MODERN EDUCATION

*Abolition of exams - Elementary schools - The High School - Schools of foreign languages* ​​– *Mission schools*

These examinations, deemed unworthy of a nation that was to set out on the rosy path of civilization, were abolished after the reforms of 1895, before they could rationally be replaced by any others, as the nation was neither intellectually nor morally ready to adopt a new culture.

A knowledge of Chinese letters, although it implied a knowledge of the whole of Chinese history and philosophy, from which all the nation’s institutions are derived, was not much, but it was still a qualification for advancement in a ranking system based on merit. Even taking into account the abuses generated by the old system, it was still better than the void which exists today.

The abolition of the annual exams was a terrible setback for the study of Chinese letters in the peninsula. The members of the College of Confucius, the last bastion of the old culture, struggle in vain to defend it, sending petitions to the throne imploring the sovereign to restore the former curriculum. The old classics lie abandoned, while the energies of the young are dispersed in a vain effort to master Western science.

The current education system, designed along the lines decreed by the famous Legislative Assembly, comprises Elementary Schools, a High School in Seoul, and various so-called Foreign Language schools, also in Seoul.

At present there are only a few government *elementary schools* in the capital, while in the provinces the old system of private elementary schools still exists. In the private schools, where the small monthly fee charged for each pupil constitutes the teacher’s sole income, only basic arithmetic is taught in addition to the usual Chinese characters. In the government schools, at least the Korean language and some notions of history and geography are taught as well as arithmetic.

The *High School*, formerly called the Teacher Training School, is the highest educational institution in the peninsula. It was established in 1897 to train future teachers for the various state schools, and Professor Hulbert, an American who arrived in Korea in 1886 to teach in the existing English language school, was appointed to run it and draft the necessary textbooks. In the spring of 1901 it was renamed and reorganized: a Korean official was appointed to manage the institute, leaving Prof. Hulbert at the head of the teaching staff. As it is organized now, the school has nine teachers: Professor Hulbert himself, a Japanese graduate from the University of Tokyo, and seven Koreans, several of whom, I was assured, are fairly competent in their respective subjects. The courses taught in the school include Arithmetic, Algebra, World History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, Physiology, Political Economics, Botany, Chinese Classics, Japanese Language and English Language; all subjects are taught in Korean.

Accompanied by Prof. Hulbert, who was my courteous and intelligent guide, I embarked on a series of detailed visits to all the schools in the capital, starting with the High School.

This school, the only one, with the Military Academy, which boasts a so-called European style of architecture, stands on a small hill in the northern part of the city; getting to it, through the usual labyrinth of ruined and muddy alleys, is not really an easy business. We were then towards the middle of March and as the long Chinese New Year holidays had ended only a month before, and Korean students, unlike our own perhaps, are in no great hurry to get back to their books, only about thirty of the fifty or so students regularly enrolled were present. My arrival, equipped as I was with a complete battery of photographic equipment, caused some excitement among all those boys, anxious not to miss the surprise of a photographic session; I think many of them were also grateful to me because they had very little studying to do that day.

After a short stay in the teachers' room, where I had time to admire a modest but adequate set of altogether up-to-date teaching aids, I photographed the director surrounded by all the teachers who were present, before starting a tour of the classrooms to attend the lessons.

In the first classroom I visited Professor Sidehara was teaching his own physics course. He had only recently arrived in Korea, and was giving his lesson - that day it was the pendulum - in Japanese, speaking slowly, while next to him an interpreter gradually translated what he was saying in Korean. This necessarily bilingual method of teaching is naturally not very fast, but the professor did not seem to mind; on the contrary he seemed quite satisfied with the results he obtained.

In another class a Korean teacher explained the Chinese classics and in a third a geography lesson was given using a text in *eur-mun* and modern maps published by the Ministry of Education with the names in Chinese characters and their pronunciation explained in Korean.

Finally, in Prof. Hulbert's class, I attended an algebra lesson; knowing the native language well, he gave the lesson directly in Korean, using European notation for demonstrations on the blackboard. Concerning the aptitudes of his pupils, Prof. Hulbert declared himself completely satisfied, especially with regard to mathematics. "In my opinion - he once wrote to me - the students are as apt to learn as the students in any country, and in mathematics I find them fully equal to American boys of the same age."

The average age of the students is around eighteen. What immediately amazes the foreigner is that the great majority of them are married, as the hat they wear indicates. In the whole school there are perhaps less than ten bachelors. Even though we know that in Korea marriages are made early, when couples are still almost children, we are so little used to associating the idea of ​​a wife and family responsibilities with attendance at school that our amazement is at least understandable.

The so-called *Schools of Foreign Languages* are quite different in character. There are six of them, and each one is headed by a foreign teacher imposed on the Korean Government by the Legation of the country concerned. The way in which they came into being is typical of the foreign interference to be observed in the internal affairs of that dissolving organism which is the Korean state. It is common knowledge that in the Far East the best known language, the one that is needed for all transactions, both diplomatic and commercial, between Europeans of different nationalities and between them and the native population, in short, the *lingua franca* of those countries, is English. It is therefore understandable that both in China and in Japan there are government English language schools, and the Korean government was wisely advised to set up similar schools in Seoul to train interpreters and officials who could deal directly with foreigners. Thus three government schools were subsequently built in Seoul, headed by British subjects or American citizens. In the eyes of the foreign ministers this measure appeared little less than a violation of the treaties: the French minister wanted a French language school to be opened, the Russian minister a Russian school, and so on. In short, in addition to the three English schools, there are today in Seoul a French, a Russian, a German, a Chinese and a Japanese government school, all of them needless to say staffed with foreign teachers decently paid by Korea, costing the country many thousands of dollars. There is reason enough to have a French school, and a Russian and a Japanese school too: there may be some use for the Korean government itself in having officials who speak these languages. But a German school? Unless you know the local languages, you cannot go to any German colony and be understood by the natives if you do not have a smattering of English: this is true for East Africa, for the Bismarck Archipelago, and for Kiaochow. In Korea itself, if the 42 Germans who are scattered around the peninsula only spoke their own language they would be in real diificulty! Yet who knows what would have happened to poor Korea if it had not immediately complied with this strange request? At the very least, a full-blown naval demonstration! I must point out that in saying this I do not in the least want to discredit the teachers in charge of those schools, least of all the director of the German school, the excellent Prof. Bollhjan, who has made his school a true model of its kind. Indeed it is only right to acknowledge all the efforts these foreigners are making, amidst obstacles of all kinds, and with truly apostolic fervour and generosity of spirit, for the good of education in Korea. But the fact remains that most of these schools were founded for purely political reasons and not from a genuinely disinterested desire to further the cause of education in the peninsula.

The oldest of these schools is the English Language school. It was established in 1883 under the direction of Mr. Halifax, who is today, with the captain of the port of Cemulpo, our compatriot Borioni, one of the peninsula’s oldest European residents. The school lasted for a couple of years, but the only fruitful work was done in the eight months leading up to the riots of 1884. Most of the few really good interpreters currently in government service come from that school. In 1886 it was suppressed and a new school was opened under the joint direction of three American subjects, of whom only one remained in Korea, Professor Hulbert, already mentioned. This school was subjected to fierce opposition from various quarters and its results did not meet expectations. In 1894 it too was abolished, and a new one was established in November of the same year under the direction first of Mr. Hutchison, and now of my good friend Professor G. R. Frampton.

Of all the foreign language schools in Seoul, the English school is undoubtedly the most important, being the most useful, having the most pupils, and possessing the best equipment. Much of the credit for this must go to the English community of Seoul, which was willing to provide the necessary school materials, and spares no sacrifice to ensure that the school remains up to its task despite the distressing neglect of the Korean government. In addition to the English language, which is the core subject, pupils are taught the rudiments of mathematics, history, geography and the natural sciences; most of them belong to the middle class and they generally follow the courses attentively enough to profit from them. Five Korean teachers assist Professor Frampton in his work which, with over one hundred and twenty pupils, is no sinecure.

The *French School*, directed by Mr. Martel, was established in 1896, at the request of the French chargé d'affaires. It is certainly one of the best organized and the results obtained are excellent. When it opened there were only 14 pupils; today it has about a hundred pupils, divided into six classes, and a staff of six teachers, the director himself and five Koreans chosen by him. The main purpose of the school is to form a nucleus of good French interpreters and future Korean officials who will foster pro-French feeling in government circles. During my stay in Seoul I asked Mr. Clémencet, inspector of the Korean Post Office, who managed the school for a time in the absence of Mr. Martel, if he could give me some information on the organization of the school itself, and he was kind enough to send me a succinct but comprehensive monograph. Given that, *mutatis mutandis*, the way the French school is organized and the difficulties complained of are nearly the same as in the other foreign language schools, I am content to reproduce almost word for word the information I was given, which gives a clear idea of ​​the state of one of the few vibrant branches of education in Korea.

The general curriculum of the French School comprises:

1. - Study of the French language, written and oral (reading, writing, dictation, grammatical analysis, composition, French, syntax, conversation, and translation of French texts into Korean and of Sino-Korean texts into French).

2. - Arithmetic (four basic operations, rule of three, and, for level VI only, the metric system, plane and solid geometry, and bookkeeping).

3. - Geography (in level VI).

These courses, taught in French, take place every morning, from 10 to 12.30.

The afternoon is given over to study of the Chinese language, under the guidance of a Korean teacher expressly appointed by the Ministry of Education (2 hours a day) and to gymnastic exercises directed by an officer of the Seoul garrison, also appointed by the Ministry of Education (one hour per day).

The average time needed to train a good pupil varies according to his intelligence and aptitude for study. A pupil of average intelligence can easily go from Grade I to Grade IV in his first school year; one year is necessary to follow the courses in the fourth and fifth Grades, and it is only in the third year that he will be capable of following the lessons given in the sixth. There have been exceptional cases of students who completed the entire course in two years, but in principle you have to count on three or four years.

After completing all six Grades, the students generally find a place in some branch of the civil service, and Mr. Clémencet pointed out to me with some pride that already over forty former pupils were occupying important government posts. In the list he sent me I have found two interpreters with the Imperial Household, one interpreter in the Foreign Ministry, various employees at the Direction of Mines and Railways, and even three Legation secretaries, currently in Petersburg, Paris and Berlin - which shows that Korea does not demand particularly advanced academic qualifications for admission to the diplomatic corps.

A certain number of students in Grade VI have to follow special courses at the *School of Law* annexed to the Ministry of Justice and at the Postal School in the Directorate General of Communications, with a view to training future officials for both the judiciary and the administration of the Postal Service.

The teaching system is essentially practical, but is complicated by the Ministry of Education’s failure to supply books for the students. The teachers are obliged to provide the teaching materials they need at their own expense, and Mr. Martel supplies the books the students most need from his own pocket. There is scarcely one French/Sino-Korean dictionary for each class, and no wall maps or atlases at all. In short, the Ministry does no more than supply the school with ink, paper, pens, brushes and pencils; it has also recently abolished the modest allowance of five cents initially allocated to each pupil for his daily lunch.

Two exams are held annually to rank the students in order of merit, one before the big Chinese New Year holidays, around February, and the second in June just before the end of the school year. The school closes in July and reopens in September.

The sum entered in the budget for the maintenance of the French School is about 11,000 Korean dollars, equal to some 18,000 lire, but a part of this sum, needless to say, is lost on the way, forgotten in the pockets of some official.

The French community in Seoul is very proud of this school, and Mr. Clémencet concluded the report he sent me with these words: "It is not without legitimate pride that we may note that Korea is one of the few countries in this part of the world where the French language, and *consequently something of the Latin mentality too*, have succeeded in gaining a footing."

Almost on the same level as the schools described above are the Japanese School, founded in 1891, the Russian School, founded in 1896, the Chinese School, founded in 1897, and the German School, founded in 1898.

The directors of all these schools, aided and encouraged in every way by their compatriots, do everything possible, as I have already said, to ensure that their schools do not become simply an additional burden on the finances of the State, but they often encounter an almost insuperable obstacle in the inertia, bad faith and corruption which prevail in the Korean administration. Faced with such an obstacle every initiative necessarily comes to nothing, all enthusiasm inevitably dies out. Admission to all government schools should be by competition; instead intrigue is the only basis that determines admissions. Assignment to this or that class should be decided in the light of each individual pupil’s ability and knowledge; instead it is the Minister of Education who, *motu proprio*, promotes the pupils he favours most, sometimes forcing a school to upgrade students it had already found inadequate at a lower level. While the regulations prescribe five years of attendance at each of these schools in order to obtain the relative diploma, in practice no one stays for more than four years; as soon as a favourable opportunity arises to obtain a position of any kind, students leave school promptly.

The few schools in the capital run by Europeans, which have no connection with the government, would naturally provide better qualifications; unfortunately, as they are all run by missionaries of the various confessions, they lack that calm environment without which a school cannot fulfil its true purpose. In all of them the main goal which their respective and in many ways excellent teachers strive to achieve is to form good believers, and they are not worried if their charges do not later turn out to be good citizens. Prominent among the rominent among these8 '98 '97,f a people e good citizens. religious schools are those run by the French Catholic mission belonging to the *Société des Missions Etrangères de Paris*. They offer an adequate elementary education to over three hundred children in two orphanages and a seminary located at Ryong-san. Except in the seminary, where teaching is in Latin, all lessons are given exclusively in *eur-mun* and Sino-Korean.

The *American Methodist Mission* also maintains a very flourishing college, founded in 1886, which the Emperor honoured by personally bestowing upon it the name of *Pai Cé*, or "Court for the Breeding of Useful Men." Under an agreement with the Korean government the school can take in pupils for a monthly fee of one dollar per pupil, and has to pay one Korean teacher for every fifty pupils. The curriculum, broadly similar to those of the schools already mentioned, is entirely in the hands of the Methodist Mission, as is discipline, and all pupils are obliged to attend religious services. The school has its own printing shop, undoubtedly the best of the two in Seoul, which prints Korean, Chinese and English texts, and a bookbinding workshop, which is also very good.

At this point, the astute reader will certainly have observed that up to now I have only discussed educational institutions for boys and have made no mention of schools for girls: the fact is that there are none. Women in Korea, as I have said before, do not count. Their function in Korean society is purely physiological and no special teaching is needed to regulate it. At least this is what the Korean government, which takes no interest at all at in women's education, seems to think.

For some years now the religious missions have been trying to do something for the female part of the population, but so far, with the exception of the orphanage run by French nuns, where a hundred girls, in addition to learning to read and write *eur-mun*, are trained in women's work, there are very few results to show for their efforts. Many years will have to pass before there is any improvement - not imposed and therefore ephemeral, but real and spontaneous, stemming from a change in general attitudes – in the present distressing state of moral and intellectual prostration afflicting the most unfortunate part of a population which itself enjoys so little good fortune.