

I Morgonstillhetens Land

S. Bergman

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The author often appeared on Swedish TV in the 60's. He was presented as an explorer, something that struck me as very romantic and as a child I had wanted to become one too. But by the 20th century the romantic era of exploration was over, the white areas on the map were more or less gone, what remained to do was only what could charitably be called intrepid tourism. What made Bergman's reputation were his excursions to the distant Far East, namely to the Kamchatka peninsula and the Kuril islands in the 20's. In this book he embarks on an expedition to Korea - the land of the serenity of the morning - as in the title. To call it an expedition is perhaps misleading, it consists merely of three people. Bergman himself, his assistant Sjöqvist, and a Japanese servant Fujimoto, who had accompanied him on earlier forays. The mission is to collect specimen of birds and small mammals for the Museum of Natural History in Stockholm and ethnographic artefacts for the corresponding museum of Ethnography. The visit is an extended one, spanning from the spring of 1935 until the fall of 1936, during which time he has only sporadic contact through letters with his family at home. In retrospect the mission strikes one as rather pedestrian and one wonders whether the needed knowledge could not have been retrieved from local sources. No doubt the author had lobbied for the opportunity to undertake the trip.

Korea is reached by train. This involves a boat trip to Åbo (Turko) a train ride to Helsingfors (Helsinki) and then on to Viborg (Viipuri) which still at the time was part of Finland, before entering the Soviet Union under the guidance of Intourist. Via Leningrad they arrive at Moscow to board the Trans-siberian railway to Manchuria and then crossing over to Korea. Bergman and his companion are lucky enough to have a two-bed sleeping compartment, maybe as a concession for being foreigners, and the author reports briefly from the long haul, expressing some disappointment of the view of Lake Bajkal being obscured by mist and lengthy tunnels. Manchuria and part of Korea is marred by the presence of bandits, who supposedly make it their business to attack trains, rob the passengers, and if needed maim and kill them as well. Both Manchuria and Korea are under Japanese occupation, which does not seem to bother the author very much. He prefers the notion of protection, and had it not been the Japanese the Russians would have been in their stead, something that clearly would have been worse. The energetic Japanese are contrasted to the more idle and passive Koreans, the latter who supposedly accepts their subordination gratefully. The author has many Japanese friends and finds everything to his satisfaction. The Koreans are not seldom referred to as Aborigines, and everywhere there are references to the white dresses they prefer to wear and their primitive huts in which they huddle with their live-stock.

Apart from a visit to Seoul the author naturally finds himself in the countryside if possibly in the wilderness and then almost exclusively in the northern part bordering to Manchuria. Seoul at that time, although drastically modernized, would have presented a

very different aspect than it does now, being one of the biggest cities in the world. There would still be remnants of the city wall with its magnificent gates, and in the streets there would have been carriages drawn by oxen. The most spectacular would have been the annual cherry-blossom festival, supposedly even superior to those in Japan, an event from which the author reports with obvious enthusiasm, especially from its appearance at night-time with electrical lanterns set in the profusely flowering trees.

The purpose of the expedition is to make an inventory of the fauna of the northern parts of Korea, which although it contains such spectacular mammals as big deers, bears and even tigers, although the latter are already at the brink of extinction, the major interest nevertheless concerns birds, most of them rather insignificant in size and appearance and not that different from what you would expect in Sweden. Once he engages in the hunt of pheasants using a hawk, often he is out to shoot, not seldom rare species, those being the most interesting from a collectors point of view. We follow him scaling the highest mountain in Korea, the holy Paiktusan (Paektu) which towers at a height of 2744 m, with a wide crater lake at the very top known for its blue water. The ascent is taken under the protection of a military convoy, because the wilderness around the mountain is scourged by bands of bandits, and takes several days. The descent down the steep walls of the caldera is however prevented by a dense fog.

Most of the vignettes the author treats the reader to are rather mundane. Headquarters are established for several months at a variety of locations, all of them in the north. Some of the hunts are described in detail, and apart from the incidental evocation of place and mood, seem rather pointless. It is also hard to get any idea of the scope and worth of the scientific work that ostensibly is being pursued, but maybe no attempt to do so has been undertaken. A visit to the scenic Diamond Mountains¹ to inspect monasteries appears more like a tourist venture than an exploration. He does climb to the top of a mountain to visit a hermit at a Buddhist temple partly suspended across a cliff, in order to film.

Some tidbits of Korean daily life have to be collected by his assignment given by the ethnographic museum. He reports on the funeral practices of the Korean, how the dearth of wood makes the manufacture of coffins hard and expensive (most of the land, except in the very north, having been deforested, but the Japanese have started a program of reforestation) and many poorer families will have to do without. Often a coffin is made and displayed at home long before death, and seen as very reassuring. There are rituals for mourning, including that of wearing an elaborate hat, three years for a father two for a mother. But if you lose a wife you quickly get another. In fact marriage is very much geared towards the man. Although marriages are made by matchmakers, and the couple seldom meet before the ceremony, during which the woman has her eyelids taped, the man nevertheless has the advantage by having the option to return his bride would he be disappointed. The bride is given up by her family and enter into the household and possession of her husband's. She is allowed to visit her parents after a month, and for

¹ The area around Mount Kumgang has been enclosed as a tourist enclave by the North Korean authorities in order to gain valuable hard currency, mostly open to South Koreans of whom a million have visited since its inception back in 2002. Following a fatal shooting of a South Korean tourist, South Korea discontinued visits much to the frustration and anger of the North Korean authorities.

that initial period her in-laws are on good behavior, afterwards the mother-in-law is free to take out on her daughter-in-law the privations she herself had suffered as such. If the wife does not produce a son, the husband is entitled to take on a second wife, usually a dancer or an actress for her beauty. Her issue may then be listed under the first wife who is expected to take care of them as would they be her own breed. One is on one hand expected to respect the customs of other cultures on the other hand not to compromise on the values of ones own. This frequently leads into conflict. We would rightly condemn the traditional Korean marriage customs as being discriminatory against women and see it as progress would they be abandoned. Thus our respect is conditional and subservient to our own conventions, just as multi-culturalism is encouraged only as far as it is seen as picturesque and innocent, as in the old Soviet Union. One may inquire into the origin of such practices and conclude that drastic measures are indeed called for would families be able to serve as cohesive units to give protection to its members, a necessary function in a pre-welfare state. One should also not forget that there are as many girls born as boys, so if men can take on second wives, by necessity some men can take on no wives at all, so the practice is as discriminatory to men as well, something not usually realized.

At the end of the book, written for an edition to be published in 1952, a brief survey of the sorry state in which Korea found itself in after the Second World War is added. At the time the cease-fire in the conflict was not concluded. Bergman himself died in 1975 way before the economic upswing of South Korea had come its way.

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