NATIONAL DEFENCE?

*Korean Cavalry - Changing of the Guard - Purpose of the Army - The Army of the past - The first firearms - Military monks - Traditional Korean telegraph – Changes in military instruction - Recruitment - The Military Academy - Splendour and decadence of the Korean Navy*

First comedy, then tragedy, and now farce.

If you find yourself one morning at about nine or ten on Ministry Street, you will witness a military spectacle like no other: it is there that the Seoul garrison goes to drill. Small units of about a hundred men each march past and perform manoeuvres to the strident sound of a dozen trumpets (oh, the Korean trumpets!) and as many drums, followed by a long crowd of onlookers; the soldiers chat to one another, moving in their own way, in no readily discernible order. They wear a uniform very similar to that of the Japanese, and could easily be mistaken for Japanese soldiers if they displayed the same remarkable order and discipline for which the latter are so admired. Sometimes you can see a bunch or two of paper flowers pinned on the hats of soldiers and officers alike, but take no notice, it is only a token of imperial approval: on every national holiday, and in Korea there is at least one a week, the Emperor thoughtfully sends each soldier a paper flower; he sometimes sends two to the officers, and both are pinned on their hat. But we should look closely when the cavalry passes - it is a troop worth watching. There are about fifty men in all, dressed in red, each of whom has a horse on which he tries as hard as he can to stay upright. Sometimes, holding on tightly to the pommel of the saddle, or hugging the animal's neck, a rider manages to stay on his horse, but this does not always happen, and they do not all manage the feat. A charge of these valiant horsemen puts you in mind of ​​a *paper chase* where men are scattered about instead of bits of paper. Once the rider has fallen, the horse runs off and then all along the street there is a general stampede of soldiers and onlookers, until the horse is recovered and calm returns. Here as elsewhere the cavalry officers are very proud of their position, and, to be honest, they are on average far superior to the men they command, especially the young officers who have recently graduated from the Seoul Military Academy, the institute to which General Yi Hak Hiun devotes so much care. Here is a photograph of one of these young officers who, having seen that I was carrying a camera, left his unit at once to run and pose complacently in front of the camera, a satisfied look on his face.

The incompetence of the Korean rider is natural when you remember that in Korea they are not used to riding horses. The little ponies, which I have mentioned elsewhere, are used exclusively as beasts of burden; those who travel, travel on foot or in a sedan chair, and we have seen that the few *yangban* who use a horse when it is not possible to do otherwise, leave the task of keeping them in the saddle to others. Nominally, by ancient tradition, there should be six hundred Korean cavalrymen, but in reality there are no more than fifty at the present time. This number of six hundred was not decided at random. Legend has it that in the early days of the current dynasty Korea possessed a large force of mounted warriors, who used to gather every day for their exercises west of Seoul, in the Valley of the Lilies of the valley, the start of the Mandarin road to Beijing. So fierce were the fights and mock battles they indulged in, that very dense clouds of dust rose from the earth and almost darkened the sky. Now it happened that, about 350 years ago, the Son of Heaven, standing one fine morning at one of the windows of his palace in Beijing, saw on the horizon, towards the east, a huge yellowish cloud that had every appearance of a cloud of dust. Concerned, he called a messenger and told him: "Some terrible battle must be happening in Korea, leave now and come back to report what it is." The messenger departed like a bolt of lightning and his astonishment was great when, having arrived in Seoul and been led into the presence of the King, the innocent cause of those clouds was explained to him. As soon as the Son of Heaven heard the news he was troubled and said: "If a single mock battle of Korean horsemen is capable of raising such dense clouds in the sky, it is a sign that Korea is getting too strong, and this is not good for a vassal state. Go and tell the King of Korea that I order him to dismiss his horsemen and keep no more than six hundred in his service". So it is that since that day, the Korean cavalry is nominally six hundred strong.

In order to admire the Korean soldiers, there is no need to go and look for them, because if, like the majority of foreigners, you have the good fortune to live near the Imperial Palace of Ciongdong, you can be sure that they will make enough noise for you to immediately notice their presence. From six in the morning until around nine a continuous parade of soldiers and, what is much worse, an interminable blowing of trumpets will leave you no rest. The whole performance is really nothing more than the changing of the guard at the Palace, and there will be no more than a hundred soldiers taking part in the exercise, but they have the ability to make it last for a couple of hours going back and forth, with a thousand turns and about-turns, like the extras in the operettas, so that it seems the whole Korean army is assembled there, raising all the trumpets of Jericho for the occasion.

A curious army, this Korean army! Read the orders of the Ministry of War, the military regulations, the imperial decrees, in short, everything that has been officially written about it and for it, and you will really believe that you are in the presence of a perfectly ordered force reflecting the latest dictates of the general staff. Then look at the reality on the ground and you will find, as in every other branch of the administration, a frightful confusion, and, above all, a general ignorance of what should be its real purpose. The idea of ​​an army must in fact go hand in hand with the defence of the national territory, but on this point, as has been seen on many occasions, and even very recently, the Korean army does not seem of much more use than the Swiss guards in the Vatican or the forty guards of the Republic of San Marino. The Chinese and the Japanese have invaded the peninsula, and our good Korean soldiers have stayed put, enjoying the new spectacle, impassive, indifferent, without a burst of indignation, without a spark of generous patriotism. What then is the use of this army with its hundred generals, if the territory of the peninsula can be violated with impunity without even the most platonic of protests? To march back and forth around the Imperial Palace every morning from six to nine, to the accompaniment of trumpets and drums? That really does not amount to very much; and yet in practice it does no more. It costs the nation 4,675,251 Korean dollars, admittedly a small sum compared to what other countries spend on defence; but even so one cannot help but conclude that it is money wasted*,* the game is not worth the candle.

 It is very difficult to say how many men make up this army. In addition to the lack of reliable statistics - you find a figure in one official document and a completely different one in another – its composition is continually shifting, as scarcely a month goes by without some battalion being dissolved or another established. At a rough estimate, it can be calculated that the army has a total of seven or eight thousand men, of which about half are in Seoul while the others are scattered around the peninsula, mainly in the provincial capitals, the open ports and the so-called five fortresses.

 This Western-looking army is a very recent creation. In former times the Korean army was organised along the same lines as the Chinese army at the time of the Ming dynasty, a dynasty whose arrangements the Koreans always loved to copy.

Thus in this peninsula military service, as is the case in China, was always considered far inferior to the civil one; it was thought of as aiming to giving prominence to physical accomplishments and not the more highly appreciated intellectual graces.

In those days, it was more a question of armed bands, which could be called upon to offer their services as and when the need arose, rather than regularly enlisted troops. For this purpose, each Prefecture kept a register of all the men suitable for military service, and the forces needed in the event of war or internal rebellions were drawn from them. I have already spoken elsewhere of the exams that used to be held periodically for those hoping to obtain one or other military rank; with the exception of the study and explanation of the Seven Treatises of Military Art, these exams consisted essentially of physical exercises and shooting practice with the various weapons in use.

The forces of the peninsula were divided into two large groups: the army of the capital, which was directly dependent on the central government, and the army of the provinces, which were constituted and maintained by the respective provincial governors.

The army of the capital was in turn divided into five units*: regular forces, the King's guard, the King's brigade, the common brigade* and *the dragon and tiger brigade*. These units were then transformed into five regiments called respectively *right, left, vanguard*, *rearguard* and *river defence*. In normal times their duties consisted in guarding the gates of the city, policing the streets at night and garrisoning the famous fortress of Mount Puk-han, which was connected by a secret passage to the Royal Palace, and provided the kings of Ciu-sen with a safe refuge when the capital was threatened by the approach of an enemy host.

The localities of Song-do, Kang-wha, Koang-giù, Su-uen, and Ciun-cien, known as the "Five Fortresses," had special garrisons, each under the orders of two commanders, one of whom was by right the governor of the province where the fortress was located.

These forces were equipped with very primitive weapons, essentially different kinds of sabres, spears, javelins, clubs, arrows and bows. Only a very small part of the Korean army was equipped with firearms, which first appeared in the peninsula during the great Japanese invasion, in Hideyoshi's time. Here is a popular legend which refers to that event: “During the campaign of 1591, the bulk of the fighting took place near Pyeng-yang. The Japanese greatly outnumbered the Koreans and possessed far better weapons: while the latter possessed only bows and arrows, most of the Japanese had firearms as well, which Dutch navigators who frequented the port of Nagasaki had taught them how to use. The king of Ciu-sen had fled to Euì-giù to seek the protection of China, and the Korean soldiers, taking shelter behind the city walls, tried to defend it as best they could while awaiting Chinese reinforcements.

“One day, they had a flash of genius. They cut down hundreds of trees and fashioned wooden instruments shaped like the rifles used by the enemy. The Koreans, who had never seen such weapons before, did not have the slightest idea what they were, and simply assumed that the instrument used by the Japanese was nothing more than a kind of round stick which, for some mysterious reason, had the power to inflict death.

“The Koreans, each armed with this improvised weapon, advanced bravely towards the Japanese, taking care to keep the tips of their staffs pointed at the enemy. The Japanese did not move, and let them approach; when the Koreans were very close, they all fired at the same time, a mighty volley of rifle shots which killed a large number of Koreans before any escape was possible. The surviving Koreans fled, pursued closely by the Japanese, and so great was the massacre they committed that the God of War himself was moved. At a distance of some 30 *li* from Pyeng-yang, there was a temple in honour of this deity; when the Japanese, returning from their pursuit of the Koreans, passed in front of it, the God of War, armed with a miraculous axe, descended from his pedestal and went to meet them and exterminated them."

The main material for making the old weapons of the Korean army was bamboo, and to ensure that it was always in plentiful supply there were government reserves where it was forbidden for anyone to cut the bamboo. One of them, the reserve on the island of Quelpart, was especially famous, for there, it was said, whenever the envoys of the Government landed for the usual supply of bamboo canes, they found the necessary quantity beautifully arranged at the landing point, gathered spontaneously, according to the legend.

Three times a month the troops of the capital gathered for military training exercises, consisting of individual instruction in the traditional handling of different weapons - each move was governed by very specific rules expounded in minute detail in military treatises - , of mock duels with spears, sticks, sabres and double-edged sabres, and of practice in archery and wrestling. These training sessions generally ended with a mock battle, where the winner was the side that managed to remove the greatest number of hats from their opponents.

A very curious peculiarity of the provincial army was the inclusion in its personnel of all or almost all the Buddhist monks who lived in the monasteries located on the tops of hills or in strategic points of the peninsula. These bonzes were obliged to undergo training in the use of weapons, and they were all under the orders of the army commander of their respective province. Many monasteries consequently had a store of weapons and were even equipped, in recent times, with cannons, the last thing you would expect to find in a religious establishment. These Korean guns, all of Chinese construction, generally consisted of small iron pipes tied to large wooden trunks; they were breech-loaded, by first inserting a spherical ball and then the load of powder, of Korean manufacture, enclosed in an iron case. Several of these guns were taken from the forts of the island of Kang-wha by the French and American expeditions of '67 and '71.

In the past the system of beacons by which the capital communicated with all the peninsula’s most important forts, especially those located near the coasts and frontiers, formed an integral part of the nation’s defences. These fires were lit on the hilltops at a short distance from each other, and since the peninsula had very few good roads, they served to quickly transmit to the capital all news that could affect national land and sea defences. These fires were kept alight continuously, and were visible by day thanks to the smoke they produced, which was intensified by throwing dry straw and rice husk on the pile. If all went well a single fire was lit; if there was a probability of imminent danger, two were lit; if there were reasons for serious alarm, three; if the enemy attacked the frontier, or approached the coast, four; and finally, if there was a battle, five. Two military officials and ten guards were assigned to each beacon, and it was their duty to immediately repeat any signal they saw on the surrounding hilltops. The most severe penalties were imposed on those who were guilty of neglecting this duty: anyone who forgot to signal a danger or transmitted a false signal, was immediately punished with death. The same fate befell any private citizens who lit other fires in the vicinity of a beacon. At Seoul, the beacons were located on the summits of the Nam-san and Puk-han mountains, and five officers perpetually on the lookout were responsible for immediately reporting any relevant news to the King.

Once Korea had begun to admit foreigners and the Koreans had seen the superiority of Western weapons and military systems, they began to feel the need to reform their army.

Thus it was that in 1882 the King, who for some time had employed Chinese instructors for his troops, turned to the Japanese government to reorganize his army. Japan sent him some instructors, led by Lieutenant Horìmoto, and sold him twenty thousand Murata rifles. But it proved impossible to get along with the Japanese and, especially after the events of July '82 and December '84, another change was necessary. The United States government was then asked to send a military mission to Korea to instruct the troops, and in 1887 General Dye, Colonel Chambelle and Major Lee arrived in Seoul.

These three distinguished officers, who arrived in Korea with great zeal and enthusiasm, proposed to begin by training 200 non-commissioned officers, carefully chosen from the best of the existing Korean forces – who could in turn become instructors of individual units - and to found a school of sixty pupils of noble family, which would provide the officers of the future. But they had reckoned without Korean inertia and foreign interference. Their position, poorly defined from the start, became more and more difficult due to the sullen hostility and perennial opposition they encountered from all sides, so the results obtained were not great. It must however be acknowledged that among the current top brass of the Korean army, the only ones who are really worth their salt are precisely those who come from General Dye’s school. One I particularly like to remember is General Yi Hak Hiun, the Emperor’s cousin, the organizer of the current Military Academy of Seoul, and one of the most progressive minds in Korea. He is much appreciated by the capital’s western society, being above all a perfect gentleman with distinctly European manners and none of the affectations that make most of the Europeanized Easterners so ridiculous.

When the independence of Korea was proclaimed, and Seoul found itself at the mercy of the Japanese, Japanese instructors were naturally called upon to replace the American officers. Practical people, the first reform they introduced was to abolish the old uniform and order a new one made of special cloth manufactured in Tokyo. Then they had all the military units in the provinces abolished, on the understanding that they would be staffed with the best of the troops already trained in Seoul. From these troops 2,500 men were selected to form six battalions of four companies each, two of which were sent to the provinces, one to Pyeng-yang and the other to Ciong-giù. It is not possible to keep track of all the changes which the staff of the Korean army subsequently endured, because almost every day new measures of different kinds were taken: the provincial army was reconstituted, the Royal Guard was alternately disbanded and reconstituted three or four times, special corps of engineers, artillery and cavalry were formed one after the other and then incorporated in the main body of the army - in short, real chaos, making it very difficult to follow what was happening.

But even the Japanese instructors did not last long. As soon as the King fled to the Russian Legation, they were dismissed and their place was taken by a mission of Russian officers led by Colonel Potiata, who arrived in Seoul in October of ' 96. Immediately the existing formations were disbanded and new battalions were formed on the Russian model. But these new instructors received no more help from the Koreans than their predecessors had had; on the contrary, they met with increased hostility among those who could not bear this Russian interference in Korean affairs, and they too had to leave soon.

Since the early months of 1898, the Korean army has been without foreign instructors, and things are now no worse or better than before. The most that can be said is that there is less chopping and changing of arrangements, and especially of uniforms, which, after all, is beneficial for the state finances.

Recruitment of common soldiers is still officially by compulsory conscription, since all young men fit for military service can be called up unless they are the father of three duly registered children, the eldest of four registered brothers, the only son or nephew of a seventy-year-old father, or the any of the sons of a ninety-year-old father. In practice, however, the only ones who do their military service are those who do not have sufficient means or influence to be exempted; and there is no doubt that a good many soldiers are drawn from the worst scum of the capital.

Apart from the usual arbitrary and illegal appointments - you may find, as I did, that your palace interpreter has become an infantry captain from one day to the next – officers are recruited from among students in the last year of their course at the Military Academy. This school, founded a few years ago and run with loving care by General Yi Hak Hyun, is attended principally by the sons of the nobility; the results that could be obtained, if the Korean government acted, at least in this field, with a seriousness of purpose that would so greatly and immediately benefit the unfortunate nation, would be far from negligible. Instead, as soon as some individual demonstrates any one of the qualities which are so rarely found in the country - loyalty of character, honesty of intention and practical ability - the Korean government unfailingly and immediately removes him and relegates him to some position of secondary importance where he has absolutely no possibility of fulfilling his potential. This is how General Yi Hak Hyun finds himself filling the modest function of director of the Military Academy, and the good students he produces are not employed in any useful way.

So the national army is indeed in a sad state, but the state of the navy is sadder still: it does not exist. It is true that there is that old coaling ship which I mentioned earlier, which the Japanese decided to unload on Korea, and which costs the country 500,000 dollars to maintain – but that is all.

Gone are the days when the small kingdom of Ciu-sen could put to sea as many as 380 warships and defeat the mighty Japanese fleets with them. We have seen how during Hideyoshi's invasion the Korean ships destroyed the enemy fleets and, by becoming masters of the seas, effectively contributed to driving the invading armies out of the peninsula. But nothing remains of that brilliant past. The old ships, large junks armed with colossal catapults that shot long, iron-tipped arrows, their bulwarks protected by a dense array of shields, equipped with oarsmen in large numbers, and warriors who fired arrows and stones, and warlike crews ready to board the enemy’s ships - those large ships with prows depicting enormous gaping throats of terrifying dragons ready to swallow the enemy, were hired out to the industrious inhabitants of the coasts, who used them for entirely peaceful fishing expeditions, and have now completely disappeared. It is true that there are still a few admirals on the staff of the Ministry of War, a dozen I believe, and alongside the governor of each province there is still a naval commander; but these admirals and commanders, in a country where family traditions are so religiously preserved, might perhaps be able to recount the nautical adventures of some ancestor of their great-grandparents, and the dangers he faced on the high seas, but they, poor things, have no contact with that treacherous element themselves.