

Korea in the realm of reality:

The 1876 Japanese journalistic reports and the Meiji origins of modern Korean studies

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If I had to choose one word to summarize the Japanese attitude towards Korea around the Meiji Restoration, it would be the word “ignorance”. In 1868, Japan was *ignorant* of Korean things. And this lack of knowledge was not only perceptible among the new leaders, but also among those that should have been the best informed of the Korean situation, namely the Tsushima domain.

This ignorance may seem surprising, in view of the close Japanese-Korean relations of the Edo period (1600-1868). The two countries had succeeded in overcoming their basic differences on the nature of their relations (for Korea - equal exchanges between two vassals of China; for Japan - relations which had nothing to do with a Chinese world view, but originated in her own will), and had developed relatively friendly ties.

The domain of Tsushima, headed by the So family, was the intermediary through which Japanese-Korean relations were held during the Edo period. These contacts were punctuated by the coming to Japan of “Korean embassies”. And a delegation of Tsushima, the *wakan* (Korean *waegwan*), was established near Pusan. Moreover, this relative closeness favored the emergence of Japanese experts in Korean things, like Amenomori Hoshu (1668-1755), whose Korean language textbook (*Korin suchi*) was still widely in use in the Meiji period.

Nevertheless, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the traditional frame of Japanese-Korean relations had been deteriorating for a long time. Tsushima-Korea trade was continuously declining, and since 1776, Tsushima had received regular financial assistance from Edo. No Korean official delegation had come to Japan since 1811, and that last delegation did not go farther than Tsushima.

The growing distance between Japan and Korea was also perceptible in the intellectual field. Paradoxically, the growing strategic interest some Japanese thinkers were showing in Korea since the end of the eighteenth century expressed, by its lack of realism, how Korea was actually becoming an imaginary entity in Japanese minds. At the end of the eighteenth century, Hayashi Shihei was already speaking about the importance of Korea for Japan’s security. In the 1820s, Sato Nobuhiro turned to a more aggressive stance, and called for the conquest of Manchuria, Kamchatka, Korea and China. Both thinkers referred also to the legendary conquests of Korea by the Empress Jingu, and to the historical Korean expeditions of Hideyoshi. Sato Nobuhiro also justified his expansionist claims by the divine essence of Japan, ancestor of all nations

of the universe. After 1853, similar ideas were expressed both by opponents and by supporters of the *bakufu*. Yoshida Shoin stressed the natural inferiority of Korea to Japan. Hashimoto Sanai called for territorial expansion to Korea and Manchuria, while Yokoi Shonan or Katsu Kaishu dreamt of commercial breakthroughs in the peninsula and on the continent.

One may think that at least Tsushima would show a better understanding of Korean reality. In some sense, this was true. The domain attempted, even before the Restoration, to provide realistic assessments of Korea, but without much success. Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of the Restoration, Tsushima urged the new government to redefine Japan's relations with Korea, but only succeeded in showing its own incapacity and ignorance of the Korean reality. Tsushima was not even able to inform Korea properly of the Meiji Restoration.

After Tsushima's failure, the Korean question passed gradually to the Foreign Ministry. But here again, the same ignorance and clumsiness characterized the approach to Korea. The most blatant expression of this ignorance was the agreement signed with China in 1871, whose declared objective was to convince Korea to accept Japanese requests. Japan's agreement with China should lead Korea to consider her as China's equal, the Japanese wanted to believe. But the scheme did not work. Korea was not impressed, and continued to refuse the Japanese requests.

One could even ascribe the political crisis of 1873 to Japanese ignorance of Korea. The real objectives of this major political confrontation were internal, and Korea played in it mostly a virtual and phantasmagoric role.

It was the 1876 opening of Korea which partially broke this vicious circle of ignorance. Partially, because Korea would always preserve an imaginary dimension, would always remain to some extent wrapped in a layer of unreality.

What transformed Korea into an object of knowledge was the growing perception of the strategic importance of the peninsula after 1876. Actually, this was not really a new thing. The importance of the Korean peninsula for Japan's security, especially in relation to Russia, had been stressed ever since the end of the eighteenth century, and had been repeatedly stated in the first years of Meiji.

The main approach said that two dangers might arise from Korea. First, in view of general Korean hostility to Japan, one cannot rule out a Korean attack on Japan, when the neighboring country feels strong enough to take action. Secondly, and this was the really big threat, Russia might seize Korea, and directly threaten Japan from there.

The redefinition of this strategic perception during and in the immediate aftermath of the events of 1876 helped reinsert Korea into the sphere of reality, and gave birth to modern Korean studies in Japan.

An example of this redefinition of Korea's strategic importance can be found in two articles published in the *Choya shinbun*, while Japan and Korea were still negotiating

the Kanghwa treaty. These were detailed analyses of the danger of Russian territorial ambitions to Japan. A conflict between Japan and Korea, warned the newspaper, would give Russia a pretext for intervention, and favor its policy of expansion.

This feeling of threat gave birth to the two first modern Japanese works which attempted to describe Korea in a scientific way. These two books were published in 1876, in the immediate aftermath of the Kanghwa Treaty. The first one was the *Concise Description of Korea* ("Keirin Jiryaku") by Sewaki Hisato and Hayashi Shinzo; and the second ? a *Description of Korea* ("Chosen Jijo"), a partial translation by Enomoto Takeaki of the *History of the Korean Church* by the French missionary Charles Dallet. These two books marked the beginnings of scientific study of the Korean peninsula in Meiji Japan.

The two main authors of these books came from the domain of "Dutch studies" (*rangaku*). Sewaki Hisato, better known under the name of Tezuka Ritsuzo, was one of the pioneers of the field. Throughout his entire life, he endeavored to introduce western sciences in Japan, and to attract young people to these subjects. In 1875, he was appointed commercial secretary (*boeki jimukan*) in Vladivostok. Japan and Russia had just resolved their territorial dispute and agreed, in May 1875, to exchange Sakhalin and the Kuril Islands. The opening of a Japanese delegation in Vladivostok was the consequence of this improvement in relations. But this was to be Tezuka's last mission. In 1878, he fell ill, and died on the vessel which took him home.

During his stay in Russia, Tezuka focused on the regional Asian situation, and became particularly aware of the importance of Korea for Japan's security, in face of Russia's ambitions. He thus felt the necessity of drafting an objective and detailed description - the word "concise" in the title should not mislead us - of the peninsula.

The work appeared in two volumes in April 1876, cosigned by a certain Hayashi Shinzo, about whom we know nothing. The afterword also mentions the collaboration of a Korean named Kim Rin-sung, whom Tezuka met in Vladivostok. A second part was certainly planned, but never published. The book presented a systematic description of Korea: geography, population, government, language, customs, currency, units of measure, armed forces, fiscal system, etc. Altogether, the work comprised twenty-two sections in two volumes, with a particular focus on military matters in the second.

Enomoto Takeaki is much more famous than Sewaki Hisato. A soldier and a politician, he was also a product of Dutch studies. He specialized in shipbuilding techniques in Nagasaki, and in 1862 was dispatched to Holland. He was back in Japan in 1867, on the eve of the Restoration. Assistant commander of the *bakufu* fleet, he fled to Hokkaido with all his vessels, before surrendering to the government forces in 1869. Freed from jail in 1872, he joined the new regime and was put in charge of the development of Hokkaido. And in 1874, it was Enomoto who negotiated with Russia the exchange treaty Sakhalin-Kurils. Immediately after the conclusion of the agreement, he began to translate, in St. Petersburg, Charles Dallet's *History of the Korean Church*.

Enomoto had a long-time interest in Korea. But it was the negotiations he held with the Russians, and the Kanghwa incident a short time afterward, which motivated his decision to translate Dallet's work. Enomoto felt a sense of urgency: the Korean question was of strategic importance for Japan's security, and a detailed and accurate knowledge of the peninsula was indispensable.

The book which Enomoto chose was a new French book, published in 1874. This was a study of some eight hundred pages, in two volumes, made by the missionary Charles Dallet. As the title indicates, it was essentially an account of missionary activities in Korea. But a detailed introduction of some two hundred pages also presented "the history, the institutions, the language, and the customs of the Koreans". It was this part which particularly interested Enomoto. He translated thirteen of the fifteen original sections, to which he added the fifth and sixth chapters of the second volume, which dealt with the diplomatic problems raised by the persecution of Catholics in Korea.

Enomoto did not work alone. Two men helped him. The first was the diplomat Hanabusa Yoshimoto, who assisted him in the negotiations with the Russians. Hanabusa had already been involved for some years with Korean matters. Enomoto's second collaborator was Pompe van Meerdevoort, a Dutchman employed in the Japanese mission of St. Petersburg, with whom Enomoto was already acquainted. It was Hanabusa who brought Enomoto's attention to the French book, and who helped him to obtain it. And Pompe translated it into Dutch, which Enomoto and Hanabusa rendered into Japanese. The task was hastily accomplished, in two weeks. The three men devoted four hours a day to the translation, between December 31, 1875 and January 15, 1876. In July 1876, the book was already on sale in Tokyo, less than two years after its release in France. "Chosen Jijo" sold well. A new edition would be published in 1882. And until the Sino-Japanese war (1894-1895), practically every work on Korea would refer to it.

The year 1876 thus witnessed the publication, at a few months' interval, of the two first detailed descriptions of Korea. It was not mere coincidence that both books were written by Japanese diplomats serving in Russia, at two ends of that vast empire. Their fear of the Russian threat increased their perception of the importance of Korea for Japan's national defense. The scientific analysis of Korea arose directly from this strategic perception, from this feeling of the Russian danger, and from the view of Korea as Japan's first line of defense against Russia.

The first book, by Tezuka, was an original encyclopedic work. The exactness of the information was insured by the collaboration with a Korean informant. The second work, by Enomoto, was a selective translation of a recent French study, itself based on reports by missionaries in activity in the peninsula. Enomoto, out of concern for precision and objectivity, chose a first-hand source, albeit European, containing information transmitted by people who lived and worked in Korea and were intimate with its inhabitants. These two books therefore marked a fundamental stage in the history of the perception of Korea in Meiji Japan. The feeling of the strategic importance of Korea engendered a need for a comprehensive and scientific knowledge of the neighboring country.

Another consequence of the interest in the real, as opposed to the imaginary, Korea in 1876, was the publication of first-hand journalistic descriptions of the peninsula. After the opening of the country, Japanese journalists went to Korea, and reported what they saw, or wanted to see. The *Tokyo akebono* published, on March 7, 1876, one of the first modern Japanese reports on Korea. It reads as follows:

"Here is a concise relation of the conditions reigning in Korea.

The Koreans are extremely afraid of the Japanese; when we first cast anchor in Kanghwa, we saw the natives who were carrying our luggage running away. Finally, after they understood our feelings, they calmed down, but although some eventually returned, we did not see any beautiful young ladies, they were all hiding in the houses and did not come out.

In Kanghwa one can find only bare mountains, and trees are rare. Most of the houses are small, they do not exceed four or five *shaku* in height [1 shaku is about 30 centimeters], and are made of much earth and some wood. Under the floor is a solidified trench, where you burn fire, and the rising heat protects from the heavy cold; the common people do not use any blanket to sleep, but wrap themselves in a thing similar to what can be found in distant Ryukyu. It is reminiscent of the inhabitants of the deep mountains of Japan which sleep together near the fire and do not use any bedding. The city is unhealthy, and numerous people are affected by these conditions.

Our temporary delegation building is a spacious place, a lordly house among the best in Kanghwa, nevertheless it is made only of four pillars. As there are no seats on the ground, one has to spread blankets to sit and lie down, and after several days one feels strong pains in the back and the knees. Furthermore, there is neither rag nor broom, dirt and dust cover the ground, and one absorbs together food and dust. The Koreans do not, out of laziness, clean their houses or bathe themselves. These people do not take more than three or four baths a year.

Beginning with the ambassador, we do not consume any Korean products; rice, *miso*, vegetables, fish, one uses only things brought from afar.

The Koreans, having surmounted their fear of the Japanese, gather every day in front of our temporary building, and when we go to town, the roads are filled with children following us and with people coming to see us. They are amazed by the strangeness of our flat hats, our narrow sleeves and our general look, as was the case with the Americans when for the first time they cast the anchor in Uraga during the Kaei era [1848-1854].

The clothes of the Koreans look like those of the inhabitants of Nankin, this must be the ancient Chinese fashion, their headgear is often made from a kind of straw, and the warriors carry a sword on their back.

In spite of the despicable aspect of the character of all classes, there are many schools; however, they preserve everywhere Chinese studies, and no one has any vision of current Western science; it is therefore unavoidable that in all fields stagnation and rigidity prevail. The production consists of *ginseng*, and they also grow in small quantity a sort of tobacco: I do not think we will benefit from the opening of their ports.

The Americans and the French attacked Korea some years ago, but in view of the conditions withdrew their troops: the barbarity of the people and the lack of wealth of the land made them understand that there was neither value in defeating this country nor profit in subduing it".

Korea was a primitive and backward country, devoid of resources. Japan should not expect any profit from exchanges with the peninsula. Such was, roughly speaking, the image conveyed by this report.

The backward aspect of Korea was exposed from several angles. The conditions of life were analogous to those in Okinawa or the most remote places of Japan itself. The Koreans were scared by foreign things, and they were amazed by new and modern things. Their educational system - although quite developed - was anchored in the Chinese tradition, and ignored the science of its time. Agriculture, reduced to *ginseng* and to a sort of tobacco, was also very primitive. As the article concludes, there was "neither value in defeating this country nor profit in subduing it", as the Americans and the French had already understood.

Three comments seem relevant here. First, concerning the backward aspect of the peninsula. The evocation of a remote Japan, and the comparison with the arrival of the first Americans in Japan, suggest what would much later form a full explanatory system about the development of Korea, the so-called "theory of stagnation" (*teitairon*). Outlined at the beginning of the twentieth century by the economist Fukuda Tokuzo,

this theory explained Korean backwardness by internal historical factors, mainly the lack of a feudal stage in the country's development. That was why, explained Fukuda, contemporary Korea was still "stagnating" at the Japanese pre-feudal stage of Fujiwara period (end of ninth century -beginning of twelfth century). In 1876, the Japanese were still far from such a clear formulation. But if we consider the theory of stagnation as the outcome of a very long series of images seeing in the peninsula a kind of past Japan, we can find here the first seeds of what would constitute, later, a very important frame of thought.

A second remark, still about this backward aspect: the description of Korea's backwardness, which is common to almost all the reports of the time, transposed the image of a barbaric Korea from the axiomatic sphere to that of reality. Between the Restoration and the Kanghwa Treaty, Korea was generally perceived as a small "barbaric" (*yaban*) country, as opposed to a "civilized" (*kaika*) Japan, or more precisely, a Japan progressing on the way of civilization. This Korean barbarism did not originate in any real description of the conditions reigning in the peninsula, but it was nonetheless axiomatic. In the article quoted above, Korea was described as a primitive and unhealthy country, and the Koreans as stupid, oppressed and fearful people. They knew nothing of civilization, and China was their supreme reference. The old formulas thus acquired a concrete substance, a real dimension, and a new force of persuasion.

A third and final comment: the noninterventionist conclusion of the article may surprise, in a newspaper which was one of the most active supporters of Japanese activism in Korea. Of course, the writer of this report, whose name I was not able to discover, may have been personally opposed to Japanese intervention in Korean affairs. After all, the Japanese press of the time was quite free, and there were often divergent opinions inside the same newspaper. But this noninterventionist stance may have been rather an expression of the ambiguous terms and ambivalent way in which many Japanese perceived the Korean question. They opened Korea, but without really wishing to. They invested almost ten years of diplomatic, political and military efforts to do so, but then reported that this primitive country is of no interest to Japan. What many Japanese felt toward Korea was simultaneous attraction and repulsion.

In the end, the metamorphosis of Korea from object of ignorance to object of knowledge was a reflection of purely Japanese preoccupations with security, politics, and identity. This is a general characteristic of the discourse on Korea in Meiji Japan, which is very often a discourse about Japan itself. The peninsula acted as a foil, an "other", and helped elaborate the different images of an ideal, modern and civilized Japan.

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