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HIS MAJESTY, THE KING OF KOREA.

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HIS MAJESTY, THE KING OF KOREA.*

THE twenty-eighth Monarch of the Yi or present dynasty first saw the light of day in the summer of 1852, (the year Imcha, seventh moon and 25th day) at the Un Hyen Koong, Seoul, where his aged parents still live in retirement. He is the second son of Prince Yi, who had the rank of Heung Sun Kun, the first or highest, but who is known better by the title of Tai Won Kun.

Much confusion exists in the popular mind about the relations His Majesty, the King, sustains to his father, the National Grand Duke or Tai Won Kun. That is, most people fail to see why the son should be king and not the father. A few words may suffice to explain. The Queen Dowager Cho who died in 1891 was the Queen of King Ik Chong,† who died when he was but twenty-two years of age. His son succeeded to the throne and lives in history as Hun Chong.‡ After a reign of about fifteen years, he died without male issue and the scepter passed to Chul Chong § a younger brother of Ik Chong. The line

* The photogravure portrait of His Majesty published by us this month was reproduced from a photograph taken by Mrs. L. B. Graham of the United States Legation who is a skillful and enthusiastic amateur photographer and to whose kindness we are indebted for a copy. We are also under obligations to the Hon. C. Waeber, H. I. R. M's Representative, for obtaining for us from the King his permission to publish the picture.

† 翼宗 익종 ‡ 憲宗 헌종 § 哲宗 철종

thus remained unbroken. After a reign of fourteen years Chul Chong died in 1864 without male issue. He had a daughter, we may say in passing, who was married to Pak Yong Ho. The line was now broken.

The Queen of Ik Chong after some manipulation secured the royal seals and, after consultation with some of the courtiers, nominated the second son of the Tai Won Kun for the throne. This was done by adopting him as the son of her deceased husband. The older brother, Yi Chai Myen, who still resides with his father, had already passed the usual examinations and been given official position, so, as it is said, he could not be chosen. We doubt whether this very plausible reason was the real one for passing him by, it being generally understood that his younger brother who was a very handsome, healthy, and bright child, was a great favorite of the Queen Dowager. His Majesty, when only in his 13th year, was thus called to be King of Chosen, in the year Kap Cha—1864.

The early years of the young Prince were spent in a manner not unlike that of any young Korean of royal blood. His family was not among the wealthy ones of the land and it is related that tho in humble circumstances he was indifferent to it, believing, as by a sort of intuition, that he would one day fill an influential position in his country. An interesting story is told of his visit, when a mere lad, to a book-binder in the neighborhood. The binder presented him with a calendar bound in blue paper and playfully remarked that payment was to be made after he had attained an eminent position. The book was accepted on these conditions, taken home and memorized. Years afterwards, so the story runs, when the young Prince had been proclaimed king, he remembered the old book-binder and the conditions on which he received the calendar, and rewarded him liberally. The story may be true or not, but it shows two characteristics that are prominent in His Majesty—kindness and a good memory.

The young Prince received the usual classical Chinese education imparted in the private schools. He was fond of

books and made good progress in his studies. The names of three of his teachers are given, the first was of the name of Pyen; the second from the literary province of Choung-chung and his name was Ko Syuk Hyen. The third teacher, a man of the Yi family, with the title of Chinsa, probably a Bachelor's degree, was with the Prince for a longer time than the other two and made a deeper and more lasting impression upon him. His faithful services as instructor of the future King were later recognized in appointing him a magistrate, his oldest son was given the degree of Tai Kwa, or Great Degree, and his second son that of Syo Kwa, or Smaller Degree.

Many pleasant stories are told of the king as a boy. It is said he was fond of sports, was a general favorite among his playmates among whom were included all the boys of the vicinity, and that he was a popular leader among them.

During his minority his father swayed the scepter as Regent, well earning the description given him by a native writer, that he had "bowels of iron and a heart of stone;" and he ruled with such vigor for a period of ten years, from the year Kapcha until Kayyou, that his name is by no means forgotten even to this day. The young king, while he had had his hair put up in the top-knot and at the same time, as a matter of course, put on the hat, was not married when he became the adopted son of Queen Dowager Cho; it is stated by some that for eight months, and by others for thirteen, the Queen Dowager held supreme power. The young king was married in 1866 (Pyengin) to Princess Min, the only daughter of Min Chi Rok, who was given, after the accession of the Queen, the posthumous title of the Yeo Sūng Bu Won Kun *—Prince of the City of Yūju, Father-in-law of the King. She was born in Yūju, in the year Sinhai, 9th Moon and 25th day, and was therefore about a year older than her husband, the King. Her family was of high degree, but her father was not wealthy and in fact never held any high office and died some years before his daughter

* 驪城府院君 려성부원군

was selected as the Royal Consort. She was a second cousin of the wife of the Tai Won Kun, who also belongs to the Min clan, and no doubt her selection was made by the Tai Won Kun with the idea of strengthening his own influence, believing, as he did, that with his son as King and the Queen a member of his wife's clan, his position as virtual, if not nominal ruler, would be made secure and be perpetuated. But in this the Tai Won Kun was most woefully disappointed not knowing the well recognized law in philosophy that when two forces come in contact the weaker always gives way to the stronger. The Queen was a woman of great natural ability and force of character, and soon began to exercise a commanding influence in the affairs of the nation, which was continued until she was murdered on the 8th of October, 1895.

Not a great while after she became Queen, the relations between her and her father-in-law became unfriendly and from that time forward he was in a great measure excluded from any participation in governmental business and forced into a retirement from which he has never emerged, except at short intervals, in some of the troubles which have occurred during the King's reign. In fact, he has been a kind of storm petrel, making his appearance and getting to the front only when there has been trouble and disorder in the country.

The late Queen had received a good education, from an eastern point of view, before her marriage and afterward became a great student and is said to have been the best scholar in the Chinese ideograph of any woman in Korea, perhaps the equal of any in the East.

The Tai Won Kun rebuilt the Kyeng Pok Palace during his regency. His Majesty, when he assumed the reins of power, which his father according to all reports was loathe to resign, occupied the Ch'ang Dūk Koong or Eastern Palace, for a period of four years after which he moved into the Kyeng Pok Koong. This however had the reputation of being an unlucky abode, so that, after several years, the Royal Family moved back again into the Eastern Palace where they were during the *emute* of

1884. In 1885 the King, on account of the unpleasant associations of the previous year, again changed to the Kyeng Bok Koong, only leaving it in 1895 for a short time. It is one of the strange coincidences that Her Majesty should meet her violent death in the very home she had mistrusted for some years and which was erected by one whom she had little reason to love.

It is foreign to the object of this article to enter into any details as to the untimely fate of the late Queen, or as to the stirring events which have occurred during the reign of His Majesty, this being intended as a brief sketch, personal, rather than otherwise, of the King.

His Majesty is, as compared with the ordinary Korean, rather under size, being about five feet three or four inches high. His face is handsome; when composed the expression is somewhat inanimate, but when engaged in conversation, it brightens into a kindly and pleasing smile. His voice is pleasant, well modulated, and he speaks rapidly, readily and distinctly. In talking, he is vivacious and speaks with nervous energy.

The King has always been very accessible to foreigners. Many audiences have been extended not only to the diplomatic representatives on his birthdays and other national holidays or public occasions, but also to unofficial residents and to distinguished visitors to the Capital. But little ceremony is required at these audiences. The person going to audience is accompanied, as a rule, by a Court chamberlain and an interpreter, who are of course dressed in Court costume, with the curious winged hats peculiar to Korea, and is received in a plain room. On entering the room, the chamberlain and interpreter prostrate themselves, making the kowtow in the most approved oriental fashion, but the guest is expected and required to make only the three bows customary in occidental royal receptions. Usually His Royal Highness, the Crown Prince, receives with his father and holds more or less conversation with the guest.

At these audiences, His Majesty is generally dressed in a red silk coat, very heavily embroidered with gold braid, and with

trousers in Turkish style either colored or white. He sometimes wears the gossamer hat similar to those worn by his subjects on the streets, but at other times appears in the simple cap of the scholar which is a band of fine horse hair five or six inches broad or high, opened at the top, and having four or more sharp triangular points around the upper edge. At these audiences His Majesty is affable and unceremonious, always kindly addressing more or less conversation to each person admitted.

As the Court is now in mourning for the late Queen, His Majesty now dresses in white which is the mourning color in these eastern countries. All colors, and all gold embroidery have been discarded. His dress differs in no respect from that of the Korean gentleman in mourning, except of course in the fineness of the material. He wears a mourning cap some eight or nine inches high composed simply of a hempen or flaxen band, and around his waist is bound the mourning cord or rope.

While the Koreans have a phonetic alphabet of twenty-five letters, which is one of the most simple and perfect in the world, in the official papers and records, and indeed in the standard literature of the country, and correspondence between educated persons, the Chinese characters or ideographs are used. The use of these Chinese characters, altho bearing Korean and not Chinese names, sustains somewhat the same relation to the Unmun as the Latin did to the English in Great Britain several centuries ago. His Majesty is well versed in both Chinese characters and Unmun, and from the the Korean point of view, is highly educated. It has been and still is his habit to keep in his suite scholars and historians who read to him and consult with him often. He is said to be more conversant with the history of his own country, both modern and ancient, than any other man in the kingdom. The Royal library is quite extensive and we have it from Korean officials, that whenever any question as to old customs or the past arises among the Ministers, they refer to His Majesty who can point with unerring precision to the reign and date and particulars of any historical event. His Majesty speaks none of the languages of the western countries.

Nominally the Government of Korea is an absolute monarchy, all powers being vested in His Majesty. There is no written or unwritten constitution, no Parliament or Congress, and all the laws are promulgated as Edicts of the King. His word and will are law. In all governments, no matter how absolute or despotic, the ruler is necessarily governed and restrained by old customs and traditions. This of course obtains in Korea, but perhaps to a less extent than in any other Asiatic country. His Majesty devotes much time and attention to public business and is extremely industrious, supervising and overseeing every branch of the government. Indeed the criticism is sometimes heard that he pays too much attention to details and undertakes to do, in looking over every thing, more than any mortal can find time to perform. In a word, the Korean government is essentially personal. His Majesty does most of his official work at night, and the sessions with his Ministers, Advisers and other officers are frequently continued until dawn or after.

His Majesty is progressive and is evidently not imbued with the ideas—may we say prejudices—which are prevalent in most parts of the East, against western people, institutions and customs. He is much interested in educational matters, and material advances have been made in this direction within the last few years. There is a Minister of Education as well as a Vice-Minister and these are influential members of the Cabinet. Public schools where reading and writing, in both Chinese characters and native Unmun, as well as geography, arithmetic, history and so forth are taught, have been established in Seoul and in various other parts of the country. In addition to these, there are separate schools maintained in Seoul, at public expense, for teaching the English, French, Russian and Japanese languages. There is also a school of Law connected with the Law Department and a Normal school where teachers are fitted for their work. The establishment and maintenance for the last ten years of the Royal Government Hospital in the Capital under the sole supervision of foreign physicians and to which people resort from all parts of country to get the benefit of foreign medicine, surgery

and medical skill, may also be mentioned in this connection.

In religion the King, like most of his subjects, is a Confucianist, if Confucianism can be called a religion. He observes like them the rites and ceremonies at the shrines and before the tablets of his ancestors. In the strict sense of the term there is no state or national religion.

Toleration in religious matters has marked the reign of His Majesty. While, during the regency of the Tai Won Kun, Christians were rigorously persecuted, and in 1866 thousands of Catholic Korean Christians were cruelly slaughtered and two French Bishops and other French priests executed, nothing of this kind has occurred since His Majesty assumed the reins of power. On the contrary, not only has no one been interfered with, but on more occasions than one, the King has given distinct and direct encouragement to missionaries, or as he terms them, "teachers." And on the occasion of an audience accorded to Bishop Ninde of the Methodist Episcopal Church, in the beginning of 1895, His Majesty not only expressed his appreciation of the good work done by them, and thanks for the same, but spoke those memorable words which the churches cannot and must not forget, "Send more teachers."

The disposition of the King is kindly and amiable. All bear testimony to this. He is certainly a merciful ruler, and sincerely desirous of the welfare and advancement of his country. While not regarded by the Koreans with the religious veneration with which the subjects of some of the other countries of Asia regard their rulers—while no one claims that he is a descendant of a Sun Goddess, or is the Son of Heaven, or has divine attributes, there can be no doubt that he is universally beloved by the people. He is looked upon as the father of the whole people and the Queen was, during her lifetime, recognized as the mother. We hear frequent complaints against some of the Ministers and other officials, but the people have nothing but kind words and affectionate regard for their King.