

# Comic Opera Existence in Korea



COREAN WIVES IRONING.



A COREAN SCHOOL.

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**W**HILE Japan and Russia are making faces at each other across Korea, the Land of the Morning Calm retains its composure and pursues an existence comparable to nothing outside of comic opera.

A land in which the dynasty was hatched from an egg; in which the men dress like old women; in which a bachelor, though an old man, is regarded as an infant, is called by a pet name and talked to in baby talk; in which boys are invariably married to women; in which men at nightfall are expected to stay indoors and let their wives roam the streets and gossip with their friends; in which the poor take plain pills and the rich have their pills decorated and gilded, is truly the Land of the Libretto.

China is the parent of Korea. In the mists of ages the favorite of the king of a Chinese province, wandering by the river, saw a glistening vapor which floated into her bosom and became an egg. From this was hatched a boy, whom the enraged king threw to the pigs.

But the kindly pigs fed him with their breath, and the king, believing that heaven willed that the boy should live, took him into the royal household, where he was called the Light of the East.

The boy was skilled in archery, surpassing every one. The king became jealous, and the boy fled.

Coming to the river Yalu, he shot an arrow into the stream, and thousands of fish came and made a bridge of their bodies that he might pass over. When his pursuers arrived at the stream the finny bridge swam away, and they were left helpless.

The Light of the East found an amiable people on the other side, who made him their king. Thus the king of Korea is regarded today as the Son of Heaven.

In point of fact, he is the son of Tai-Won-Kun, and was appointed to the throne by the Dowager Queen Cho. His father and elder brother are his subjects, for primogeniture does not obtain in the Orient.

Li Hsi, as the Korean emperor is called, is an amiable gentleman of 50, at present a widower—if a gentleman with 100 concubines may be called a widower. Queen Min, who was murdered by the Japanese, was, the Americans living in Seoul say, a woman whose mental powers surpassed even those of that very remarkable woman, the emperor dowager of China.

For over thirty years she was the power behind the throne—literally behind the throne, for the queen, no more than any other Korean woman, could be viewed by men other than those of her immediate family. The most subtle diplomacy was conducted from behind a screen, and so ably that the only resource of her enemies was to kill her.

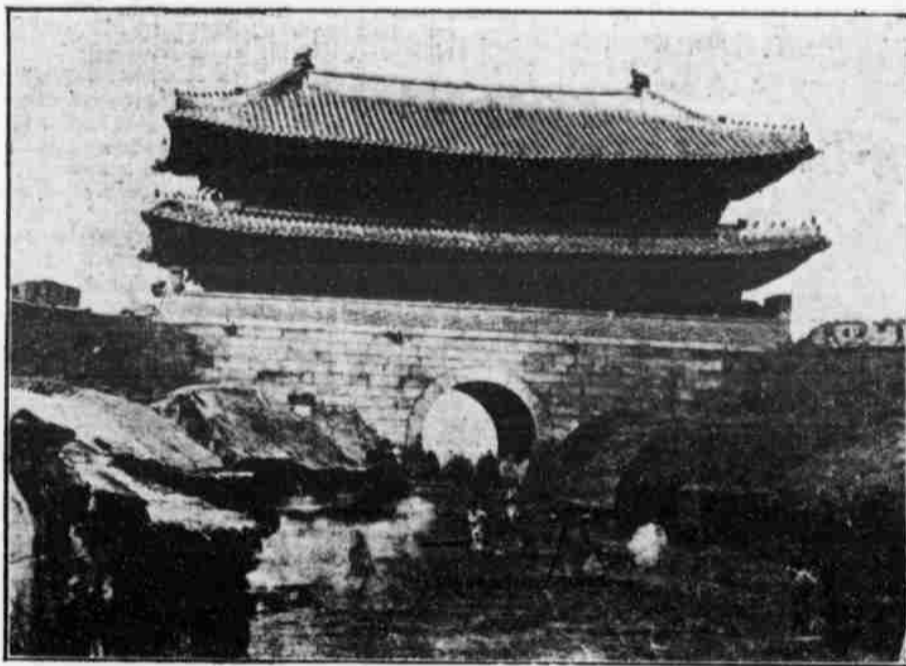
Even this murder had its enlivening features. The American missionaries, who were the only people in Seoul that the king could then trust, took turns in guarding the king and the crown prince while they slept. Another missionary and his wife cooked all the food that the hapless pair ate, sending it to them in a locked box, lest, after the Oriental fashion, they should be poisoned.

Now enters the Lady Om, concubine No. 1. Lady Om announced a venerable aunt with sudden cramps. It was necessary that she should leave the palace for her home, and Lady Om would accompany her.

Two palanquins were ordered, and in the seclusion of the women's quarters the king and the crown prince were bundled in and escaped safely from the palace, where they were virtually prisoners, for a haven at the Russian legation. It must be understood that in Korea not even the boldest of secret service men would dare to look into a woman's palanquin.

Naturally, ever since, Lady Om has had her hopes of advancement.

It is not amusing to be a widower in Korea. For three years the unfortunate must abstain from all pleasure, and go about with a sort of gunny bag veil screen-



CITY GATE AT SEOUL.

ing his face. Discipline of this sort facilitates marriage.

Nevertheless, the king has thus far evaded the Lady Om. She has her faction, which ascribes every national evil to the king's failure to take unto himself a new queen, and has memorialized the king in her behalf.

Memorializing is one of the occupations of Seoul. In front of the palace gates the sightseer never fails to behold a couple of men squatting behind a low stool on which lies a roll of paper. This is the memorial. There are memorials about everything under the sun. Here they sit day after day, for time is of no consequence in Korea. Perhaps in time the memorial reaches the king, who in time responds, perhaps in the summary fashion in which he responded to the memorial concerning Lady Om.

"April 27, 1897. Reply to Kim Kon Vok and others. Your views are quite patriotic, but the government has laws and ceremonies which do not require your suggestions. Therefore, you need not confuse us any more by sending us memorials. You are therefore ordered to go away."

The king's edicts might be issued by the sultan of a comic opera. After the Chinese-Japanese war, which gave Korea its independence, the king determined to be abreast of the times.

The army was taken out of its petticoats and put into trousers, and the king ordered that the most sacred object, the topknot, as their gun-trigger style of hair dressing is called, be cut off. Thus the edict ran:

"Laws and rules proceed from the king. Treaty relations must now be observed with the rest of the world, and changes be introduced into politics. We have, therefore, introduced a new calendar, a title of the reign, and changed the style of dress and cut off the topknot.

"You should not regard us as loving innovations. Wide sleeves and topknots have become familiar by usage. The topknots and hair bands stand in the way of health as you know.

"Nor is it right in this day of ships and vehicles that we should stick to these customs."

This edict nearly created a revolution. To cut off the topknot, the Korean evidence of dignity, was an abasement; and the amiable king finally let his own hair grow out and resumed his topknot.

More permanent innovations were his home and foreign offices, with their Cham Pan (help to decide) and their Cham Wi (help to discuss.)

The difficulty of taking these dignities seriously sometimes disturbs the foreigners. The secretary of state, as it were, went to see the German consul about some disputed mining concession; and the German pushed him off the doorstep and shut

the door. The feelings of the official were so hurt that he went home and resigned.

The king has abandoned the palace in which the queen was murdered, and is building a new palace at the foot of the slopes, on which the legations are housed, and where the frogs croak by day and night. Here in an emergency he can climb over the wall into the grounds of the English resident, or shin into the American minister's compound.

The palace is a collection of Korean houses for the king's hundreds of supernumeraries and is enclosed by a high wall. Except that he is allowed to have more steps the king's houses do not differ greatly from other houses of the better sort.

But unlike other householders the king can go on to one of his own roofs without asking his neighbors' permission; a provision to keep the Korean from looking by chance at his neighbors' wives.

The Korean house has some beautiful features. Chief of these is the roof with its re-entering curves.

The roof is tiled and the tiles rest on a bed of earth. In this the floating seeds find a place, and in the spring the roofs burst into bloom and are gay with tulip, wild pink, forget-me-nots and riotous foliage. Beautiful woods and paper windows and walls are the other materials used.

Nothing could be more barren than the interiors of these houses. Caught in a driving rain, we sought the shelter of a gate. A little servant ran out and insisted on our coming indoors.

We were led through various courts until we reached the women's house. Here were two wives, whose delight at our company was like that of children.

They led us through their empty rooms, a low bed and a wardrobe furnishing a room. The furniture, however, was imposing.

The wardrobes were gaily decorated with landscapes inlaid with mother of pearl, and the hinges and locks were of ornamented brass. One conspicuous feature was the cash chest to accommodate the Korean money, of which the foreigner frequently pays 400 cash for a sedan shopping excursion and 1,400 for a day's board.

The Korean women wear a sort of Turkish trousers and several stiffly starched skirts. Over all this is a very full skirt gathered to a band that reaches the armpits, the last garment being a tiny bolero.

The hand of the peasant woman is much narrower and the jacket so small that the baby, which she carries low on the back, sticks its head under its mother's arm and feeds itself without disturbing her conversation.

The woman of position never goes abroad except in a closed palanquin. Then she is

gaily painted and adorned with jewels, hairpins being her favorite ornament.

The middle class woman goes out, but wears over her head a green silk coat, which she holds tightly with one hand so that her face cannot be seen. This coat has sleeves so small that a child could not get its arms into them. This is a custom from time immemorial, the origin of these useless sleeves being unknown.

At home the Korean wife looks after the household, her chief duty being to see that her—or their—husband's white gauze coats are smooth and shining. Ironing is, indeed, a fine art in Korea. This is done with two rounded sticks which the little women handle deftly.

When Koreans talk it always seems as if the air were full of brickbats, so harsh and curt is the tongue. But a group of Korean gentlemen on the street in their long, white, shining coats, with their pipes and reticules, always suggests a company of spick and span old women going to a tea party.

Nothing is ever seen like their head covering. This is a tall, cylindrical hat, with wings woven of horsehair, and so thin that the topknot can be plainly seen.

This is it, etiquet not to remove. Even at Minister Allen's last Fourth of July reception the Koreans kept on their hats.

When a boy marries he puts up his hair and assumes this hat. If he does not marry he must wear his hair braided down his back in a pigtail, and has only a pet name and must submit to being tootsie-wootsied until he is toothless and dies. All Korean boys have a feminine appearance. The girls are never seen.

The Korean gentleman, unlike his wife, does not lack for entertainment. He is devoted to nature, picnics, feasts and the Korean geisha or gesang—that is to say, singing girl.

These girls are the necessary accompaniment of a civilization that shuts up its wives and sisters. As they depend on their attractiveness, they are taught to be good natured, always pleasing, to be accomplished, witty, to sing and to dance.

This necessity gives the gesang incentive to study and time for devoting herself to refined occupations. She dresses modestly, even when wearing the brilliant silks and gauzes of her calling, and what seems the greatest of her privileges, she can go freely abroad.

After the feast, death is the greatest of Korean functions. Four days after dying the departed has a send-off in the fashion of a great feast. His coffin is then provided with money and pieces of rich stuffs for the journey.

If he is a person of consequence, the geomancer is called in to determine the time of his burial. This may not be for three months.

The family graveyards, which occupy an inordinate space of Korean territory, are the occasion of what are known as graveyard fights, in which the contending parties toss out the sacred ancestors' bones without ceremony.

Korea is the least religious of all the nations of the east. A mild form of Confucianism serves for philosophy, and ancestor worship is the only thing that resembles religion.

There is not a temple in Seoul. In the country there are monasteries, but to the monasteries the Korean gentlemen repair for their high revels.

On the roofs of the Korean houses squat grotesque images, intended to scare away evil spirits, and before the doors of hovels are seen wisps of plaited straw and strips of garments for the same purpose.

There are devil trees, also, on which these strips hang. The Korean devil is so stupid that coming across these strips he fancies he has the wearer of the clothes.

The cultivated Korean gentleman is a delightful acquaintance. He has a charming sense of humor, a lightness of touch in conversation and a pleasing gallantry, all of which make him an eminently social person. The Koreans are good linguists, and those who speak English do it without accent. MARY GAY HUMPHREYS.