SEOUL.

*The heart of Korea - Seoul and Sigul - The eight gates - Houses or huts? - Wood, mud and paper - Lively streets - Oxen and horses - The districts of Seoul - The Legend of Ciong Dong - District of Mud or City of Mud?*

Translated into English by Jeffrey Russell

Like the whole nation, Seoul has its own distinctive features.

It is a strange place, to be honest. When I arrived in Seoul, I had the same experience as everyone who visits this city: you think you are going find something very like what you have seen in China or Japan, and instead you find that everything is essentially different. Anyone trying to describe Seoul, as alas I am, has nothing to compare it with: no other city in the Asian world is comparable or even similar to the Korean capital.

  Seoul is to Korea what Paris is to France: the object of all Koreans' aspirations, the center which attracts everyone who wants to get on in life, the source of every novelty and every manifestation of the nation's activity.

One could almost say that Korea is divided into two parts: Seoul, the capital, and Sigul, the provinces, in the sense that our neighbors beyond the Alps use this word - for the French *la*  *province* denotes everything that is not Paris. The name itself, Seoul, sounds like capital in Korean; it has almost come to mean the capital *par excellence*, and it has in fact been the capital of the empire for over five centuries, ever since King Tai Giò, the founder of the current dynasty, established his residence there.

*"And yet, if you were to walk through the streets of Seoul now, it would never occur to you, I can assure you, that you were really and truly in the heart of one of those Eastern cities of your youthful dreams, a mysterious phantasmagoria of light and colour, luxury and splendour. You would find nothing here that even reflects the grandeur which the traveller can still see or imagine in Beijing, despite the Chinese capital's current state of decay and neglect; and there is no semblance or trace in Seoul of the thousands of art treasures that can be admired in even the humblest of Japanese villages. One could almost say that the sole purpose of the wars which for centuries the Chinese and the Japanese have fought in Korea was to appropriate for themselves everything in the way of good taste and artistic talent which nature must have bestowed on the Koreans as well, such is the city's squalor and, worse still, its lack of charm."*

This is a passage from a letter I wrote when I first arrived in Seoul, and today, after a much longer stay, I find no reason to significantly change the opinion I formed from my first impressions. I should add that, if you look long enough, you can still find a few buildings and monuments that are typically Korean,  but they are of historical rather than artistic interest, and all, without exception, merely copy old Chinese designs, with no sign of any original Korean input.

When King Tai Giò settled in Seoul, he had a high wall built, in imitation of the Chinese, all round his capital. This still exists today and forms an eight-mile circuit, with eight large gates giving access to the city.

These gates are all of very original construction; together with the imperial palaces they are the only buildings of any real architectural merit. The two largest ones, the South and the East Gates, are actually exact copies, apart from their size, of the corresponding Gates in Beijing. They all have extraordinary names: *Heng-in Ci-mun*, "the Gate that exalts Grace", *Ton Ei Mun*, "the Gate of Constant Loyalty", *Sang Ye Mun*, "the Gate of Exalted Education", etc., and it is only for the sake of brevity that foreigners call them the East Gate, the West Gate, the South Gate and so on. Until a few years ago all the gates were closed at nine o'clock in the evening and no-one was allowed to enter or leave the caital. Now, after the reforms of 1894 , this custom has been abolished; the gates are still closed at night, but they are opened for anyone who requests entry.

On its northern side the city wall climbs up over Pu-khan, the mountain dominating the valley in which Seoul stands. A double ring of walls encircles the summit of this mountain, constituting the famous fortress where the kings of Ciu-sen used to take refuge in times of war, when the approach of an enemy army gave them reason to fear for their own safety. A secret road leads to it from the old Summer Palace, which stands at the foot of the mountain, and the North Gate, giving access to it, is never opened except to allow the sovereign through.

I do not know whether in Tai Giò's day the city walls really separated the inhabited area from the countryside or whether he wanted to keep some space free to allow for future enlargements of the city; if so, his spirit would be greatly disappointed today, for the area covered with houses occupies at present less than one twentieth of the total area within the city walls - all the rest is deserted countryside.

I used the word *houses*, but *huts* would be a more accurate name for most of the dwellings. Lord Curzon, in his excellent book *Problcms of the Far East*, calls them a mixture of wood, mud and paper, and his definition, if not particularly clear, is certainly very accurate. The frame is made of wood; it is covered with mud to make the walls; and paper is used for everything else: to cover floors, interior walls and ceilings; paper curtains of the desired size divide the internal space into the required number of rooms; sheets of paper are used for windows instead of glass; the door panels are made of paper. In short, paper is used in a thousand ways in a Korean house, as well as for umbrellas, clothes, hats and an infinite number of other everyday objects which are always made of paper in this country.

To complete the list of the materials used in building the Korean house, we should add straw, which is usually used for the roof. Clay tiles are occasionally used, but only for the houses of the wealthiest and for government buildings.

The houses are all very low and only have one floor. There is not a single Korean house of two storeys or more in the whole city.

A special feature of the Korean house is the *kang*. Alone among all the peoples of the East, the Koreans have solved the problem of heating in a fairly ingenious and original way with the *kang*. Korean houses have no foundations; they are built directly on the ground. The stone floor is therefore built at a certain height above street level and the space in between - the *kang* - is used in the winter to burn wood or straw, thus heating the floor and consequently the whole house. A hole made almost at street level, on the opposite side to the stove in which the fuel is burnt, allows the smoke to escape from inside the *kang* - smoke which gets into the eyes of passers-by, doing nothing to enhance the delights of the streets of Seoul.

What can be said about these streets? Seoul, unlike all other cities in Korea and China, boasts four or five large arteries that cross it from one end to the other and which, although very wide, are relatively clean. It is a pity that they lack the liveliness and cheerfulness, so typical of Chinese streets, conferred by the rich, multicolored decoration of Chinese house fronts and the artistic originality of Chinese shops and window displays - which so often make you forget, while you admire them, the half meter of mud you are walking through or the dusty hole you have just fallen into.

The longest and most important of these streets runs in a straight line for over four kilometres from the Great West Gate to the Great East Gate, from which it takes its name, dividing the city into two almost equal parts: the "northern city" and the "southern city". This street, over sixty meters wide, is lined with many shops stocking the main products of the Korean market, especially pottery, grain, paper, and rope shoes. The electric tram now operating in the Korean capital runs along its entire length, and for several kilometers beyond both Gates.

About a quarter of the way along this street, starting from the West Gate, another much shorter but far wider street bisects it, leading north to the old imperial palace called *Kyung Pok*or Summer Palace. This avenue, three times wider than East Gate Street, is lined solely by government buildings housing the big state departments. Dubbed Ministry Street by foreigners, it also serves as a parade ground for the capital's garrison on account of its exceptional width.

Continuing along *Great East Gate Street*, just before its halfway point, you come to *Great South Gate Street*, the second most important of the capital's major thoroughfares, which, as you would expect, leads from the city centre to the Gate of the same name. It is also served by an electric tramline which, exiting through the South Gate, leads to Yongsan village, Seoul's river port on the Han River, four miles away.

About halfway between the start of Ministry Street and the start of Great South Gate Street, you come to another of the main arteries leading to the South Gate: this one passes in front of the new imperial palace called *Ciong Dong* Palace, the current residence of HM the Emperor. It is lined almost exclusively with Korean shops; this has given its name to the street, which the foreign residents of Seoul generally know as *Cabinet Street* in English.

Two other streets deserve a mention, not so much for their size as for their state of maintenance (which would be considered bad in any of our cities but beyond anyone's wildest dreams in Seoul). One leads from near *Ciong Dong* Palace on Cabìnet Street to the Great West Gate and the other leads from the same place to the Little West Gate. The first passes near the Legations of England and America and in front of the Russian and French Legations, and is consequently called *Legation Street*, while the other, for a similar reason, is now known as *Italian Consulate Street*.

But with the exception of these few broad thoroughfares, the rest of the city is a maze of narrow filthy streets where garbage piles up for eleven months of the year waiting for the great rains of July to sweep them away with the force of the water. It is difficult to imagine anything more superlatively unclean than these little streets, where the space for walking is restricted on both sides by the open drains, which often overflow, and which are sometimes so smelly that they upset the toughest constitution and the strongest stomach. The first few days of a stay in Seoul are naturally the worst; the whole atmosphere seems saturated with that nauseating stench and the mere thought of having to go through those side alleys would make you faint, were it not for the fact that little by little we grow accustomed to this as to everything else, our courage revives ..... and we end up laughing at the astonished faces and the disgusted amazement of the new arrivals. Not only that, but our initial dismay gradually gives way to the ever-increasing pleasure we take in the manifold picturesque and bizarre sights that the streets and roads offer in abundance: the whole pageant of Eastern and particularly Korean life played out under the eyes of the western passer-by, very varied scenes endlessly following one another, very strange costumes, never seen before, that suddenly attract your attention, and arouse your curiosity so that you never tire of observing them.

Those streets are incredibly full of life: from daybreak until late at night they continually swarm with people moving with that slow, dreamy, swaying gait peculiar to Koreans. They pass close by, bump into you, stumble, and move forward with vacant eye and uncertain step, as if obliged by some mysterious force to roam the streets forever. Where are all those silent people going? Why all this toing and froing of a crowd as compact as those that fill the most populous centers of our busiest cities, here, in Seoul, the capital of one of the most idle people on earth? In vain do you try to understand the reason for all this movement; you look around, you peer ahead as far as you can see, you are curious to discover what unusual spectacle is taking place to attract so many people. But do not search, for there is nothing to see; and above all do not stop, for then you will become the center of attention. As soon as you stop, for whatever reason - to admire an object or to look at your watch - a circle immediately forms around you and people look at you, scrutinize you, draw close to you, hem you in, silently: children bundled up in their pink clothes, young men with heavy braid loose on their back, serious men with stained white robes and traditional chimney-pot hats, venerable old men whose blue sleeveless overcoat gives them a certain dignity - but no women, there are no women in a Korean crowd. They all look at you - ten, a hundred, a thousand eyes are fixed on you, and not a word is spoken. You turn, you make a rather abrupt movement, the circle opens and all those people scatter, as if seized by a sudden terror, but the panic is over in a flash. You smile, you let them see that there was nothing hostile about your movement, and all the faces light up, mouths open in a loud laugh, and the crowd re-forms.

In the morning, especially in winter, it becomes even more difficult to get around Seoul because of the extraordinary number of oxen and horses bringing the firewood necessary for the great city's daily consumption.  Every morning thousands and thousands of pack animals file through each of Seoul's eight great gates: the oxen, or to be exact the young bulls, generally carry large loads of big logs piled up in a pyramid on their back, while the horses - those small horses you only find in Korea, ugly, skinny, restless animals, a disgrace to the equine race - almost disappear under huge bundles attached to both flanks which they drag along the ground. They are all heading for Ministry Street or Ciong No, near the Great Bell, at the junction of Great East Gate and Great South Gate Streets, where the main wood market is held, before returning to the countryside once their load has been sold.  This traffic generally lasts from dawn until around ten in the morning and while it is going on, navigating the streets of the capital becomes a real problem, especially in some of the narrow alleys that are barely wide enough for one animal to pass. Every time you meet one of them coming towards you, you have to retrace your steps until you find a side street or a doorway you can use to avoid getting crushed between the wood and the wall. The worst time is when, later on, the loads have been sold and all those young bulls are heading back to the city gates. Their drivers, faces hidden under the huge straw hats they wear in the countryside, walk carelessly with dazed eyes, like all Koreans in general, without looking where they are going and, unfortunately, without attending to their animals. The beasts, relieved of their morning load, are seemingly disinclined to trot along gently on their own and may well butt you with their horns if they get the chance. As there are not many of us, we Europeans naturally seem to be the preferred butt of their playful little jokes, and I recall two or three occasions when the distance between me and the tips of the horns of one of those horrible animals had narrowed enough to make me fear that at any moment it could become negative; it was pure luck that I got out of trouble with no serious injury.

As in all eastern countries, each district acquires its own distinct character from the special shops located in it. In Seoul as in the other eastern cities, all shops selling the same item are generally to be found in the same district. The jewellers, for example, are all located near Ciong No, between the Kuang T'ong Kyo, the *Great Link Bridge*, and the Ciang Kyo, the *Long Bridge*; if you want to buy anything made of silver or gold, that is where you have to go. You will be spoilt for choice; there are hundreds of open-fronted small shops set about two feet above the street, in a long row. The shops are very narrow, with barely enough room for the craftsman and his stove. You stay out in the street, studying the few objects on display in a small glass case, while the imperturbable old artisan, his big glasses in their tortoiseshell frames stuck on his nose, continues his skilled and patient work. You ask the price of an item, the old man looks at it, examines it at length, turns it this way and that, thinks it over for a long time, and then picks up the abacus which he keeps near him and which no Korean merchant is ever without. You watch as he moves the little balls deftly between two fingers of his right hand, sliding them to every possible position, then stopping them, before moving them once more and stopping them again. His lips, closed until then, finally move and the old man tells you its price. It is enormous, at least ten times the value of the object. You try to lower it, you propose a more reasonable figure, but the old man no longer speaks: he retrieves the object, puts it back in the glass case and returns to his work. You move away and then the scene changes: someone runs out of the old man's shop - one of the many idle loungers who populate the streets of Seoul - with the object you want in his hand, runs after you and offers it to you at a lower price, let's say five times its value. You insist on your figure, the other lowers the price a little more and, if you stand firm and refuse to be swayed, you will end up buying the object at its true value. The same scene will be repeated whenever you want to buy something. At first this bargaining may seem amusing, but in the long run it becomes unbearable. If you are lucky enough to have a servant you can trust, the best thing you can do is ask him to do all your shopping. I ended up adopting this system; I went around with Ma', I showed him what I wanted and then I let him take care of it. Ma 'of course, as a good Korean, saw no point in losing a good half hour in vain talk, and I saved time and money, and above all avoided a nervous breakdown.

Not far from the jewellers' quarter, on the opposite side of Great East Gate Street, you find the district of the silk merchants, confined in a number of blind alleys. These are perhaps even dirtier than the rest of the city, but in them you can find all the most marvellous silks that a girl could ever dream of: very fine silk from Ciul-la province, heavy silk from Shangtung, delicate gauze produced in Ci-là, patterned damasks from Nankin and Shanghai, solid crapes from Japan, of all colors and all shades. Naturally, when they first venture out, the few western ladies drawn by their passion for travel to Seoul go to Ciong No, which is the only part of the city where you might meet any of the few ladies from the European community in the Korean capital.

On Ciong No square, near the Great Bell, the hat sellers display their wares, which are packed in large straw boxes covered with yellow paper. Further on, the hat repairers carry on their trade in the middle of the road, alternating with the sellers of sweets, the sandal repairers, the oxen laden with wood, the coal merchants bent under the high stacks of coal they carry on their backs. Further on, further along Great East Gate Street, your attention is drawn to some shops selling curious objects of turned wood painted red, a kind of candelabra, and little altars and sedan chairs - funeral objects, of the kind used for those gay Korean funeral processions.  All the shops selling prints and paper objects are in the same street, on the opposite side. With a few *seu* you can get fantastic figures of dragons, tigers, hippogriffs or ancient warriors to stick on your doors to keep the evil spirits away. There are other prints, designed more especially for use indoors, depicting ancient sages, guardian spirits, or ancient myths, which you will find in any Korean house.

The city of Seoul is divided into 49 districts, known as *Pang*, each of which is divided into several *Tong*or *Dong*, neighborhoods or, more properly, villages. Naturally, each *Tong* has a different name and in a way this compensates for the fact that the streets are not named. The names of most of the *Tong* reflect the professions that are usually practised in them, or the objects that are sold in them; so we have the *P'il Dong*, the Paintbrush District, *Ciu Dong*, the Printing District, *Yang Dong*, the Blacksmiths' District, *To Dong*, the Knife District, *Ciuk Dong*, the Dyers' District, *Mo Giung Dong*, the Gala Hats District, etc. Some districts, on the other hand, are named after special monuments that are located or were once located in them, such as *Sa Dong*, the Monastery District, so called because it was once the site of the largest monastery in the city, and *Uen Dong*, the Garden District, near the imperial garden called *Uen.* *Sang Sa Dong*, the Shrine of the Living District, took its name from a small pagoda where, at the time of the Japanese invasion, Koreans placed portraits of the two Chinese generals who were still alive then, Yi Yu Song and Yang Ho, who had effectively helped the Koreans to drive out the invaders.

Other neighborhoods derive their name from ancient and curious legends, some of which are very interesting. The *Mek Tong*, the InkDistrict, was so called because, in former times, a very famous literary man lived there, who spent his time writing a great number of Chinese characters very beautifully on a piece of cloth which he then washed in the stream near his home; and he wrote so many characters that the stream was perpetually as black as ink.

A widespread legend is connected with the name of the district where most of the foreign Legations are to be found and where the Palace of the Emperor, *Ciong Dong*, currently stands. In the old days before the advent of the present Yi dynasty, there used to be a well in the place where the English Legation now stands. One day a charming girl was busy drawing water from the well, when she saw a nobleman approach and ask her for a drink. She consented, but she picked a few small leaves from a nearby willow tree and slipped them in the water before handing the bowl to the stranger. The man drank avidly, but had to pause after every sip to avoid swallowing the leaves. Having quenched his thirst he turned to the girl and said sharply*: "What on earth do you think you are doing? A stranger courteously asks you for a drink and you fill his bowl with such filth?"* The girl, who had gone red in the face, replied humbly*: "I did it for your good. I realized that you were tired and in a hurry, and in such a state, you could have come to serious harm if you had drunk a lot of cold water quickly. So I put the leaves in the bowl to force you to drink slowly, a little at a time."*The stranger, who was none other than the famous general Yi, founder of the current dynasty, was greatly pleased with the girl's reply. He asked her name, inquired about her parentage, and learned that she was the daughter of poor but honest parents. When he had seized power and moved the capital from Song-do to Seoul, he had his servants look for the girl, married her and greatly honoured her. In her new position as queen, the beautiful Kang fully justified the reputation for wisdom which the answer she gave Tai Giò had earned her; for as long as she lived she was of great comfort and good counsel to her royal husband. When she caught a terrible disease and died, poor Tai Giò was inconsolable. Before dying, she begged the King, as soon as her spirit had departed, to take a large kite, write her name on it and throw it up in the air; then cut the rope and bury her body where it fell. The King willingly agreed to do so. After the Queen's death, the kite was released and it landed on the very spot where Taì Giò and the girl Kang had met for the first time. The Queen was buried there and the surrounding neighborhood was called *Ciong Dong,* the District of the Tomb. However, the tomb did not remain there long. Government rules expressly forbade burial of the dead within the city walls, and officials protested so strongly that they managed to convince the King that the tomb would have to be moved. At this point the spirit of his deceased wife appeared to Tai Giò and begged him, given the need to transport her remains elsewhere, to repeat the kite experiment, bury them again wherever the kite fell this time, and build a temple there to make a pleasant place to visit for the many people from all over the country who would go there in future. The spirit made one further request, that a small stream be made to flow near the tomb to cheer her with the murmur of its waters. All this was done exactly as requested: the remains of the late Queen were transported to *Ciong Naug*, where the kite fell; the temple was built, and the waters of the stream that flows nearby are popularly held to be miraculous and excellent for the treatment of certain diseases.

Next to each Korean tomb there is usually a rice field, and a rice field was undoubtedly planted near the Queen's tomb when it was still in Ciong Dong, in the area currently occupied by the so-called Cabinet Street. This explains, according to Dr. Allen, the exceptionally muddy state of that street.

All the streets in Seoul are so muddy that, in order to walk more easily, the inhabitants have had to adopt certain curious wooden clogs raised about fifteen centimeters above the ground. Their gait is even clumsier than usual in these clogs, which make them look like people walking on stilts. One of the city's districts is actually called *Ni Dong*, the District of Mud. I find it unjust that the name should be used only for one particular district: it would be much more appropriate to use it for the whole city, rather than Nam Pyeng-yang, Puk Han-san, Kuang-neng, Namkiong or Han-yang, Seoul's former names.