RELIGIONS OF COREA.

Influence of Confucius and Lao-tse —When Buddhism Flourished.

Corea, like the greater part of the countries of the Extreme East, has no civilization peculiar to itself, writes Alexandra Myrial in "Mercure de France." The barbarous clans which two thousand years before our era occupied the untilled wastes and wild forests of the mountainous peninsula have produced nothing by their direct evolution. Arts, sciences, industries, philosophy—the Coreans have received all from China. Contrary to certain of their neighbors, notably the Japanese, whose point of departure in a considerable movement, in which the special genius of their race was highly manifested, was imitation of Chinese culture, the Coreans have never been anything but imitators, and clumsy ones, having never succeeded in equalling their models.

Poorly gifted pupils, they have advanced slowly since the lessons of their first masters, the Chinese chiefs, whom they followed in the far off times of their prehistoric days. Their effort was maintained down to about the fourteenth century A. D. Then, upon the fall of Buddhism, everything disappeared together, industry, the arts and literature. Corean civilization then underwent a recoil from which it will never recover. The pupils, too slow witted to adapt to their needs the models which might have served them as examples, or to vivify their national life with the superior mentality of their neighbors, seem, from that date, to abandon themselves to an unthinking routine, passively accepting their impotence, without appearing to account for it.

Whence springs this inferiority? That is too complicated a problem to be easily solved, and I shall not attempt the solution. The Coreans whom I have known have shown, in our conversations, an intelligence far above the average. Two of them particularly attracted my attention. The first, a literary man, entirely Chinese in education, was of an open mind, eager for instruction, practical and matter of fact, in spite of an old foundation of superstition which he carefully concealed. The other, a pupil of the missionaries, a son and great-grandson of Christian Coreans, having received the hereditary influence of two generations in direct contact with Occidental ideas, finished by rejecting Catholic dogmas, and assiduously read Büchner, Haeckel and our modern savans. But, to speak truly, these are rare exceptions in Corea, and a few isolated cases can only prepare from afar the renovation of a race, supposing that it has in itself the energy necessary to shaking off its torpor.

The attention of the Occidentals being called to Corea at present, there is no lack of well informed persons to portray the general aspect of its territory and the more obvious customs of its inhabitants. It would doubtless be superfluous for me to describe the surroundings of the royal residence of Seoul, the streams crossed by little bridges, ornaments of its gardens, the lotus covered pond in which the summer palace is mirrored, or the streets of the capital, obstructed by quagmires, and the national costume of the coolies or of the fashionable natives.

NO NATIONAL BELIEF.

Apart from all these wholly external details, there are others of a more intimate character, and not the less interesting to us, touching closely the soul of the nation, and more adapted to revealing its true mentality. They have relation with the religious or philosophical concepts and the material manifestations to which they give rise. It is to a succinct study of some of the religious beliefs and customs honored in the kingdom of Corea that I shall devote these pages.

Have the Coreans a religion? No, if we take this term in its ordinary acceptation. Among them, as among the Chinese, the elite of the population are attached to the doctrine of Confucius. Now, we know that the teachings of this philosophy bear only upon the questions of social order, establishing a sort of a lay moral code, qualified, according to it, to regulate the different relationships of men with each other for the greatest good of the whole nation.

There is no metaphysical side to the doctrines of Confucius. His practical and utilitarian spirit never felt the need of resting his precepts upon a supernatural authority, nor of overleaping the narrow limits of the earth and of human knowledge to plunge into the infinite beyond and to people it at the pleasure of his reveries. The capital interrogations, the base of all religious systems, What is the origin of the universe? Whence comes man? Whither does he go?—these seem to have interested him very little, even admitting that he ever put such questions to himself. The only immortality which he recognizes is that of the memory of the sages, of the savans, of those who are signalized by extraordinary acts of civic virtue, of a humanitarian or domestic character. To this survival of their name, promised to exceptional men, Confucius adds, for the humble anonyms, the pious memory in which their descendants will hold them for many generations. Upon the whole, the future life of the Confucianist is summed up in the little funerary tablet on which his name will be engraved, and which, according to what his personality shall have been, will find a place on the family altar or will be deemed worthy of the hospitality of a public temple.

If the official disciples of the famous Chinese philosopher give themselves up to certain sacrifices, certain rites which serve to give the illusion of a worship, there is nothing in these manifestations but a remnant of the superstitions which were anterior to their master, and which he, in his disdain for all extramundane speculations, did not condemn. Many of them, doubtless, appeared to him, by the very vagueness of the beliefs that inspired them, adapted to constitute civic celebrations which should rally the entire population of the empire.

According to the opinion of the philosopher, solemnities and what they involve of pomp and diversion, provided the expenses shall be in proportion to the resources of the budget, have their proper place in a well ordered state. However, if we examine it closely, we shall observe, besides, that the fetes celebrated by the Confucianists are either naturalistic or civic, just as their temples are, in reality, only pantheons, in which the names of their great men are inscribed.

Under these conditions, it truly seems difficult to give Confucianism the title of religion.

THE VOTARIES OF REASON.

A second fraction of the Corean population invokes as patron the philosopher Lao-tse.

Lao-tse did not show the same indifference as Confucius to the enigmas of the universe. Of these two men, who lived in the same epoch, Confucius having been born fifty years later than Lao-tse, one was a statesman, a sociologist; the other a thinker whose profundity often astonishes us, as his simple, logical and powerful idea flashes through the obscurities of his style.

The meaning of the Tao, which is the basis of the celebrated work of Lao-tse: the Tao-te-King, has occasioned numerous discussions in the world of Orientalists. It is probable, however, that this word was in use in China in remote times, long anterior to the existence of this philosopher.

If we seek the meaning of Tao in the passages in which Lao-tse endeavors to define it we shall find a great resemblance between this vague designation of a thing still more vague and the Sat of the Hindoos—that is to say, the "Great All," the universal substance, one in its essence, multiple in its aspects, or, according to the translation of the Sanscrit term, "That which is."

Completely distorted, the doctrines of Lao-tse gave rise in China to a veritable religion (a religion without God, the supreme creator, like all those of India and the extreme East), including an important priesthood which had its days of prosperity under certain Emperors bound to the Tao-tse superstitions.

It would take too long to explain here by what process the doctrine of Lao-tse, containing, like the Hindoo philosophies, the principle of the direct power of man over matter, came to serve as the sign of the most contemptible sort of jugglers. However this may be, by an odd irony of fate the votaries of "reason" are addicted, above all others, in our time to practices as absurd as they are incoherent, and which spring from a rude sorcery. It is, of course, under this latter form that Taoism exists in Corea. Its adherents belong to the popular classes, and its priests, at the same time healers, conjurers, soothsayers, who are necessary intermediaries between human beings and the genii, take a most unmerciful advantage of the wretched herd of their dupes.

After their establishment in China the Buddhists, whose missionary zeal was so ardent, entered Corea, toward the fourth century, A. D., and preached there the metaphysical subtleties of the various sects to which they belonged. As in all countries of the extreme East, their repeated efforts brought victory, and Buddhism not only took a place between Confucianism and Taoism, but even acquired a veritable supremacy in the country.

HOW BONZES FELL INTO DISGRACE.

Whatever the real value of the kind of bastard Buddhism, transformed into a religion, which the Chinese bronzes, the Tibetan lamas and the Hindoo pundits installed little by little in the country, the epoch during which it flourished was also the most brilliant period of Corean civilization.

The temples, monasteries and religious edifices of all kinds with which the monks covered the peninsula, and even the neighboring islands, gave to architecture and the fine arts in general a development which they never had attained up to that time. The religious literature which spread from the convents through the country awakened among the Coreans the taste for letters at the same time. Authors sprang up, and at the side of dogmatic or philosophical works, sutras and collections of legends, profane poems and romances full of charm were born, such as that ingenuous story, famous in Corea, entitled "The Withered Forest Restored to Verdure."

Nevertheless, prosperity blinded and corrupted the Corean bonzes. Like their Chinese confrères, they became arrogant toward the civil power, greedy for riches, and all means seemed good to them for increasing their wealth. Their private morals aroused the indignation of the public. In a word, becoming odious both to the ruling classes and to the mass of the people, they disappeared, swept away, in one of those tempests which follow the explosion of passions pent up for a long time. The temples and monasteries were burned or demolished, and their inhabitants perished in tortures and wholesale massacres. This was in the fourteenth century. The scandal caused by the insolence and depravity of the monks culminated in the pitiless execution of the guilty ones. The impulsive justice of the crowd was satisfied.

The sequel ought to confound the moralists who directly attach every happy effect to the observance of equity, purity of morals and other virtues of a private or public nature.

From their foreign origin, their relations with better endowed populations, these bonzes, thirsty for power; these pitiless hoarders, these shameless debauchers, sad successors of the first Buddhist apostles, maintained, nevertheless, in Corea the work of their predecessors and preserved a centre of vitality which the native element was not in a state to replace. Their tragic end involved the ruin of letters, of the arts, and even that of the most interesting industries, such as the porcelain industry. Abandoned buildings, covered with vegetation, have now lain in ruins for five centuries without other edifices coming to take their places. Corea, fallen into a dull torpor, has never awakened!

ATMOSPHERIC CIRCULATION.

Professor Hildebrandsson, the Swedish meteorologist, speaking in French, gave to the British Association for the Advancement of Science, says "The London Times," an account of his researches on the circulation of the atmosphere. He pointed out that to study the mechanism of the atmosphere, either in its entirety or restricted to cyclones and anticyclones, it was necessary to determine with precison what took place actually in the atmosphere—that is to prove by direct observations what were the movements of the air, not only at the surface, but also in the highest regions of the atmosphere. By extended observations carried on through thirty years he had attempted to calculate the mean movements of the air at different altitudes above the surface in various parts of the globe.

The results at which he had arrived were (1) that above the thermic equator and the equatorial calms there existed throughout the year a current from the east; (2) that above the trades an anti-trade prevailed from the southwest, in the northern hemisphere, and from the northwest in the southern (3) that this anti-trade did not pass the polar limit of the trade, but deviated more and more to the right in the northern hemisphere and to the left in the southern, so as to become a current from the west over the crest of the barometric maximum of the tropics, where it descended to increase the trade; (4) that the regions situated at the equatorial limit of the trade joined sometimes that of the trade, sometimes that of the equatorial calms, according to the season; (5) that the pressure of the air diminished gradually toward the poles, at least beyond the polar circles; (6) that the upper layers of air in the temperate zones flowed over the high pressures of the tropics to descend there; (7) that the irregularities found at the surface of the earth, especially in the regions of the Asiatic monsoons, generally disappeared at the altitude of the lower or intermediate clouds; and (8) that it was necessary to abandon completely the idea of a vertical circulation between the tropics and the poles hitherto assumed according to James Thomson and Ferrel.

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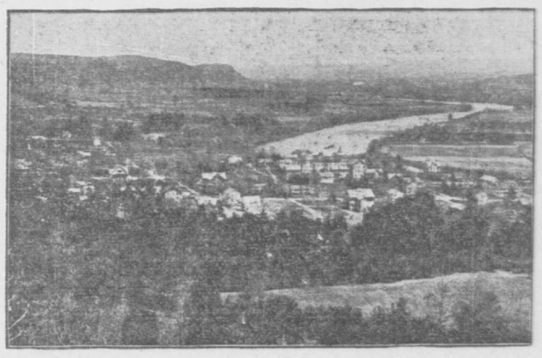

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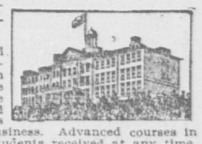

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