DOMESTIC INTERLUDE.

*In search of a house -*The Hôtel du Palais *-*Ma' Ch'un Yang *, polyglot servant - confusion of tongues -*Kishù *and*Mungighì *,a long story -*Mr. Yang Hong Muk *, interpreter - an Italian ship becomes a Belgian ship – The good Parodi and the small*musmè*.*

Translated into English by Jeffrey Russell

I had barely arrived in Seoul, when I had the good fortune, denied to my late predecessor, to immediately find a charming little house, small but comfortable, for my own accommodation. It was a real stroke of luck because, given the very limited number of Europeans who are currently in the Korean capital, and the very special positions occupied by them, there are hardly any European-style houses available to rent. The Westerners established here are all either members of the Diplomatic Corps, in which case they are provided with suitable accommodation owned by their respective governments, or employees of the Korean government who have come to work for several years and whose first thought on arriving in Seoul is to buy a piece of land and build a house of their own. As for the considerable number of Christian missionaries, both Protestant (the majority) and Catholic (together there were more than two hundred of them, out of a total of some four hundred Westerners), most also live in houses owned by their respective missions. So, if not the only one, I was one of the very few who had to find his own accommodation, and I owed my salvation to a providential decision which the Russian government had just taken to move its vice-consulate from Seoul to Cemulpo; as a result the house in Seoul previously occupied by the Russian vice-consul became vacant. It could be that my pro-Russian sympathies spring from this little event! At any rate Russia solved a real problem for me and I have been very grateful for it ever since. It is true that there is a small hotel in Seoul pompously called "Hôtel du Palais" , but, my God, I had spent one night there on my previous visit to Seoul and the memory of it was enough to discourage me from repeating the experience. They say *à la guerre comme à la guerre*, but, in the first place, I was not " *à la guerre*", knowing that on this occasion I would be staying in Seoul for some time; and then there were many other reasons why the Hôtel du Palais was not right for me.

The lucky star that had allowed me to find a suitable home immediately continued to guide me in the choice of a servant.  Foreigners in Korea generally employ Chinese servants, believing that Koreans are ill-suited to delicate domestic tasks; but I wanted to try using Korean servants, and I declare right away that I was very satisfied with them. Ma' Yang Ciun, who had been employed by my predecessor in another capacity, was raised by me to the confidential position of 'number one boy', an expression which, in *pidgin-english*, the very comic language spoken throughout the Far East, designates, especially among domestics, the servant who has precedence and authority over all the servants of a house.  Ma' naturally spoke *pidgin english*to perfection, and he also knew some Chinese and Japanese, making him a genuinely learned person in the eyes of his peers. Lastly, after spending several months with me, he also acquired a certain stock of Italian words which he would use whenever a suitable opportunity arose. In short, he had a gift for languages and a marked penchant for displaying it. When I came to Seoul I brought with me, by permission of the admiral commanding the ocean-going ships of the Italian navy, one of the *Puglia's* petty officers, the excellent Parodi, to be my secretary; the poor man had to spend all day answering Ma's linguistic questions. Ma' wanted to know how this or that thing was said in Italian; when he got the answer, he would write it down in Korean characters in a little notebook he always carried with him. Then at the first opportunity - whenever the term in *pidgin-english*escaped him and he did not know the corresponding Italian word, replacing it with the Japanese word - he would come out with sentences like “*Master, stassera wantchi tabeu six o' clok* ?” or “*Master, oggi go out mettere pelliccia*?” As can be seen from these examples, the jargon that was spoken in my house in Seoul was somewhat out of the ordinary and was so full of unexpected phrases mixing words from four very rich languages that some mental gymnastics were often necessary to immediately grasp the idea that the speaker was trying to express. Yet I got so used to understanding this lingo and to using it, that I was often unexpectedly successful, especially latterly, in obtaining clarifications or information on local customs from Ma' that I had not managed to get from my official interpreter, the dignified Mr. Yang, of whom more later.

Ma’ took it upon himself to find suitable people for the other household tasks, and  in this too he fully repaid the trust I had placed in him. His brother Xia' Yang Sun took possession of the kitchen and proved to be an enviably good cook. Ma' then chose a certain Yi to carrry out in his stead all those tasks which in Korea were considered beneath his dignity, such as preparing water for the bathroom, lighting stoves, carrying letters around, etc. The staff of the consulate was completed by Ceu and Kim , both *kishù*and one more especially *mungighi*:  strange titles with even stranger attributes dictated by local custom. The *kishù* is a kind of servant, who is placed lower than everyone else on the highly complex Korean social ladder; in fact he is not allowed to wear the white national costume and the ordinary hat of horsehair and bamboo, which together represent for Koreans something like what the toga represented for Roman men. Instead he has to wear a very curious outfit, peculiar to his class, consisting of wide black trousers with a red stripe, a jacket of the same color with metal buttons, a blue cloth scarf knotted at the chest, and a tiny hat of rough felt held in place with a length of twine. Nowadays the main task of a *kishù*seems to be to run before his master whenever he leaves the house, opening all the doors through which he might pass; after which he can spend the rest of the day philosophically smoking his very long pipe. In former times, when ordinary folk were absolutely obliged to stop and bow to any passing dignitary, these *kishù*served to announce to the populace the passage of an important person, and no  Korean official would ever have taken a single step outside unless he was preceded by a good number of such heralds. The first European diplomats accredited to Korea, in order not to seem less important than Korean officials when appearing in public, also adopted the custom. Now that the wind of modernity is beginning to blow in Korea and the people no longer stop when officials pass by, there is no longer any reason to keep this custom; and I believe foreign representatives only continue to keep it for the convenience it offers when going out in the evening. The *kishù*are then provided with a large silk lantern, generally in the national colors, and they walk ahead to light up the road, a necessary function given the almost complete absence of any street lighting.

However, it was never my habit to be preceded in this way, except on rare occasions of official visits; and my *kishù* spent their time in blissful idleness, to the envy of all their colleagues.

The *mungighì*is not the same as the *kishù*: his standing is higher, and he does not wear a special uniform. He corresponds roughly to our concierge and, generally speaking, confines his activity to opening and closing the outer door of the house and pocketing the entry fee which it is customary for all merchants, street vendors, etc. to pay to enter the house. This fee is in addition to the monthly salary he receives from his master. I believed at first that I could dispense with the services of a *mungighi* and I had charged one of the *kishù*, the elderly Ceu, to act as *mungighi* as well. To my mind I was well within my rights to do so, given that the two *kishù*, whom I only retained because I was morally obliged to keep them on, were not exactly worked to death. But here I was up against the deep-rooted tradition, so widespread throughout Asia, that each servant should be entrusted with one, and only one, well defined duty. In no time at all I found I was short of a *kishù* as well as a *mungighi*, since whenever I happened to need the services of one of them old Ceu claimed to be only the other. To solve this dilemma I promotedhim from *kishù* to the position of full-time *mungighì*. This new state of affairs did not last long, however, for a few days later an imperial decree ordered all Koreans to stop wearing white and adopt a black costume instead.  Ceu, who had been quick to abandon his *kishù* uniform in favour of civilian attire, and now had no money to buy a new black suit, came to humbly beg me to let him wear his old uniform again. Of course I granted his request, and so Ceu remained to the end both *kishù* and *mungighi* at the same time, which is what I had wanted all along.

At this point I must say something about the senior and most authoritative, if not the most important, member of my household, Mr.Yang Hong Muk, interpreter. Always impeccably dressed in spotless white silk robes, with a very thin overcoat of light blue gauze and a gleaming hat which shone with seven reflections, as required by the canons of perfect good taste, he invariably wore a huge pair of glasses with tortoiseshell frames, symbolising his dignity as a man of letters, whenever he went out or received his compatriots in his study, and which he only removed, as a sign of respect, in my presence. The good *Mister*Yang, as he was usually called, was a typical Korean nobleman, a classic *yang-ban*. His position as the official interpreter of the Royal Italian Consulate did not impress him - I would even say he considered it to be way beneath his dignity. His true vocation was sweet idleness, and in the fulfilment of his duties he brought a strong personal note which was the sincerest expression of his vocation. I had met him on my first visit to Seoul and I remember an incident which depicts his character very well. I had invited him on board the *Puglia*one day to show him round the ship. During the visit I had taken some photographs which I promised to send him as soon as they were ready, duly inscribed with his name and titles. He was very grateful for this little courtesy, thanked me profusely, and took his leave; but he came back shortly after to tell me it had occurred to him that I would not know all his titles and consequently would not know how to dedicate the photographs properly, and so had come back to spell these out. Thereupon he rattled off all his titles, which, according to what he told me, were the following: former private adviser (adviser to whom? Hmm!), former editor-in-chief of "Han Yang Sin Bun", former English teacher at Pai Cè School, and finally interpreter for the Royal Italian Consulate; but the latter did not matter much. I noted down all these details, and when I sent him the photographs I was careful to include all the former positions he had held and to which he attached so much importance. In exchange Mr. Yang  promised to get the capital's newspaper to print an exact description of the *Puglia,* for which I had provided the details, slightly exaggerated - an essential ploy in those countries - to give the paper's readers the impression that our ship was the most powerful in the world. He duly wrote the article, but alas! either through his fault or the printer's, the article appeared the following day with an error in the Korean name for Italy (Tai Yi-Guk), and the readers learnt that our beautiful destroyer was a Belgian ship (Tai Pi Guè)! To think that I had taken the trouble to enhance all her excellent attributes - power, armament and speed!

How he managed to teach English in a school, even a Korean school, is beyond me. Although we used English to communicate with each other, he spoke it rather badly; his spelling was highly idiosyncratic and I only gradually got used to it. Still, given his limited duties, and above all the meagre salary he received in comparison with his counterparts in the other diplomatic missions, all in all I had little cause to complain about Mr Yang. On the contrary, I must say that, unlike some of his colleagues who were remarkably well paid but were always pestering their employers for pay increases, Mr. Yang never made the slightest mention of a pay rise to me; his ambitions were all confined to the field of honors. He dreamed of two beautiful jade buttons to wear on his headband, a mark of great distinction, and every time I had to go to the Palace, or call on some influential minister, he never failed to entreat me to obtain the imperial favour of the two jade buttons for him.

I sometimes asked him to explain certain essentially Korean customs and practices, but it was very rare that I got a satisfactory answer. While proud of his linguistic superiority, Mr Yang did not understand how one could take an interest in such things and he merely replied: "That nonsense! Stuff for ignorant people! It is not worth talking about!" There was no way to get more out of him; at most, he would sometimes digress to tell me about little intrigues or Court scandals, since he thought I would then see him as someone of importance who was well acquainted with secret things. Mr. Yang had once learned the name of Garibaldi, I do not know where or how, and whenever he happened to meet an Italian officer from one of our ships for the first time, he invariably brought Garibaldi into the conversation at the earliest opportunity, together with the most devout declarations of admiration for that great national hero.  He had brought up Garibaldi when he first met me too, and I had been pleasantly surprised to find that this exotic character knew so much about our history; with the passage of time, however, I came to realize that all he really knew about Garibaldi was his name.

Before I left Seoul, he had a kind thought. For a long time I had been looking for a very rare book about Korean military tactics printed many years ago, but I had never succeeded in tracking it down. On the very day of my departure Mr. Yang arrived with a beautiful copy of the book, asking me to accept it and keep it to remember him by. I was all the more touched by this gesture as I was leaving Korea for ever and Mr. Yang could no longer expect anything from me.

This then was the Korean staff I lived with throughout my stay in Seoul, and whom I remember today with great satisfaction. Whether it was because I had had the good fortune to find particularly suitable people, or whether it was because my needs were very modest compared to those of other employers, it is a fact that all in all I had no cause to complain about my employees; on the contrary I had good reason to be satisfied with them, a very rare state of affairs in those countries, where Europeans complain continually and loudly about their native staff.

I cannot end these notes on my domestic life in Seoul, without remembering with gratitude the excellent Parodi, second chief helmsman in the Royal Navy, who proved a zealous and devoted subordinate on every occasion, and whose jovial character and quick intelligence were often a very precious help to me. During the first days after our arrival in the Korean capital, he immediately and tirelessly set about the job of organizing our residence as quickly as possible, with the sailor's typical ability to adapt and get his bearings: with a couple of words of English, two of Japanese and many of Italian, he made himself understood by everyone and understood everyone. There was no difficult errand, ​​in any language, that he could not carry out. How he managed it I could not say, but it is a fact that when I sent him to ask something of an Englishman, a Korean, a Frenchman, or a Japanese, he always came back with the answer, and, what was more important, the answer was always the right one. In. In no time at all he had acquired great popularity in Seoul's Japanese district, *Cin-ko-gai*, and  when he passed swiftly through the streets in his smart uniform, with its gold braid glistening in the sun, more than one little *musmè* stopped to look at him with small almond-shaped eyes full of promises.

 It was largely thanks to Parodi that I was able to get the house ship-shape and recruit the staff I needed in just a few days, and that, on 11 November, His Majesty's birthday, I had the satisfaction of inaugurating my residence with a reception for all the representatives of the other Powers and the Korean authorities assembled for the customary congratulations.

With the material side of life thus secured, I could finally get around to a more detailed study of this country, which until then I had only observed with the distracted eye of one who is preoccupied with other more urgent needs.