

## Chapter 1

---

# The Hermit Kingdom

### A Monument

Someone who tries to reach downtown Seoul coming from the southern parts of the South Korean capital, and who chooses the Yang Hwa Bridge to cross the Han River will observe at the northern bank of the river a modern church. The place where this Catholic Church, called Yang Hwa Jin, was built is a memorable one as Christians, persecuted by the government, had been killed here. A museum attached to the church is dedicated to those Christian martyrs. In front of the museum stands a replica of a stone monument with an inscription. The text of the inscription, which can also be studied on a board inside the museum, reads as follows: “Not to fight a battle against the invasion of the barbarians from the West and agreeing to peace negotiations, means selling-off the country. Posterity is admonished forever. Written and erected in the year of the tiger and the month of the lamb”.

The year of the tiger was the year 1866. The Korean government had approximately 100 of these monuments erected in order to stop the people from getting into contact with the Europeans. In the middle of the 19th century Chosun was an extremely isolated country indeed.

### Relations with the Middle Kingdom

Chosun in those years was a monarchy ruled by the Yi-dynasty since the 14th century. The Yi dynasty, like its predecessors, found itself in isolation, due to the country’s geographic position. In this secluded world of East

Asia there were only limited opportunities for foreign relations. During their long national history, Koreans had to fight against tribes invading from the North as well as the Japanese trying to conquer the country from the South. While the Japanese invasions under Toyotomi Hideyoshi at the end of the 16th century had failed, it had in the process devastated large parts of Korea. Korea had exchanges with neighbors but developed permanent and consistent relations only with its large neighbor in the North, with the Middle Kingdom.

The Chinese made various attempts to conquer Korea but failed. During the rule of the Tang dynasty (618–907) — Korea was unified under the Shilla dynasty (668–935) — the ties between both countries started to assume their characteristic form of tributary relations. This special type of foreign relations had built up into an elaborate system during the Ming and Ch'ing dynasty in China, and the Yi dynasty in Korea. China and Korea regularly exchanged embassies. Korea recognized China as a “great state” calling the relationship *sadae* (serving the great) and expressed this by sending tributes. The Korean kings received a seal from the Chinese emperor which had to be used in their correspondence with the imperial court, the Chinese calendar in order to date official documents as well as their posthumous titles.

The tribute system was of economic importance. It was the only form of external trade authorized by China and resulted in a considerable transshipment of goods across the borders of China. The total value of goods delivered by Korea to China in 1787 is estimated to have matched more than 3 tons of silver.<sup>1</sup> As China was obliged to offer gifts in return, and to accommodate the embassies during their stay in Beijing, the tribute system was not necessarily profitable for the Chinese government.

The cultural aspect of the tribute system was also important. Foreign visitors to Beijing were exposed to the superior Chinese culture. It is difficult to determine whether the cultural impact was based on Chinese intentions or was just a byproduct. It was, however, the vehicle in which China's dominating influence spread to its neighbors.

The main aim of the tribute system, however, was a political one. It was meant to guarantee peace for China along its borders. At the same time it protected the states at China's borders against interference in their domestic

---

<sup>1</sup>R. Machetzki, “Tributssystem”, in *China Handbuch*, edited by Wolfgang Franke and Brunhild Staiger, Düsseldorf 1974, p. 1421.

affairs. These family relations were only offered to those countries which had become Confucian and had accepted the natural rules. The neighboring states were supposed to recognize the tribute system voluntarily. Therefore, military interventions were to be avoided — a principle, however, which was often violated.

The tributary ties with China were a burden for Korea's economy, but a blessing for its cultural development. Politically non-interference by China in Korea's domestic affairs prevailed. As long as Korea recognized China's precedence it remained independent in its internal policies. The investiture of the Korean kings by the Chinese emperors was mainly of a nominal character because regularly the one who already acted as king received the seal from Beijing.

During the centuries of relations between Korea and China friendly feelings towards the great neighbor in the North prevailed in Korea. They found their expression in the term *mohwa*, veneration for China. The aristocracy in both countries had a similar education and shared the same Confucian convictions and conceptions of the world. These views held the Chinese Emperor, the son of heaven, responsible for transmitting the heavenly principles to everybody.

Tung Yueh, who came as Imperial Envoy to Korea in 1488, used the following formula for Sino-Korean relations in his account of his mission: "Because Korea has always shown loyalty and reverence to the Imperial Court, it receives favors such as is given to no other country".<sup>2</sup> His Korean contemporary Choe Pu, who wrote down his account also in 1488, shared this view. He said to a Chinese officer who had shown him hospitality: "Certainly that shows your feelings that though my Korea is beyond the sea, its clothing and culture being the same as China's, it cannot be considered a foreign country. . . All under Heaven are my brothers; how can we discriminate among people because of distance? That is particularly true of my country, which respectful serves the Celestial Court and pays tribute without fail. The Emperor, for his part, treats us punctiliously and tends us benevolently. The feeling of security he imparts is perfect".<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>English translation by Richard Rutt, "Chao-hsien fu", *Transactions* of the RAS Vol. XLVIII p. 65.

<sup>3</sup>John Meskill, *Choe Pu's Diary: A Record of Drifting across the Sea*, Tuscon 1965, p. 65.

## First Contacts with the West

The Koreans' feeling of security was going to be upset by contact with the Europeans and the Americans. This exactly had been the reason why the Korean government had the stone monuments erected with warnings against contacts with the barbarian.

Beijing was the place where Koreans got in contact with Westerners. Through this contact, the members of the Korean Embassies came to know Europeans and European ideas. Europeans seldom came to Korea and most of them came as sailors of stranded ships. If caught they were jailed and not released. In 1653 Hendrik Harmel and other Dutch sailors who were stranded at the coast of Cheju Island succeeded in freeing themselves after having been imprisoned for 13 years. After reaching Europe via Japan, Harmel's account about his Korean adventure was translated into several European languages and made Korea known in Europe.<sup>4</sup> As he reports, the strange European visitors were treated with a mixture of curiosity, kindness and arrogance.

The contacts with Westerners had one particularly important result. The Catholic faith, which the Koreans had met in Beijing, began to spread in Korea by the middle of the 18th century. It did so even before the first missionaries had set foot on Korean soil. The new faith also met much opposition. Confucian scholars could not find justification for the Christian faith in the part of history with which they were familiar. It was a traditional Confucian approach to check history so as to cope with present events. Some Korean scholars felt the Christian claim that Jesus Christ — whom they considered to be the founder of that faith — was God's son was blasphemous. In addition they realized that this new faith broke away from Korean traditions, particularly ancestor worship. The official version of Christianity found its expression in a textbook on Confucianism edited by the Korean government at the end of the 19th century. The German Consulate took up the matter with the Korean Foreign Ministry in a letter dated 5 October 1896 which complained about the deformation of the Christian religion quoting the following passage from a Korean textbook: "In the opinion of

---

<sup>4</sup>Hendrick Harmel, *Account of a Ship wreck of a Dutch Vessel on the Coast of the Isle of Quelpart, with Description of the Kingdom of Korea*, first publication in 1668, reprinted in *Transactions of the RAS* Vol. IX 1918, pp. 97 ff.

the new generation the so-called Christian religion of the Europeans is mean, superficial and wrong, and is an example of the viciousness of barbarian customs which is not worthy of being studied seriously. The terms used by Christians for heaven, happiness and misfortune are similar to those used by the Buddhists. They worship the heavenly spirits, but not their ancestors. They insult heaven in many ways and confuse the social system. This is really characteristic of barbarian ruthlessness and not worth to be dealt with in our survey of foreign customs. This is especially true since this religion is in a state of decay at present. Europeans have spread their spawn in all countries in the world except China. Everybody adores this religion. We are surprised to see that Chinese scholars and the Chinese people did not avoid the infection".<sup>5</sup>

By the end of the 18th century the Korean government acted against individual Christians. From the beginning of the 19th century Christians were brutally persecuted. The persecutions were mostly triggered by the Christian refusal to worship their ancestors in the traditional way.

Before the turn of the century the first ordained priest, a Chinese, came to Korea; he was followed by French fathers who started arriving in Korea by 1835. Kim Tae Gon (Father Andre Kim) was the first Korean priest to do missionary work in his home country. He became a victim of the persecution shortly after his arrival in Korea in 1845. But the persecutions did not succeed in stopping the spread of the Christian faith. Many Koreans were attracted to this faith because Christianity demanded that all men and women were God's children, and should be treated equally. There were allegedly 17,000 Catholics in Korea by 1860.

Official church history dates the founding of the Catholic Church in Korea back to 1784.<sup>6</sup> In that year Yi Sung Hun, who had come as a member of an embassy, was baptized in Beijing. When he returned to Korea he baptized Yi Pyok. Together they created a Christian community. In May 1984 Pope Paul John II came to Korea to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the country's Christianization. At that occasion he canonized 103 martyrs.

---

<sup>5</sup>*Ku Hanguk oegyo munso (Diplomatic Documents of Old Korea), togan (German Document)*, edited by Koryo taehak kyo Asea munje yonguso (Asian Research Institute of Korea University) Seoul 1966, Vol. 1, pp. 658 and 659 (Translation from German by the author).

<sup>6</sup>E. Plazidus Berger, "Zr Gründung der Kirche in Korea. Ein Forschungsbericht", in *Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft und Religionswissenschaft*, Vol. 19 (1985), pp. 98 ff.

## The Country's Internal Situation

Korea's desolate situation in the 19th century contributed to attracting many people to this new faith. Many people felt that the traditional concepts were inadequate to cope with modern developments.

Chosun continued to be an authoritarian state ruled only nominally by the kings. Real power was no longer in the hands of the victorious factions of the aristocrats, the *yangban*, but was wielded by the in-laws of the royal family. This development was made easy: since King Chongjo's death in 1800 minor princes ascended the throne for whom regents filled in. It was in particular the Kim clan from Andong which dominated politics at the royal court. Nepotism and corruption were spreading.

The old class system was unsettled. Many *yangban* who were kept excluded from government services became impoverished. Early capitalism was developing, aggravating the contrast between rich and poor. Status was now determined by wealth. Confucianism which had been the official ideology of Chosun for such a long time degenerated into formalism. Interest in science and technology was missing.

The majority of Koreans felt suppressed and exploited. This was particularly true for the farmers who had to carry the heaviest burden. They suffered from an unfair tax system which was often enforced by corrupt government officials. The basis of the tax system was a land tax. The system had many exemptions of which some were based on fiction. This often resulted in the land tax being applied arbitrarily. Those who wanted to be exempted from military conscription had to pay a military exemption charge. Families with many men who were needed for working on the farm had to suffer particularly from this charge. The rice loan system was misused. It had originally been established in order to support farmers. In spring, when rice was in short supply, farmers were to receive rice loans from the government which the farmers had to refund after harvest in the fall. The tax officials had not used the rice loans for its intended purpose, but had started to charge interest. As corruption was widespread among government officials the country's financial system was in disarray.

It was not surprising that injustice and mismanagement caused severe rebellions. Already in 1811 a rebellion broke out in the Northwest of Korea; in 1862 revolts were started in the South and quickly spread over the whole country.

It was the regent Yi Ha Ung (1864–1873) who restored government authority. When King Cholchong died in 1864, a twelve-year-old boy — his

posthumous title was: Kojong — ascended the throne and his father was made regent. He was given the title of Taewongun (Prince of the Great Court). This title had been bestowed on other fathers of kings, but Yi Ha Ung was — much to the surprise of the Cho clan which had appointed him — such a strong personality that he became known as the Taewongun. He succeeded quickly in controlling the court, reorganizing government administration and fighting corruption. In order to make the strengthened role of the crown visible he had rebuilt Kyongbok Palace in the heart of Seoul which had been in ruins since the Hideyoshi invasions. It is the Taewongun's reconstruction of the Palace which visitors see today.

Since the Taewongun was afraid that Koreans might be infected by Western ideas, he launched persecutions against Catholics. In the period from 1866 to 1872 several thousand Catholics were killed. It was disastrous for Korea that the Taewongun failed to realize that only a dynamic and future oriented policy could show Korea the path to modern times.

## **Seclusion**

The Taewongun reacted negatively to various Western attempts to take up relations with Korea. Due to this, he increased Korea's isolation even more. The stone monuments, as mentioned above, which warned the Korean population of contacts with Europeans, were erected during his rule. Korea finally became known as the "Hermit Kingdom" in Europe and in the United States in the second half of the 19th century.

Already during the period before the rule of the Taewongun, Koreans were convinced that there was reason to be suspicious of Western intruders. In the view of many Koreans, Europeans and Americans appeared to be propagandists of a religion which, if it succeeded in spreading, would result in a confusion of the social system. The Koreans were also worried about the conflicts between China and Japan on the one side and the West on the other. It could not have left Koreans unimpressed that China had had many conflicts with European colonial powers and since the opium war in 1864 suffered one humiliation after the other resulting in a deep shock for the Middle Kingdom. Seoul had also observed with concern that Japan had been forced by the USA to establish relations.

Time after time European and American ships reached the coast of Korea. Already in the first half of the 19th century British ships had demanded to trade

with the Koreans. In 1846 and 1847 French naval ships appeared on Korea's western coast to retaliate for the persecution of Christians. The Korean impression that Christianity accompanies Western interference is, therefore, plausible.

During the rule of the Taewongun, European and American ships approached the Korean coast more frequently. In 1866 the American merchant ship *General Sherman* advanced along the Taedong River. The Koreans sank the ship and killed the crew. In the same year French ships under the command of Admiral Roze showed up at Korea's western coasts in order to retaliate for the Taewongun's persecution of Christians. They were, however, quickly driven off. The same happened to American warships which had come to Korea in order to find out what had happened to the *General Sherman*. In 1871 a small fleet of five US warships came to Korea in order to urge the Koreans to conclude a treaty of friendship. The ships approached Kanghwa, situated at the estuary of the Han River, and engaged in fighting with the Koreans. These intruders were also driven off. The notion that the Taewongun resisted the arrogant style of Western colonial powers is plausible. Unfortunately, he had no idea how to free Korea from its backwardness and how to reform the country.

### Oppert's Act of Piracy

Among those foreigners who tried to open Korea to the West, the German Ernst Oppert played a strange role. There are different accounts of the event; even its precise date is not clear. If one pieces together what W. E. Griffis<sup>7</sup> and Oppert<sup>8</sup> reported, events would have unfolded in the following way: Oppert, a German merchant residing in Shanghai, had made several vain attempts to trade with Korea. Together with the French priest Féron and the American Jenkins he devised a plan to open the tomb of the Taewongun's father, Prince Namyon, and take away his mortal remains — which Oppert called relics. Griffis, using official US documents, felt that the adventurers had in mind to extort money from the Taewongun. It seems more plausible that Oppert intended to use the remains of the Taewongun's father as a type of security in order — as he himself put it — “to force the regent and his government to comply with the demand to open the country and sign accordingly treaties

---

<sup>7</sup>William Elliot Griffis, *Corea. The Hermit Nation*; 4th edition, New York 1884, pp. 396 ff.

<sup>8</sup>Ernst Oppert, *Ein verschlossenes Land, Reisen nach Corea*, Leipzig 1880.

with foreign powers”.<sup>9</sup> Oppert dates the expedition “three half years” after Admiral Roze’s visit.<sup>10</sup> As the latter one occurred in October 1866, it is likely that Oppert sailed to Korea in the spring of 1868. The adventurers, some Filipinos and a Chinese crew of approximately 100 men left Shanghai with the steamer *China* and the dinghy *Greta* under the flag of the Northgerman Federation, the predecessor of the German Reich. Sailing via Nagasaki they reached the Asan Bay at the west Coast of the Korean peninsula. Using the dinghy they found the tomb of Prince Namyon. The tomb was — and still is today — situated on a hill overlooking a valley surrounded by the Kaya mountains. Four of the men tried digging the tomb with shovels. When they met the stone walls inside the mound they had no tools to open them. They thus had to leave without having achieved opening the tomb. They stayed for some time in the area of Kangwha Island and then returned to Shanghai.

Jenkins was tried by a US consular court, but acquitted for lack of evidence. It is said that Oppert was given a prison sentence in Germany.

Though the event can only be called grotesque it had its influence on the Korean attitude towards Westerners. Desecration of graves met indignation everywhere. For Koreans it was outrageous. For centuries ancestor worship was a central element of Korean religiousness. The ancestors who were contacted via offerings continued to protect the lineage. The attack on Prince Namyon’s tomb by Oppert and his cohorts confirmed the impression of the Koreans that the Europeans were barbarians who should not be allowed to enter their country. While Oppert had intended to pull Korea out of seclusion his act of piracy contributed to an even greater seclusion of the country.

## References

- Clark, Charles Allen, *Religion of Old Korea*, New York 1932.  
Dallet, Charles, *Histoire de L’Eglise de Corée*, Tome Premier, Paris 1874, Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch (RAS), Reprint Series, Seoul 1975.  
Chon, Hae Chung, *hanchung kwankyesa yonku (A Study of the History of Sino-Korean Relations)*, Seoul 1970.  
Koh, Byong Ik, “Concept of Foreign Countries in Traditional Korea”, in *Asian Culture Quarterly*, Vol. III No. 4 (Winter 1975), pp. 1 ff.

---

<sup>9</sup>Oppert p. 272 (Translation from German by the author).

<sup>10</sup>Oppert p. IX.