

## CORRESPONDENCE.

*Written for this Paper.*

## BUSINESS IN COREA.

(Copyrighted by Frank G. Carpenter, 1894.)



THE city of Seoul is now filled with Japanese troops, and Japanese merchants are preparing to open stores and go into business. The whole country is to be reorgan-

ized on a modern basis. Other merchants will soon come in, and the business methods of the Koreans will be changed. They are the queerest business men of the world, and their shops and stores are like nothing else on the face of the globe. I spent many days in going through them last summer, and in chatting with the merchants. They are the gaudiest merchants on the planet. They keep their horsehair hats on when in their stores, and instead of standing up behind the counters, they squat cross-legged on the floor and smoke long pipes while they talk to you about trade and offer you goods. Often they squat outside their stores, and both stores and merchants are so unlike anything in America that it is hard to describe them. The stores are located on the three main business streets of the city. These are dirt roads about as wide as Pennsylvania avenue in Washington. They are lined with mud huts thatched with straw, to the front of which there is often a framework or booth-like awning, which juts out over the street, and in which, on boards, are spread out the goods they have for sale. Here and there little tents have been built up in the streets, and there are hundreds of big hatted, white-gowned squatters who have planked themselves down on the road, with their goods spread out before them, and who soberly smoke as they wait for their customers. There are hundreds of boys who part their hair in the middle, and who look like girls in their long gowns, going about peddling candy and chestnuts. They have a kind of a box which is swung from their shoulders, and which rests on their chests, and the candy peddlers carry scissors and cut off their long strings of taffy into such sticks as you want. These boys yell out that they have taffy for sale. They are shrewd little fellows, and they ply their business in all parts of the city.

## THE COREAN BAZAARS

Seoul is, you know, a city of 300,000 people, and it covers about three square miles. Right in the center of the city there is a point where the three business streets come together, and at this point there is a temple about as big as a good-sized cowshed, which holds the great bell, or town clock of the capital. This

bell rings the opening and closing of the Corean day, and its knell sounds the beginning and ending of the day's work and business. It is rung just at dusk, and at this time the great gates of the city are closed. The stores are supposed to shut up, and the men to go into their houses and give the women a chance to take moonlight walks unmolested. About this bell are the biggest business establishments of Seoul. They are in large one and two-story buildings, which look a good deal like granaries and which are cut up into little bits of closets opening out upon halls. Each of these buildings is devoted to the selling of one kind of goods, and the leading merchants who deal in them have each one of these closets, and they squat on cushions just outside of them, ready to bring out their goods when the customers come. Glass is hardly known in Corea, and there are no windows, and the closet is as dark as a pocket. There is no display of goods, and you ask for what you want and the merchant brings it out. One of the buildings will have nothing but cottons, and there may be fifty merchants each owning one of the closet-like stores within it. Another building will contain nothing but silk, and others will be devoted to the selling of hats and paper. The merchants of different classes have guilds, and they fix the prices. Every yard of silk and every sheet of paper sold in Seoul has to pass through the guild and pay its taxes before it can be sold. There are six great guilds, and each of these guilds pays a good round sum to the government for the controlling of its branch of trade. If a retail dealer is found with a piece of goods which does not bear the stamp of the guild the guild can fine and punish him without references to any other tribunal, and, all of the petty traders throughout Seoul have to buy through the guilds. The six greatest guilds are those which control the trade in Chinese silk, cotton goods, hemp cloth, grass cloth, Corean silk and paper, and it will be surprising to know that the whole of Corea is divided up into unions, and that the porters have their trades unions, and there are peddlers' unions and all sorts of working organizations.

## A LOOK INTO A COREAN STORE.

The average Corean store is not much bigger than a dry goods box, and about this great bell there are courts surrounded by such stores, which open out on a ledge or porch about three feet wide, upon which the merchants sit. A merchant could hardly turn around in one of these stores, and if you would take a piano packing box and line it with shelves and run a board along in front of it about two feet from the ground you would have a Corean store. The chief business is in cloth, as the Koreans probably spend more on clothes in proportion to their income than any other people in the world, and the cotton trade is a big one. The common people all wear cotton, and I was told that they like the American goods much better than the English, for the reason, they are better made, and that they are of finer material. The Corean silk is fairly good, and they use a good deal of Chinese silk. I remember one fur store

which I visited. It was not more than five feet square, but it was full of costly fur garments, which the richer of these people wear in the winter. Among the curious articles which it had for sale were frameworks of wicker, which these people wear during the summer inside their garments to keep them away from their persons and allow a thorough circulation of the air. There were wicker shirts and wicker cuffs and wicker frames which fit out over the stomach, all so light that the weight of them would be imperceptible and as fine in their workmanship as a Panama hat.

## THE BIGGEST BOOK STORE IN SEOUL.

I spent some time in going among the book stores and picture shops, and I found the merchants by no means anxious to sell, especially when I had Gen. Pak, my interpreter, with me. I was warned to pay for everything on the spot, and I found that the nobility of Seoul and the high officials, with whom I was supposed to be connected, had a habit of taking what they pleased and never coming back to pay for it. I really believe this was the way they looked upon me until I offered them the money. They always asked three times as much as they expected to take, and everything is done by dickering. I bought for about fifty cents a book which was first offered to me for three dollars, and this was at the biggest book store in Seoul. The books are all laid flat on the floor. They have flexible backs, and are more like magazines than books. Many of them look like blank books and account books until you open them, and you find them filled with Chinese or Corean characters. The merchant keeps his accounts with a paint brush, the clerks keep their hats on and the average clerk is satisfied if he receives his clothes and food for his family and himself. I bought a Corean first reader, and later on I visited a Corean printing establishment. There were no movable types, and the pages which were to be printed were engraved on boards. The printer laid one of these boards down on two blocks of wood, then mixed some lamp-black and water on a flat piece of marble and smeared this over the page. He then laid a proof sheet on it and pounded it down into the engraved type, and this constituted the printing.

## ONE OF THE KING'S PERQUISITES.

The king gets a big income out of Corean paper. It is all made by hand, and it brings about five cents a sheet, each sheet containing about as much paper, I judge, as eight pages of this newspaper. I went through a paper factory, which is just outside of Seoul, along the banks of a stream. Some paper is made of bark reduced to pulp, and all the old paper is worked over. It is ground up into a sort of a mush, and when it is all in bits, a bamboo frame is thrust into the mush, and that which sticks to the frame makes a sheet of paper. It is bleached in the sun, and is as strong as cloth. Now, the king gets his percentage out of the first sale, and he makes a big lot of money out of his examination papers. All offices are supposed to be awarded by civil service examinations, and at certain times of the year the students, by the thousand come from all parts of the country, each carrying two or three of these sheets of paper. They are admitted into one part of the palace grounds, and there squat down under umbrellas which they bring.