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SOME KOREAN CUSTOMS.

DANCING GIRLS.

KOREA has a class corresponding to the geisha of Japan In Korea they are called gesang, and their duties are much the same as those of their class in Japan. These girls properly belong to the government and receive their support from the national treasury. They are controlled by a regular department, in connection with the official musicians.

When a poor man has more sons than he can well care for he will sometimes give one to the government to become a eunuch thus insuring him a good living and possibly very high honors - for in the past this order has obtained and exercised great influence owing to their closeness to the Royal Family.

So a man may give his daughter to become a gesang. She is taken in childhood and carefully instructed by good teachers in music, reading and writing, and in fancy work. Being so much better educated than the ordinary woman, the company of these girls is greatly desired. Also they are free from all restraint and mingle freely with men and women, without any embarrassing modesty, whereas ladies can only see the men of their immediate family and have not the accomplishments of gesang.

These dancing girls are attached to various departments and may be hired by gentlemen to sing, dance and play for them when giving entertainments. Their services are said to be quite expensive however. They are often seen at official dinners at the Foreign Office and are the chief entertainers at banquets given at the Palace. They are usually rather pretty, perhaps they are the prettiest women in Korea. It is not uncommon for an official to lose his heart to one of these bright girls, and to make her his concubine. There is not much doubt that they would in many cases marry these girls outright were it not that such a union would be illegal.

These matches however are usually love matches, and some of the brightest and strongest men spring from such unions. They are also the cause of much heart-burning to the legal, but neglected wife, to whom the young man has probably been united by his parents in his infancy, and for whom he has probably felt the love called forth by his fascinating concubine.

Korean folk-lore abounds with stories of the discord arising in families from these attachments, while there are as many accounts of ardent and prolonged devotion of young noblemen to these girls whom fate prevents their taking to a closer union than that of a concubine.

Some of the dances of these gesang are very pretty and never fail to interest the foreigner who sees them for the first time. These dances are of course seen at their best at the Palace when in days of peace and rejoicing they are performed before the Royal Family. The one that seems most to interest foreigners is called the sword dance. The dancers are as usual clothed in voluminous garments of striking colors. Long and brilliantly colored sleeves reach down to and beyond the hand. False hair is added to make an elaborate head-dress in which many gay ornaments are fastened. The dance is done in stockinged feet, and as the sword dance is the most lively of all, the robes are caught up and the sleeves turned back out of the way. The girls pirouette between swords laid on the floor and as the music becomes more lively they bend to one side and the other near the swords until at last they have them in their hands, then the music quickens and swords flash this way and that as the dancer wheels and glides about in graceful motion. A good dancer will work so fast and twirl her swords so dexterously as to give one the impression that the blade must have passed through her neck. This dance is also done in men's clothes at times, but the cut of the garments of the sexes is so much alike as to present little external difference except that the colors of the men's are either white or of one shade, and the mass of hair worn by the dancer ordinarily is replaced by a simple hat.

One of the prettiest dances is that of the lotus flower. In this a tub is brought in containing a large lotus flower just ready to burst open. Two imitation storks then come in, each one being a man very cleverly disguised. These birds flap their wings, snap their beaks and dance around in admiration of the beautiful bud which they evidently intend to pluck as soon as they have enjoyed it sufficiently in anticipation. Their movements all this time are very graceful, and they come closer and closer to the flower, keeping time to the soft music. At last the proper time arrives, the flower is plucked, when as the pink petals fall back, out steps a little gesang to the evident amazement of the birds and to the intense delight of the younger spectators.

The dragon dance is also very well done. There are usually two of these beasts, each made up of two well trained men who are concealed by a hide which might be meant for a red, white and black tiger or most anything else. The head is very large and the huge jaws, worked by a string and pulley, give a ferocious air to the monster. These figures keep very good time in their contortions, snappings and other movements to the music. and every once

in a while they make a savage dash for the gesang who falls back in well disguised terror to be ready for the next attack.

The performance on these great occasions is never complete without the game of throwing the ball which consists in a series of graceful arm movements by the gesang before a painted arch with a round hole at the top. As the music quickens, her step becomes more lively and the arm movement indicates that she will soon throw the ball. When she does throw, if it goes thro the hole, she is decorated with a flower stuck into her hair by an attendant. If the ball fails to go thro, the unfortunate dancer is given a black mark, with a brush, on her cheek. One after another the dancers face to the rear after doing their act. When all is finished they march in procession past the King, where those with a flower in their hair receive a roll of silk each, while the others get nothing.

The most beautiful and accomplished gesang come from Pyeng Yang which is quite a centre for dancing girls, but the order is an extensive one and the girls are to be found all over Korea. Not all of these belong to the government, however, as many girls become gesang from choice. These when they grow up, if they belong to no man and have no children, have a very hard and dreary time of it. Gesang are said to never join the order of dancing women sorceresses called Mootang, tho in Seoul they are attached to the Yak Pang or Palace Medical Department, where they are taught to mix medicines. Some years ago, five of these girls were attached to the Government Hospital to learn nursing and the care of the sick, but their presence caused so much disorder that they were soon removed at the request of the foreign physician in charge.

In the pretty folk tale of the "Swallow King's Rewards" when the unjust brother is visited with the ten plagues of Korea, because of his ill treatment of a wounded swallow, gesang figure along with the mootang as one of the ten curses of the land. Doubtless they are so considered by many a lonely wife as well as by fathers who mourn to see their sons wasting their substance in riotous living as they doubtless did themselves when they were young.

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