THE SIGHTS OF SEOUL

*The Great Bell - The Marble Pagoda – The White Buddha - The imperial palaces - A professional anecdote - The Summer Palace - The Eastern Palace - Ancient legends about the Mulberry Palace.*

Translated into English by Jeffrey Russell

Until a few years ago there was a very curious custom in Seoul: at a given hour of the evening, eight or nine o'clock I think, every man had to return home. A big bell located in the center of the city gave the signal, and on the last stroke, any man found in the streets by the special patrols was arrested on the spot; at the same time all the women were free to go out and walk about the streets undisturbed. Now that this custom has been abolished, the men stay out at night as well as during the day, while women are denied even this harmless pastime.

The big bell that signalled the changeover (men back in, women out) is the most renowned object in the whole city and its location, Ciong No, is the true center of the world for Koreans. A curious legend is linked to it.

  When Taì Giò, the founder of the current dynasty, ordered the great East Gate to be erected, a bell was found during the excavations for the foundations.The bell was hung at the entrance to the Eastern Palace, where it is still located. Tai Giò, enamored of its shape, thought of reproducing it on a much bigger scale and ordered all the provincial governors and prefects to collect as much metal as possible. Every inhabitant of the peninsula had to make a personal contribution, and special officials were charged with the collection. While this was in progress, one of the metal collectors came across a house in the An Eye district of KyenSang province, inhabited by an ugly old woman with a three year old child on her back. The hag said she had no metal to give, but if the man wanted to he could take the boy away as her contribution. The official believed he was dealing with a madwoman and went on his way, but he mentioned the incident later and it soon became known in Seoul .

Once all the necessary metal had been collected, it was melted down and the bell was cast but, as it cooled, it cracked.

The operation was repeated, but the bell cracked again. In short, there was no way the bell could be successfully cast and Tai Giò, when he realized this, promised a lavish prize to anyone who could solve the problem. One of the workers at the foundry went to the King and told him that in his humble opinion the melting and casting would never be successful until they accepted the offer made by the ugly old woman, who was undoubtedly a witch. The King did not stop to think it over - that was obviously the answer and it was strange that nobody had thought of it before. He sent for the child at once and had him thrown alive into the red-hot mass of molten metal: as was to be expected, the operation was successful this time and the bell was cast. But the victim's voice was not silenced and every time the deep, solemn sound of the bell is heard across the city, the people believe they recognize the cry of the poor child repeating in long cadences: *Ah mey la, ah mey la*: it's mommy's fault! it's mommy's fault!

Very close to the Great Bell, which goes by the name of *In Giun*, that is " the man decides himself, " meaning that when he hears it the man decides to go to bed, we find another of Seoul's sights, the so-called *Marble Pagoda*, the oldest and most remarkable of the city's monuments. A Korean writer recounts that in the middle years of the Korai dynasty, the dynasty that preceded the current one, King Ciun Su Yang married the only daughter of Sai Ciò, one of the rulers of the Mongolian Yuen dynasty which overthrew the Sung dynasty around 1269 and ruled China until 1368. It now seems that it was this Sai Ciò who sent the Pagoda as a gift to his daughter. In short, this monument is believed to be approximately seven centuries old. During the Japanese invasion which Korea endured from 1592 to 1598, it seems that the invaders decided to carry the pagoda off to Japan and actually removed the top three floors and the tip. However, when they found that the stone blocks were too heavy to transport overland, they tried to destroy the pagoda by lighting a large fire all round it. But that did not work either; the flames only succeeded in blackening the monument, which is still a dark colour today.

In the same enclosure where the marble Pagoda stands, there is a large memorial stone resting on a turtle-shaped base. This monument, of no historical importance, was erected in honor of a certain Wun Gak Sa by Kim Su On, a member of King Se Giò's court, about the year 1470. Like the Pagoda it is also, albeit very indirectly, of Buddhist origin, since, as recorded in the *Yö-gi Seng-nam*, an authoritative Korean work written in 1478 by order of King Seng Giong, Kim Su On, when he had it built, had been driven out by the College of Confucius for his ill-concealed Buddhist sympathies.

These are the only monuments which recall the existence of the Buddhist religion in the city of Seoul. Outside the walls there are still several Buddhist vestiges - temples, shrines, monasteries - which include the so-called "white Buddha", although this is only very indirectly connected to Buddhism.

Leaving Seoul by the small Gate of the Master, and continuing past the hills that surround the northern side of the city, you come to a narrow, arid valley. It would be difficult to imagine a drearier, more desolate place: not a blade of grass, not a sign of life, nothing but lumps of bare and barren rock, a silent moonscape enlivened only by a small stream running through the middle. On the bank of this stream stands a small pavilion, under which, on a rock outcrop, a large white figure of a woman is carved.

The Europeans, who see a Buddha in every Eastern sculpture, christened this memorial   "the white Buddha". In reality it does not depict a Buddha at all,  but only the white figure of a poor woman, who lived a long time ago, an unhappy victim of the Korean peninsula's worst mother-in-law.

 The legend goes like this: “At the time of King Myeng Yiong, there lived in Seoul a great personage by the name of Kim Su Dong, as wise as he was handsome. Misfortune struck on his wedding day: when his bride removed her face paint, he found himself looking at the ugliest woman that a man could imagine in his worst nightmare. Not only were her features contorted, irregular and clearly contrary to the accepted canons of Korean beauty, but her face was all pitted with the signs of smallpox, her eyes were large and perfectly horizontal - in a word, a horrible sight. The poor fellow, it must be said to his credit, made no complaint and was ready to endure his great misfortune with resignation - an attitude indicated by his wisdom and ....the prospect of a second wife. But his mother, her old mother-in-law, took a very different view: when she saw the little monster in front of her, she became a viper. The son tried in vain to make excuses for the poor girl, pointing out that after all it was not her fault that she was so ugly, but the old woman would not listen; instead, she spent every day thinking up new ways to make life unbearable for her son's wretched wife. Things went on like this for a couple of years, until poor Ha-su, Sea Water as she was called, gave birth to a son. The infant may have looked too much like his mother, and the old tyrant, taking advantage of Kim Su Dong's temporary absence, chased her and her little boy out of the house.

" Ha-su, who until then had endured everything patiently, was driven to despair by this new and greater injustice, and retired to a distant cottage where she decided to let herself die of starvation. Before she died, she found a way to send this message to her husband*: "I am dying, and I ask you as a last and extreme favor to bury me near some torrent, so that its cool waters passing by my body will calm the fever of my spirit. "*

“ Kim Su Dong paid no attention to this request and instead buried Ha-su's body on the side of a hill, as custom required. But after a few days his wife's spirit appeared to Kim and reproached him for not complying with her request. He pointed out that it would have been real madness to do so because, as everyone knew, if you bury your own dead by the bank of a stream, you run the risk that water might penetrate the grave, and then the least that can happen is the immediate death of all your relatives. But the spirit was so insistent that Kim decided to turn to the King and ask him for permission to depart from national custom. The King, informed of the whole affair, gave his permission, and Kim buried his wife by the stream that passes near the gate called Hong-wha, and had her likeness carved on the rock there."

From then on the place was called Ha-su, after the poor victim. When people no longer remembered its history it came to be regarded as sacred. Passers-by used to leave rice offerings for luck. One day, some Buddhist monks settled near the white figure, reconfirmed its sacred character ... and ate the rice. To compensate, they gave it a more imposing name, and it is now called Ha-su Kuang-han, or "Pavilion of the Peace of Sea Water".

When you have seen the Great Bell, the Marble Pagoda, the Turtle and the White Buddha, you have seen all the sights of Seoul except for the Imperial Palaces. These are numberless, since it is traditional for any house used by a sovereign, if only for a stay of a few hours, to be purchased immediately by the government and given the pompous name of imperial palace.

On the subject of imperial palaces, I recall an anecdote from my consular days. Discussions were in progress in Seoul between the representatives of the foreign Powers and the Korean government on the eternal question of the right, enshrined in the treaties, of all foreigners to own property in the capital. The Korean government was endeavouring by all possible means to restrict this right. We were all invited to a conference at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the matter further. The Minister of the Interior also attended the conference. When the meeting had been opened, he delivered a speech which our interpreters translated word for word. He began his speech by declaring*: "In all the countries of the world a special respect is shown for the buildings that are or were the residence of the sovereign"* and he went on to ask us to approve the proposal he was submitting, that foreigners should not be allowed to own land or houses within a radius of 700 metres from all the so-called imperial palaces. This demand was indeed excessive, but everyone knows that each country has its own special customs, which must be respected as far as possible. We were already thinking that we would accept the proposal in principle, but with a significant reduction in the permissible distance, to 400 metres for instance instead of 700 metres, when one of us produced a plan of Seoul and we were all astonished to find that circles with a radius of only 300 metres drawn round each of the innumerable "imperial" buildings would cover the entire area of the city, even extending beyond the walls in several places. When we exclaimed, naturally enough*, "But then there is no free space left for us!",* the good Minister looked at us with the most naive air in the world and said gently: *"But that is exactly what we want!".*

To come back to the palaces, there are only four which truly deserve the name. The two oldest, known respectively as the Old Palace and the New Palace, are both situated in the northern part of the city. The so-called Old Palace was built about a century after the one known as the New Palace. Neither is currently inhabited by the Emperor, who instead lives with his Court in an unimposing residence known as the Ciong Dong Palace, which he had built shortly after his famous escape to the Russian Legation. The fourth is the so-called Mulberry Palace, now completely in ruins, to which numerous popular legends are linked.

The New Palace, better known to foreigners as *The Summer Palace,*was built by Tai Giò on the advice of his assistant Ciung Ta Ciaug despite the opinion of Mu Ah, who predicted that, if it was built, great calamities would befall the country within the next two hundred years. Its Korean name, taken from the seventeenth book of the Classic of Poetry, is *Kyung Pok Kung*, “Palace of the Blessed View”. The great gate giving access to the palace from Ministry Street, *Kang-wha Mun*, the Kang-wha Gate, with its three high entrance arches, is deservedly famous throughout Korea. Guarding the gate are two large monsters, half lion, half dog, fantastic beasts from Korean mythology. They sit threateningly on their stone pedestals on both sides of the approach. They are there specifically to keep the God of Fire away from the Palace - that God of Fire who resides so near Seoul on Mount Kuan-ak (an old volcano?) and whose path across Seoul, as all geomancers are well aware, passes over the great South Gate near the Summer Palace. For the great South Gate, the Koreans provided for its defence by building a small lake nearby, and the Government takes care never to let it dry up: water of any kind has the same effect on the God of Fire as holy water has on the devil, and if, by chance, the deity should one day desire to descend from its mountain, on approaching Seoul it would be immediately repulsed by the mere presence of this lake, placed exactly on the path it would follow. To ensure that, if it found another way of entering the city,  it would not damage the Imperial Palace, these two wild beasts, Ha-i'a, were placed at the Palace gate so that the deity, fearing the beasts, would keep out.

Passing through the Kang-wha Gate, you find yourself in a large courtyard containing two rows of small pavilions, which housed the sovereign's military guard when the kings of Korea resided here. You then pass through a series of doors, arches and untended gardens to reach the great Audience Pavilion, Keun-gieng-ciun, the most renowned building in all Korea, and without any doubt its most remarkable architectural work.

 The Emperor used to receive his subjects here, and a similar pavilion was recently built in Ciong Dong Palace, where only Koreans are granted an audience. Another pavilion copied from this one can be found in the grounds of the Eastern Palace.

This building, which with its vast size and elegant lines is both imposing and harmonious, rests entirely on a double base of white marble; a wide staircase, also of marble, leads up to it, flanked by numerous small pillars carved in strange shapes, depicting dragons twisted in fantastic coils, legendary animals, or other similar motifs typical of oriental decoration. Today grass and weeds grow unchecked between the steps, around the pillars, and all around the pavilion; most of the carved friezes have fallen into disrepair, the bright colors that once decorated the exterior of the pavilion have blackened with the destructive passage of time, and the original gilding has almost completely disappeared. The place has acquired an air of antiquity and an age-old stillness which seems to exude an aura of peace and repose.

Inside the pavilion, the passage of time has done less damage than outside: the huge room which fills it entirely is still a grandiose and evocative sight. Of all the monuments preserved today in Seoul, it is the only one that produces an impression of grandeur and reveals how very much better the circumstances of the unhappy Korean Court used to be.

In the middle of one of the long walls of the hall the imperial throne sits on a kind of raised dais, finely worked in red lacquer and gold. Three flights of five steps, one in the center and the others on either side, lead up to it. The floor of the dais, where the sovereign sat, is covered with the very finest mats, examples of wonderful workmanship, which only the renowned craftsmen of the island of Kang-wha can produce. Immediately behind the throne is a massive screen in gold lacquer, worked in squares, each of which bears the emblematic royal dragon - a dragon with seven claws, for only the Son of Heaven is allowed to use the dragon with five claws, and ordinary decorative dragons only have four. Further back, leaning against the wall, an enormous decorative panel depicting the sun and the moon, blue sky and green earth, snow-covered mountains and clear alpine waterfalls, symbolises the beautiful land of Ciu-sen.

Above the platform, between two massive columns lacquered in red, there is a canopy of openwork wood, lacquered in red and gold and attractively decorated in white and blue. Altogether this throne closely resembles the architecture of the minbar of Islamic mosques, and in fact many of those to whom I showed the photograph reproduced here mistook it for one of those Muslim pulpits.

The ceiling is just as attractive as the throne, but because it is difficult to photograph, and its multiple colours are impossible to reproduce, the accompanying illustrations do not do it justice.

Near the great Audience Pavilion, another of the most beautiful features of this ancient palace is to be found, the Lotus Lake. It is best seen in spring, when the lotuses are in bloom and the water is hidden under a floating carpet of flowers, some red as the blood of a wound, others white as mountain snows, all solemn on their rigid stems that rise from the center of the very large leaves - at this time of year the lake is a most delightful sight.

The so-called Eastern Palace, Tong-kuan Te-kuel, very similar on the whole to the Summer Palace, consists in reality of two very old palaces, the western one, *Ciang-duk-kung,* built by Tai Giò himself, and the eastern one, built by Seng Giong. The Eastern Palace is in an even worse state of neglect than the Summer Palace and the visitor cannot fail to be dismayed by the sight of its rapid decay.

The third palace, noteworthy above all because of the curious legends attached to it, is *Kyeng-hei'kung,* today almost completely destroyed; only a few pavilions are still standing within the vast enclosure. Mulberry trees were planted in its grounds some years ago, and it has come to be called the *Mulberry Palace* by Europeans. Legend has it that about seven hundred years ago, when the land now occupied by Seoul was simply an empty space in Hang-yang prefecture, Kong Min An had chosen the place where the Mulberry Palace now stands as the site of a future palace. Later, when Tai Giò moved to Hang-yang to look for a suitable site for his capital, he stopped at a place about ten li from the Palace's current location. He had almost made up his mind to choose it when a large stone table suddenly arose from the ground, on which it was written that it was not a suitable spot, and that Tai Giò should go on for another ten li. Tai Giò hastened to follow this mysterious advice and went on until he reached the place where the Mulberry Palace now stands. He would have adopted it there and then, but his adviser, Ciung Ta Ciang, a man highly versed in the mysteries of *Eum Yang*, immediately found that the place was subject to various evil influences and therefore not suitable. Although the new king's other adviser, Mu Ah, disagreed, foreseeing a very great misfortune (within the next two hundred years) if the palace were to be built elsewhere, Ciung Ta Ciang managed to convince Tai Giò to build his residence at the foot of Mount Pu Han. And Mu Ah's prophecy was not long in coming true, as before the end of the two hundred years the notorious Japanese invasion occurred, when Korea was ravaged by fire and sword.

A later king, remembering the earlier prophecy, and troubled by reports that the Summer Palace was inhabited by numerous evil spirits, ordered a study to ascertain the exact location of the site which Mu Ah had recommended, and built the current Mulberry Palace on it. When the building was finished, its name, as required by Eastern tradition, had to be inscribed on the main entrance. The choice of name, and the manner of its inscription, had to follow all the rules laid down in the old books of occult science.

A well-known scholar, An Suk Pung, was invited to perform this task. After fasting for a hundred days - days spent in meditation - he wrote the three characters *Kung Wha Mun*on the main gate of the palace, that is, the *Gate of Renewed Youth*; and no sooner had he finished his task than his right arm swelled so that he was unable to write anything for the rest of his life.

An even bigger surprise was in store: as soon as the inscription was unveiled, the moon stopped shining, but the road continued to be lit up by a mysterious light coming from the three characters on the gate. Greatly amazed by this supernatural apparition, the King called that road *Ya Quai*, the Way of Resplendent Light.

 This light continued to shine for a long time, until the Manchus descended on Korea. Attacking the palace, they launched a projectile which stuck in the upper part of the ideogram \ Vha of the inscription and the light went out forever. The hole made by that bullet is still visible.

The King, however, did not stay much longer in the new palace. As soon as he believed the evil spirits had departed, he returned to the Summer Palace.

 Only one other sovereign inhabited the Mulberry Palace, but he was not a member of the royal house of Ciu-sen - the well-known Yi Kual, nicknamed the Three Day King by Koreans.

From birth Yi Kual had special lines imprinted on the palm of his hand, in which the Chinese ideogram three 三 could easily be recognized. One day he conceived the idea of ​​adding another line to this ideogram, so that it would form the word for king; he cut his hand, with the idea that the wound, once healed, would complete the character. The blood gushed out abundantly. Pressing his hand against the wall to stop it bleeding, he was astonished to see that he could distinctly read the three characters  三日王, Three Days King, in the red handprint on the wallpaper.

From that day on he was ruled by his imagination and his ambition. He went to Pyeng-yanz, gathered a company of courageous young men, trained them well, collected weapons and marched on Seoul.

The terrified King took refuge on Nam Han, and Yi, who proclaimed himself King, went to live in the Mulberry Palace, where he actually reigned for three days before the royal troops dispersed his followers, and he was beheaded.