninsula to another: very mild in the south, where the influence of the warm current of the Kuroshiwo is still felt, and generally very cold in the north. In Seoul in winter the cold is intense and it is not uncommon for the thermometer to drop to 23 degrees below zero; these periods last for no more than fifteen days during which the Han river freezes as far as the estuary. Winters are generally dry; in March and April north-easterly and north-westerly winds prevail; fine weather begins in May and lasts until the end of June. July is the wettest month of the year, when the rains are incredibly, almost frighteningly, heavy. August is the hottest month, and in Seoul the temperature rises to 32° or 33°; in September the prevailing winds are from the south-east, and it is in this month that there is the greatest risk of typhoons, those violent storms that constitute one of the worst hazards of these regions. October, November and December are generally splendid.

The soil of Korea is very fertile and in some places in the province of Ciul-La Do there are normally two harvests a year. The country also possesses considerable mineral wealth, and although an exact geological survey of the peninsula has not yet been carried out, relatively large deposits of iron, silver, copper, tin, lead and coal have already been found in numerous places, in addition to gold which is the main product of Korea's mines and of which a fair quantity is already exported.

Korea's fauna is very varied and includes many species of animals of great value: above all tigers, but also numerous leopards, bears, deer, wild cats, foxes and wild boars. The horses are small and ugly, very similar to Chinese ponies and even hardier; on the other hand, the cattle are beautiful and constitute one of the riches of the country. Among the birds the pheasant is pre-eminent, but there are also a great many herons, ibis, wild ducks, pigeons, chickens, storks, and so on. Together they make Korea a true paradise for hunters.

Even the flora, if not as varied and rich as that of neighboring Japan, is also of some interest. Tall trees abound, and the forests of elm, pine and fir are very dense. On the other hand, fruit trees are few, and the fruit they bear is tasteless. Of particular note is a certain type of very beautiful pear: describing it, one writer says that it all depends on how you consider it - as a turnip it would be delicious. One plant apparently peculiar to the peninsula is gin-seng (*panax quinquefoglia*), which has a very high therapeutic value in classical Chinese medicine, and which seems to be found in the wild only in the dense forests of North Korea.

The people who inhabit the peninsula undoubtedly have some Mongolian features, but they are clearly different from the Chinese as well as the Japanese, being physically much more attractive than either. In all probability, they are to be considered as the product of the overlap of Mongoloid families with the original inhabitants of the peninsula, who, according to studies conducted by an able group of distinguished scholars from the Far East (among whom I must single out the venerable Dr. Edkins of Shang-hai, Professor Hulbert of Seoul and Professor Baeltz of Tokyo), were members of southern, Indo-Malay, or perhaps even Kanaka, tribes, who emigrated to the north, moving in the opposite direction to all other major human migrations.

Together with my excellent friend Emilio Bourdaret, an engineer with the Imperial House of Korea and author of a highly regarded study on Koreans published in the Annals of the Anthropological Society of Lyon, I tried to take advantage of my stay in Seoul to collect as many anthropometric observations as possible of Korean individuals. Unfortunately, while I was lucky enough in the photographs taken of the face and profile of a good number of subjects, the difficulties I encountered on the part of the natives, who seemed to see some kind of malicious black magic in these very innocent measurements, were so numerous that I was unable to make enough observations to reach any valid conclusions. More fortunate than I, Bourdaret obliged all the workers he employed on the construction of the Seoul-Songdo railway to be measured in advance, so that he was able to make at least a few hundred observations, certainly not enough to provide definitive conclusions, but sufficient to give an approximate idea of ​​the physical characteristics of the Koreans.

Their stature is considerably above average. After measuring 113 individuals, Bourdaret found their average height to be 1.62 metres, the same result as Lubentoff obtained from 247 measurements made in the province of Ham Kyeng Do, and as Elisseyeff obtained. The average height of the Chinese, according to Deniker, seems to be 1.61 metres, while that of the Japanese is between 1.57 and 1.59 metres.

Koreans are brachycephalic. Their head is short: the average anteroposterior diameter is 177 millimetres and the transverse 148 mm. The cephalic index found by Bourdaret is 83.61, while Deniker, based on the observations of Elisseyeff, Koganei and Bogdanoff, gives an average index of 82.3 for living subjects.

Their skin is of a pale white color closely resembling that of the Japanese, although in the lower classes a brownish tint is frequently observed. In women of all classes, the skin is always very white.

The eyes, always black, slightly oblique, are much less so than those of the Chinese and Japanese, and cases of absolutely horizontal eyes are not uncommon.

The nose is often flattened, with an average width of 36 mm and an average length of 49 mm, but straight, regular noses, and sometimes even aquiline noses, are not exceptional.

The hair is always straight, thick and black. The beard is generally much fuller than in the Japanese and lighter in color than the hair.

Of robust constitution, hardy, and of more than average height, the Koreans undoubtedly constitute a fine race.

However, moving from the physical to the moral, we have the downside. Physical strength does not correspond to moral strength; the Korean is certainly endowed with excellent qualities, but over them all hangs, like a veil, the most excruciating apathy.

The product of the grafting of a southern people onto an eastern branch of the large Mongolian stock, the Korean people seem to be proof of the biological law which condemns the mixed descendents of very dissimilar races to premature extinction: if not physically, the Korean is now morally exhausted.

The last eastern bulwark to be penetrated by the West, voluntarily shut off for over thirty centuries from the rest of the world, the continual object of invasions by greedy neighbors eager to conquer its fertile valleys, the scene of endless wars, the empire of Korea and its people offer today a very sad spectacle of misery and squalor.

Yet Korea has also had its glorious past. There was a time when, its people having been drawn into the orbit of Chinese civilization, art and literature, practised with enthusiasm and honor, flourished in the peninsula, and Korean artists enjoyed an undisputed fame as far as the Great Middle Empire, where writers were pleased to call Korea "Little China". It was a time when the inhabitants of the then semi-barbaric Japan regarded Korea as a promised land, a cradle of all art, and a storehouse of all wealth.

Today little remains of that glorious past. To say however, as some do, that present-day Korea has nothing of interest to offer and nothing worth studying is a rash exaggeration.