TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

*A Korean school of the old type - Chinese characters and the national alphabet - The origin of eur-mun - Korean and its relationship with other languages - The state exams*

Strolling through the streets of Seoul, your attention may often be caught by the shrill sound of childish voices coming from some Korean house. If you have the traveller's instinct to observe everything and to want to make sense of everything, you immediately go to the door of the building and enter – and here you are right in the middle of a primary school. In the narrow room, about thirty boys dressed in pink, seated cross-legged on the ground, are rocking swiftly back and forth over a book covered with large Chinese signs, all confusedly shouting out what they are reading. In front of them is a handsome old man dressed in white with a very light three-pointed tiara of black horsehair on his head; he has the same book in front of him and is reading from it with the help of a pair of very large round glasses in tortoiseshell frames. He is the teacher: he is silently smoking a very long pipe and he keeps a fairly long cane at his side, which he uses from time to time to rap a pupil over the head or shoulders if he has remained silent and motionless for some time; as if propelled by a spring, the errant boy will immediately resume his rocking motion and deafening shouts. At other times someone who has incorrectly pronounced one of the signs is given a rap on the shoulders while the teacher clearly repeats the correct pronunciation. This is the Korean system for teaching pupils to read Chinese characters. The book which these boys are holding was written in China eight centuries ago by the sage Uang Ying Lin, and contains the fundamental precepts of Confucian morality as well as the first principles of Chinese metaphysics. It is in general use throughout China and is still very popular in Japan; in Korea, the government added a short chapter on Korean history where Korea is obligingly called “Little China”. The book consists of 1068 words comprising about 500 different characters arranged in 356 rhymed groups of three characters each – hence the Chinese name of *San Tzu Uan* or Classic of the Three Characters. When the boy has thoroughly mastered these 500 characters, he moves on to the *Tsien Tzu Uan* or Classic of the Thousand Characters. Generally speaking, in Korea, where a very simple national phonetic alphabet is used, the traditional teaching of Chinese stops there for middle class boys. Only the sons of the nobility and those who aspire to pursue a learned profession continue the inexhaustible study of Chinese characters, memorizing first the four classics, then the five canonical books, and, if they live long enough, as many other books as possible to increase the number of characters they know – but there are no less than forty-two thousand Chinese characters recorded in the great dictionary of Kang-hi!

As well as learning to read these characters, the boys must naturally learn to write them. For this purpose very large models printed in red on extremely light paper are used. The pupil must first practise covering the red characters of the model exactly with decisive touches of a brush dipped in black ink. When doing so he must remember that every single stroke making up a character – and sometimes there as many as eighteen – must always be started from the same point, as otherwise the character can acquire a different meaning or at least make no sense. The trained eye of a student of Chinese always distinguishes at first sight the precise point from which one of the brush strokes of the character began. When the student has acquired the required skill in this exercise, he can then reproduce the character on another sheet, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred the copy will be absolutely identical to the model. Knowing this, it is easy to understand why the study of Chinese characters takes such a long time, but what is not easy to understand is why the Koreans insist on imposing the straitjacket of Chinese hieroglyphics on their own language, when the language they speak is so different from Chinese, and when they are lucky enough to possess, as already mentioned, their own alphabet, which is undoubtedly one of the most perfect in Asia.

Korean is an agglutinative language and cannot of course benefit from a means of expression created for the needs of a monosyllabic language, that is, one in which there are no grammatical variations at all. In Chinese each character represents an idea and not a sound, as happens in other languages: when, for example, the sign representing a house is coupled with a sign that suggests the idea of height, the idea of a tall house comes to mind, but only the context can make it clear whether the meaning really is a tall house and not, for instance, the height of a house. In the Korean language, where there are numerous grammatical variations and the grammar is complex as in all languages that use prefixes and suffixes, Chinese characters could only be used if supplemented by some signs derived from them but which have acquired a special meaning to meet the particular needs of Korean. This whole system of signs, arbitrarily chosen to express some of the most important inflections and affixes of the Korean language, is known as *Ni-tu* and was invented at the end of the seventh century by a Buddhist monk called Syel Ciong. Its use is based on the same principle which underlies Japanese, that of mixing the signs of *kana* with Chinese writing.

Now, as every single Chinese sign has a special pronunciation in Korean, different from Mandarin as well as from the many other kinds of pronunciation in China, Japan, Annam and so on, and since this sound does not always correspond to that of the Korean word which expresses its meaning, we observe in Korea the very curious fact that most educated Koreans, while they have no difficulty reading or writing any document in this special Sino-Korean language, would understand absolutely nothing if any passage was read to them by a third person who was not smart enough to add all the missing parts of speech on his initiative. This is very easily understood if we remember that Chinese signs do not represent sounds, but ideas.

The honour of inventing the indigenous alphabet, says Scott, is ascribed by national tradition to the fourth king of the current dynasty, and it is held to have been officially promulgated in the year 1447.

Its origin can be traced to the fact that the Government and the people of the peninsula always harboured the ambition to appear to be an independent nation with its own identity, which is strange for a people who for many centuries had always been the vassal or tributary of one or other neighbour. The Korean envoys to the Court of the very powerful Ming emperors had observed that the neighbouring states which maintained relations with China all had their own literature and writing; and the King of Korea, not wanting his nation to appear inferior to the others, and wishing to make use of the knowledge which his envoys had acquired of Mongolian, Burmese, Tibetan and Sanskrit in Nanking, where there was a flourishing government school for interpreters, ordered the composition of the current alphabet, called *eur-mun* - originally composed of twenty-eight signs, now reduced to twenty-five -, and had its adoption proclaimed throughout the realm.

However, the good King had reckoned without the conservative spirit of his people, and while it is undeniable that the indigenous alphabet has rendered great services to the cause of education in the peninsula, it has never succeeded in replacing the Chinese ideograms which the educated classes still use today as their normal script.

There again, the use of *eur-mun*, which until a few years ago was held in very low esteem by the upper classes and educated Koreans, and was confined to women and people of the lowest class, is often a source of ambiguities and misunderstandings. This is due to the existence in Korean of a great many words which sound the same but mean different things, and which are never the same as the Chinese ideograms.

A more rational system would be one which uses a mixed script, as is already the case in Japan, where all words expressing a concrete idea, such as nouns, adjectives, pronouns and roots of verbs, would be represented by Chinese ideograms, while *eur-mun* would be used to express particles and morphological and lexical variations. Such a system, which would be nothing more than an extension of the one already in use with *Ni-tu*, was introduced in Korea very recently; it is beginning to take hold and has already been adopted by the two daily newspapers that are printed in the capital (*Ce-guk Sin-mun* and *Han-sung Sin-mun*).

The only written language used until now in official reports is Sino-Korean, but very occasionally you come across passages in the *Official Gazette* written in the national alphabet. This fact, which even a few years ago would have caused a huge scandal, is principally due to the Independence Party’s propaganda in favour of everything essentially national, and indeed *eur-mun* was officially used for the first time when the sovereign edict proclaiming the independence of the nation was published.

On the question of whether *eur-mun* is derived from this or that existing alphabet, that is, from Tibetan, or Sanskrit, or Manchu or perhaps even from Chinese itself, opinions are very divided among Orientalists. I am not going to risk entering the debate by expressing a personal opinion, although derivation from Sanskrit, which is perhaps the theory that enjoys the greatest support today, seems to me the most probable, or at least very likely, as can be seen from the table I have taken from Scott’s *Corean Manual.* For my part, I shall do no more than recount the legend that Koreans like to tell about the origin of their alphabet.

This legend has it that when the King issued the order to draw up a national alphabet, one of his courtiers, a very learned gentleman and a reputed man of letters, ran home and locked himself in his room where he spent most of the night in deep meditation on this arduous task. And there, while he was cogitating how best to proceed, his eyes fell on the lattice-work of a window, and the idea flashed through his mind: “Suppose I were to take that as a model?”. No sooner said than done: he seized his paintbrush and an hour later he had composed the alphabet. If we remember that the little circles we see now were so many triangles in the past, each of its signs can easily be detected in the traditional lattice-work of Korean windows and doors.

Just as the origin of this alphabet is still debated, even though it is of relatively recent date, so too the origin of the language itself is much discussed, and the question whether it belongs to this or that linguistic family is far from settled.

Even if I had not already mentioned that Korean is an agglutinative language, it would be pointless, in the current state of the public’s general knowledge, to insist on the fact that in its structure it has no affinity with Chinese, an error that was very common until a few years ago and which stemmed from the use of Chinese ideograms in the written language. On the other hand, it is undeniable that Korean grammar and Japanese grammar are closely related, although the vocabularies of the two languages are not related at all. The discovery of this fact has given rise to the theory of a common continental origin for the two peoples who currently inhabit the Korean peninsula and the Japanese archipelago. The Japanese, passing from the mainland to their islands, are thought to have adopted the vocabulary of the natives, adapting it to the lexical forms they were familiar with. The same affinity can be observed between Korean, Mongolian and Manchurian, and it seems very likely that the Korean language is of Altaic origin. The subject is hotly debated among Orientalists, especially in the Far East, and scientific journals continually publish the attempts of this or that glottologist to find similarities between Korean and the most disparate Asian languages. However, the method employed to prove these hypotheses, consisting most of the time in comparing words, is often illogical, and can lead to completely false deductions. Anyone who uses such comparisons as his only scientific method to prove the relationship between two languages could end up placing Turkish, Arabic and perhaps even Persian in the same linguistic group, while placing Japanese and Korean in different groups, when in fact the first three, despite having many words in common, belong to three quite distinct linguistic families, and the last two, as we have seen, in all probability share a common origin. Dr. Edkins, who for several years has supported the theory of common origins for both Asian and European languages, relying heavily on the laws which, he believes, govern the phonetic modification of words in their successive migrations, has published many such comparisons, finding similarities, often quite remote, between the vocabularies of most Far Eastern languages; and Professor Hulbert in his turn highlighted a series of comparisons between Korean and some Dravidian and Polynesian dialects. But, I repeat, the conclusions drawn from such comparisons are so illusory that a joker of goodwill was able to find a series of Korean words which were phonetically very similar to the corresponding English words, and then wonder amusingly whether it could now be taken as proven that Korean belonged to the Anglo-Saxon group.

However that may be, unlike the situation in China, where the study of the national language can be said to absorb so much of the energy of the educated classes that literate is synonymous with learned, and foreigners tire themselves out investigating its inmost essence, in the peninsula the Korean language, if not exactly held in contempt, is at least considered of very secondary importance, and Korean literature is of no help in this branch of study. Rather like the situation in Europe during the Middle Ages, when education was purely scholastic and Latin was judged to be the only language worthy of imparting knowledge, Korean culture is still essentially Chinese. Korean is not taught in schools, where instead long years are spent studying Chinese ideograms and literature. The literature of the peninsula consists largely of works written in Chinese, some of which were acclaimed in the Middle Empire itself. The only books written in the vernacular are popular works: short stories, novels and songs intended for the general public. Sometimes books are written with the Korean text opposite the Chinese, usually ritual works or compendiums of moral texts intended for general distribution.

Before the reforms, attendance at school generally lasted from six to twenty years. Young people aiming at a career in the civil service or in one of the learned professions had to attend two schools. In the most elementary of these, the primary school, which I have already shown you, teaching was limited to a certain number of Chinese characters; the number of characters taught depended on the career which the pupils hoped to pursue. Boys from the common social classes limited themselves to learning the number of ideograms in current use in the profession or trade for which they were destined, while those from the upper classes stayed on until they had memorized all the thousand characters of the *Tsien Tsu Uan*. They then entered a high school, where by studying the classics they enriched their knowledge of ideograms and acquired those notions of Chinese metaphysics, ethics and poetry which would enable them to sit and pass the great state exams held annually in Seoul.

These exams, very similar in essence to those that are still held in China, differed from them in that there was a distinction between the examination entitling successful candidates to a *Mun* or *Mu* *koa*, a certificate qualifying them for civilian or military employment, and the examination leading to the title of *Gin-sa* or *Seng-uen*.

The first of these exams, known by the name of *cyel-il-koa*, took place five times a year, on the seventh day of the first moon, on the third day of the third moon, on the seventh day of the seventh moon, on the ninth day of the ninth moon and on the day of the eleventh moon when the annual tribute of oranges from the island of Quelpart arrived in the capital, to commemorate the excitement produced in Seoul when the fruit first arrived, several centuries ago. The exam generally consisted of a Chinese poetic essay on a subject determined by the King; of the successful candidates, the one who came top was sure to obtain a post of official in grade six, the next two were provisionally appointed Reporters at the Court of Transmissions, and the others obtained a certificate which, depending on what influence and connections they had among members of the party in power, would enable them sooner or later to obtain any post in public administration.

The other examinations, those for the conferment of academic degrees, took place more rarely and therefore assumed even greater importance. In the autumn of the last year of each cycle (the Chinese sixty-year cycle by which dates are distinguished) and then every three years, four senior officials, known as *Kieng-si-koan*, Metropolitan Examiners, were sent from Seoul to each of the provinces of Ciung-cieng Do, Ciul-la Do, Kyeng-sang Do and Pyeng-an Do, where, in agreement with the governors, they chose candidates for the *sik-nyen-koa*, an exam that was held in Seoul the following spring. In the other provinces the governors alone selected the candidates, and in Seoul the candidates were determined by a competition which was held in the Examination Hall.

These preliminary exams took place over two days, with a day off in between. On the first day candidates competed for the degree of *Cin-sa*, the subject of the exam being the Chinese classics – the four *Sye* and the five *Kyeng*. On the second day they competed for the title of *Seng-uen* with a poetic essay. In the whole peninsula only 700 candidates sitting the preliminary exams could be accepted for each of the two degrees, and after the final exam, which took place in Seoul in the following spring, no more than 100 in each of the two categories received the coveted title.

The exams for ranking posts in the armed forces were similar to the civil exams, except that the subjects were essentially military: archery, on foot and on horseback, handling of the spear, javelin throwing, fencing with sabres and explanation of the seven military treatises.

All these national examinations took place in the Quagga, behind the Royal Palace, and constituted an extraordinary event for which the capital took on a festive and lively air. Thousands of candidates of every class and condition flocked to Seoul from the provinces: young people timidly preparing for the difficult test for the first time, grey-haired old men resigned to try it again for the hundredth time; many came with their family, or with a crowd of friends, or a revered teacher, while others came on their own, after sweating for years, not to draw ideograms and meditate on the classics, but simply to save up enough money to pay for the journey from their dark provincial village to the luminous capital.

No periodic event in the national life of our peoples has ever had the importance that those solemn examinations had for the Koreans. The popular literature of the peninsula contains a wealth of legends, stories and anecdotes which revolve around the exams, relating Kim’s schemes to pass the test, or Pak’s cunning in overcoming an unexpected difficulty, or the events that prevented Yi from obtaining the degree he was entitled to.

It was customary for successful candidates to undergo a burlesque initiation ceremony which kept friends happy and which they paid for. A kind of tribunal was set up, and the new doctor had to present himself to its members and bow to them; while he was making his bows very contritely, the president of the assembly no less solemnly dissolved a stick of China ink in a stone basin of water. When he judged that he had dissolved enough ink, he dipped a broad brush in it, approached the victim and blackened his whole face; then, jokingly proposing to turn it white again at once, he dusted it with flour while it was still damp, amid general laughter. The game continued until all the friends had done the same thing to the poor doctor, or sometimes played another and worse joke on him. But the new doctor was overjoyed at the honour he had earned and calmly endured these ferocious jokes, which always ended, *more solito*, in a sumptuous feast.

Meanwhile the unlucky student, who had come from afar and failed the test, started for home with a heavy heart, thinking of the new pilgrimage he would have to make in three years time.