TRADITIONAL ORDER AND MODERN DISORDER Translated by Jeffrey M. Russell

*The ancient Statutes – The official hierarchy - Badges of rank - Privileges of officials -*

 *Reforms on paper - Lady Om and her story - The sorcerers*

The kings of Korea, like those of Ko-ryu and the Three Kingdoms, were always absolute kings in the most Asian sense of the term.

The word of the King was tantamount to an order, and the possessions, the very life of the people were entirely in the hands of the sovereign. Here as elsewhere, however, the external influences of the courtiers, of the favorites and of anyone who happened to have won the royal favor were profoundly felt, and the decisions of the head of state usually ended up being no more than the result of those same influences. The history of Korea is, indeed, a whole story of court intrigues, conspiracies and arrogance; even if, as we saw in the beginning, there were some kings who tried to have the well-being of the people as the only guide to their actions, the great majority of them, it should be said, were no more than puppets in the hands of their astute courtiers.

To complete this weak monarchical structure around the person of the King, there existed, before the reforms, a whole series of officials who were organized, from the earliest times of the current dynasty, on the lines of the model used in the Middle Empire under the domination of the Ming. These officials were divided into nine hierarchical grades, each divided into two classes, and the grade and class of each individual office was determined very precisely by ancient laws or customs established in the "Six Basic Statutes."

Using the notation introduced by Wilkinson, where a number indicates an official’s grade and a letter (a or b depending on the case) the class to which he belongs, so that 3b would mean an official in the second class of the third grade, I shall now give a succinct outline of the traditional organization of Korea.

At the head of this privileged body of servants of the state, alongside the sovereign, there were first of all the "Three Dukes," *Sam Kong*, individually called the Prime Minister, the Right Hand Minister and the Left Hand Minister, all officials of the 1st degree, who alone constituted the Cabinet, *Eui-cyeng-pu*. They were not placed at the head of a special department, but essentially fulfilled the office of advisers to the King. The administrative work was instead entrusted to the care of six large departments, known by the name of Tribunals (*Ciò)*: they were the *Tribunals of Civil Offices*, of *Taxes*, of *Ceremonies* *and Rites*, of *War,* of *Penalties* and of *Public Works*. After the opening of Korea to international trade with the signing of the first treaties, two other departments had to be created, those of the *Interior* and of *Foreign Affairs*. The heads of these ministries were all Grade 2a officials with the title of President, *Pan-sye*, and each had a Vice-President, *Ciam-pan*, of grade 2b under them.

To complete the enumeration of the high metropolitan dignitaries, we should mention the Governor of Seoul, *Pan-yun*, a grade 2a official, head of the Prefecture of Seoul, *Han-syeng-pu,* - who oversaw housing, traffic, markets and in general all the municipal services of the city and the surrounding four hills – and the President of the Correctional Court, *Ei-kem-pu*, an official of the first grade, 1b, who was responsible for judging the faults committed by the senior officials, and who was hierarchically inferior only to the three great Cabinet Ministers.

Turning to the provincial administration, it is useful to remember that before the reforms the peninsula was divided into 8 provinces, or *Do*, each of which was in turn divided into cities, departments, districts and villages, respectively known as *ciù, pu, kun* and *hyen*. At the head of each province was a Governor General, *Kam-sa*, a grade 2b official, assisted in his duties by a Secretary of Civil Affairs, *Te-sa*, and a Military Secretary, *Cyung-kun*. At the head of each city was a prefect or pastor, *Mok-sa*, 3a, with the exception of Pyen-yang, Ham-heung and Cìen-down, whose respective prefects, with the title of *Pu-yun*, were the governors of the provinces of Pyeng-an Do, Ham-kyeng Do and Cìul-la Do.

The *pu, kun* and *hyen* were respectively governed by *Pu-sa*, 3b, "Departmental Magistrates with full powers," *Kun-syu*, 4b, "Custodians", and *Hyen-nyeg*, 5b, "District Magistrates."

Particular privileges were granted to the different grades and special rules governed the ceremonial to be observed for them, such as the styles of dress which distinguished one grade from the other. These outward signs of rank consisted essentially in the use of special headdresses, buttons behind the ears on the frontal band, and finally of embroidery on the chest and on the back. The main difference, one of the few still remaining, was in the buttons: officials of the 1st grade, 1a and 1b, wore, as they still wear, *smooth jade* buttons; those in grade 2a wore *smooth gold* buttons; those in grade 2b, buttons of *worked gold*; those in grade 3a, buttons of *worked jade*; for the following grades there were no special buttons – the horn buttons which everyone could wear were used. The embroideries on the chest or on the back represented a *peacock* for the 1st grade, a *wild goose* for the 2nd and a *silver pheasant* for the 3rd; officials in the lower grades were not entitled to any such ornament. There was, moreover, a distinction in this regard between civil and military officials: the embroidered designs for military officials of the first and second grades represented a *tiger* and for those of the 3rd grade *a bear*. As for the headdresses, the difference consisted in this, that while only *yang-ban* (noblemen) could wear the tiara hat (*koan)*, the butterfly hat (*mo*) and the Phrygian hat (*tang-ken*) being common to all classes of officials, the former for Court dress and the latter for use indoors, the beads of the ordinary hat (*kat*) could only be of pure amber when worn by officials of the first two grades and of the upper class of the third grade, 3*a*. These officials were collectively known as *tang-syang*.

Regarding Court dress, *tap-ho*, which I have briefly described elsewhere, I will limit myself here to saying that it was of violet silk for officials of the first grade, of dark green silk for those of the second and third grades, and of black cloth for all the others. In addition to this costume, there was what was called *tai-rye-pok*, the "grand gala uniform," used only for the most solemn ceremonies, such as attending the annual sacrifices of the sovereign at the Temple of Heaven and the Temple of the Spirit of the Earth. This uniform consisted of several silk robes of different colors that overlapped the ordinary dress, held tightly to the waist by a silk belt, from which hung a long rectangle of embroidered material, called *syu*, on the back. The embroidered design varied according to the official’s grade, representing a *stork* for the first two grades, a *sea eagle* for the third, a *magpie* for the next three and a *mandarin duck* for the last three. On top of these clothes was the rigid belt already mentioned in the earlier chapter on the Imperial Court: the belt was worked in *rhinoceros horn* for the first grade, in *gold* for the second, in *silver* for the third and in *common horn* for all the others. With the grand ceremonial uniform, the most curious of all Korean headdresses was used, a kind of gilded cardboard crown, held down at the back by some wooden pins which were also gilded. The number of these pins indicated the official’s grade: there were five of them for officials of the first grade, four for officials of the second grade, three for officials of the third grade, two for those of the fourth, fifth and sixth grades, and just one for the last three grades.

On certain special occasions involving royal processions, a curious headdress (*pit-kat*) was still worn by Korean officials: similar in form to the ordinary *kat*, it was red instead of black, and was decorated at the front and on both sides with three feathers of tiger moustache fixed to the head by a cord of pure amber, or amber mixed with coral, depending on the official’s grade. A large blue silk overcoat with fluttering sleeves was worn with this hat, and the combination of the two was called *yung-pok*, or "martial dress".

On the subject of official privileges, it should be noted that all classes of officials considered it beneath their dignity to be seen walking on the streets. As a result they never appeared in public except in a sedan chair or on horseback. In the latter case, the horse was invariably kept at walking pace and two servants held the dignified rider by the legs, one on the right and the other on the left, so that he would not have to go to the trouble of thinking for himself how to keep his balance.

The sedans used were also of different kinds, depending on the official’s rank. Thus the use of the *pyen-kye-cià*, a low covered sedan chair, generally more comfortable than the others, was reserved for officials of the first grade, or as a special favor for very old and infirm officials in other grades. The curious *cio-hen*, "mono-cycle sedan," raised about a meter and a half above the ground over which it rolled by means of a single large wheel, while a certain number of servants kept the whole machine in balance, was reserved for officials of the first two grades; use of the *sa-in-nam-ye*, a small, low chair covered with a tiger skin and carried by four porters, was the exclusive privilege of officials belonging to the first two grades. There were many more differences – certain officials could not have more than so many porters for their sedan, others were not allowed to use side windows, and so on.

If by chance it was necessary for an official to walk a few steps - this normally happened every time an official had to go to the palace, where only the Chinese Resident and the three great Ministers of State were permitted to enter in a sedan chair -, then two servants supported him under the armpits and almost dragged him inside, so that he avoided the physical fatigue of walking, which would have been singularly degrading.

The great state exams, which I shall discuss in a special chapter, were held periodically and officially opened the way to all these privileges, since careers in the Korean civil service were reserved for the successful candidates. In practice the sale of offices was the system most generally followed, and the one that, from the Korean point of view, brought greater benefits to the public treasury. Offices were sold through the intervention of some official or influential person in the Department of the Royal Household, whose power was always immeasurable; but it would be more accurate to say that offices were rented out, as the newly appointed official was sure not to remain in his post more than two or three years, after which the desire for new income led them to appoint another person ready to pay in his turn.

It is superfluous to insist on the abuses that such a system generated, and it is painful to observe that it is still openly practiced and, I would say, to an even greater extent since the abolition of the State exams which, if nothing else, could bring some element of honesty to the administration.

Today there should be nothing left of the old state of affairs: although the Emperor has not yet granted a constitution to his subjects, he has nonetheless given a solemn oath before the whole nation to observe certain rules of government which should restrict his powers and lay down the broad outlines of a more civilian order.

Today Korea has a fine cabinet made up of nine Ministers/Secretaries of State, *Tai-sin*, headed by a Prime Minister, *Eui-giong*. Each minister has his own undersecretary and his own cabinet; each ministry is divided into multiple directorates-general, divisions and inspectorates, whose duties are well defined by specific laws and regulations published in the "Official Gazette of the Empire" and which were mostly the work of the famous Legislative Assembly. The meeting of all these ministers constitutes the so-called Council of State, *Ciong-pu*. The Prime Minister, President of the Council, has no portfolio, and the other Ministers, each of whom has a Deputy Minister under him, *Hyap-pa*, are respectively head of the following departments: Interior (*Nai-pu*), Foreign Affairs (*Oi-pu*), Finance *(Tak-ci-pu*), War (*Kun-pu*). Education (*Hak-pu*), Justice (*Pop-pu*), Agriculture and Commerce (*Nong-sang-kong-pu*), and the Imperial Household (*Kun-de-pu*).

The number of officials employed by each Ministry is generally very large.

They are divided into three broad categories or distinct ranks with the names of *Cik-im* (first rank), *Ciu-im* (second rank) and *Pan-im* (third rank), depending on whether they are appointed by imperial decree, by decision of the Council of Ministers or by simple ministerial decree. Each of these categories is then divided into various classes: there are four for the first rank, six for the second and eight for the third, making a total of eighteen grades in the Korean hierarchy.

In addition to the ministries proper, there are also various autonomous directorates headed by officials who have the same rank as ministers: thus there is the Director of the Police, *Kieng-mu-ciong*, the Director of the Communications Office (Post and Telegraphs), *Tong-pan*, the Director-General of the Railways, *Cial-to-uon*, the President of the Health Office , *Knan-ce-uon-cia*, etc. etc.

I note that there is even a General Commissioner for Emigration and a Central Office of Weights and Measures; this shows that no branch of the State service was overlooked by those busy legislators.

But what can we conclude from this magnificent organization on paper? The conclusion is that Korea believed it could throw overboard its ancient customs, its traditions, its age-old arrangements and its national spirit, on an order from the sovereign, and that following the same method it was possible from one day to the next to adopt new arrangements and new customs, completely unrelated to the nature of the people, to their way of thinking, to their psychology - arrangements and customs which had been developed among other peoples over a long period of time. It was not long before the country realized it had made a mistake. Before, there was a government, corrupt, blemished, barbarian, perhaps, but national, understood and endured by the people: today there is nothing, only complete anarchy.

The will of the sovereign is in the hands of concubines, eunuchs, courtiers and sorcerers. Ministers are the laughing stock of their parties and their clients. The parties, unconsciously, obey orders from abroad; and some believe perhaps that they are working for the good of their country, while in reality they are only hastening its ruin. And the people? The poor people sweat, work, pay taxes and starve.

The influence which the so-called Department of the Imperial Household has on affairs is truly enormous. In times gone by, the person who directed all this gang of courtesans was Queen Min: now, since the Japanese thought of sending her to a better world, her place has been taken by the famous Lady Om. I say famous, because, in one way or another, much has been said about her in the Western press.

There was a time when the sea snake was in fashion, and when a journalist in a good mood did not know how to whet his readers’ appetite, he served them up a good column of sea snake, nice and warm. But, alas, fashions come and go, and when the sea snake was no longer fashionable, its place was taken by the favorite of the Emperor of Korea, Lady Om, an American, it was said, a certain Miss Brown, the daughter of a missionary, etc. etc. The first time this news appeared, it was in the columns of an obscure little North American newspaper; the “scissors” - the editorial telegraph – got hold of it, and in a flash the news spread across the globe. By now it has already travelled around the world three times. Of course, whenever it arrives in Korea it provokes general indignation, and the poor *Korea Review*, in my time the only representative of the fourth estate in the peninsula, busily denies this fairy tale and anathematizes anyone who repeats it. Be that as it may, the American wife of the Emperor of Korea is now in the public domain and who knows how long it will take for this fantasy to become just another old wives’ tale, like the sea snake mentioned above, and for a new fantasy, perhaps even more outrageous, to take its place.

The whole misunderstanding arose from this most unfortunate title of Lady that the representatives of the powers in Seoul, and the western press in the Far East, got into the habit of attributing to the first concubine of the Emperor, the Korean Om. In a way they can be forgiven, for official Court etiquette in Korea does indeed attribute a special position to this lady, and the corresponding etiquette of the western Courts has no recognized title for people in the same position as Om. Since it would be disrespectful to refer to her simply as "the Om concubine," they were induced to give her the title of Lady, a title moreover in common use for the numerous concubines of the emperor of Japan. Hearing this European title it was only natural to imagine that whoever bore it must necessarily have been European, or at least American, and the legend spread throughout the world.

Let us now see who this lady Om really is. No different in this respect from their brothers in the West, the Koreans have their own legends concerning her. The dignified Mr. Yang, when he condescended to forget his literary reserve, used to tell me a few, and here, on the faith of that serious confidante of mine, is as much as I could learn about Ms. Om.

First of all, it is fitting to assume that she is old, having passed forty – a very advanced age for a Korean - and that she is proverbially ugly; accepting this assumption, it is deduced that the influence she exerts on her imperial consort must be entirely moral and that the passions of the senses have nothing to do with it. While still a young girl, when she was certainly not dreaming of climbing to such an exalted position, she entered the house of a Chinese merchant as a concubine, with whom she had a son. She then subsequently attracted the favours of various Korean gentlemen, until one of them, who was very influential at Court and with whom she had another son, managed to bring her in as a handmaid of the late Queen. Endowed with great intelligence and uncommon tenacity and moral strength, she was able, in this new environment, to attract not only the goodwill of the Queen but even the attention of the King himself. Now Queen Min was very jealous, and although Court protocol allowed for a significant number of royal concubines, she had no intention of letting her royal consort avail himself of the indulgent provisions of some long-dead legislator to grant his favours to other women than herself. So, as soon as she became aware of the relationship between the King and the damsel Om, a violent scene took place, and the poor girl had no choice but to escape. The King patiently endured the Queen's will and for some time no longer thought of Om. She for her part did the same, and after taking a new lover she had a third child, whom she would have liked to pass off as the son of the Emperor, but who soon died.

When the Queen died at the hands of the Japanese, the Om lady reappeared in the palace, in the humble position of a maid. But she watched and waited for the right moment to come forward. An opportunity was not slow to present itself. When the life of the sovereign himself was under threat from the Japanese, who kept the palace under guard, the King realized that the only way out open to him was to flee. The two ladies Om and Pak, assisted by Yi Yong Ik, prepared his escape to the Legation of Russia, and it is no wonder that the King, out of gratitude, immediately raised this intelligent instrument of his salvation to the singular dignity of royal concubine. Now the royal concubines were divided into several classes in Korea, and the highest of these, according to the ancient statutes, was ranked immediately below the corresponding class of the Chinese Court. Ms. Om rose swiftly through the entire hierarchy of the royal harem, and from the lowest grade of *Suk*-*uen* "chaste beauty (!)" soon reached the positions of *So-yong* "resplendent conduct," of *So-eui* "exemplary splendour" and *Kui-in* "noble lady," until she was elevated to the very highest rank of *Pi* "lover." But this was not enough for her ambition, and a party arose at the Court that called for her to be raised to the throne: they wanted her to take the place of the late Queen and be officially recognized as the legitimate consort of the sovereign. Meanwhile, she had had a son by the Emperor; when the lady Om was officially recognized as imperial concubine, this son had received the rank of prince of the blood, *Oang-cia Kun*. If his mother had been raised to the throne, the boy’s chances of being raised to the position of Crown Prince, *Oang-tai-cià Tien-ha*, would have been very great, particularly given the mental and physical weakness of the current heir. The Emperor, however, did not want to allow this situation to arise; not knowing how to refuse the lady Om's direct requests, or those which she had other people send him from all quarters, reminding him that there existed a higher rank at the Chinese Court than that of *Pi*, the Emperor has solved the problem by creating this new rank in Korea too, and promoting his favourite to the rank of *Oang Kui Pi* "private consort of the sovereign". And this is the position which the famous Lady Om currently occupies at the Korean Court.

This is the woman who keeps the unfortunate Korean monarch under her control. In the internal affairs of the palace she does and undoes everything as she pleases, but with her very lively intelligence she immediately understood that in that same palace she had to limit her sphere of action if she wanted to keep the position she had so laboriously conquered and perhaps - who knows? - rise to even greater heights. Consequently she has always taken care not to interfere in matters of foreign policy and questions concerning the relations of the Court with the representatives of the Powers. Even if she has exercised some influence in one way or another, it has never been apparent to the public.

Still, it would not be accurate to assert that Ms. Om's ascendancy over the Emperor's mind is unchallenged: besides the special position that Minister Yi Yong Ik, of whom I will say more shortly, was able to create for himself in imperial circles, she often has to deal with the enormous influence that sorcerers, soothsayers and necromancers of all kinds have on the imperial soul. When a soothsayer has expressed his opinion on any matter, there is nothing in the world that can persuade the Emperor to follow any other course than that. Upon the death of Queen Min, the Emperor gave her a great state funeral and her body was buried with solemn honours and huge expenditure (over half a million dollars) in a location not far from Seoul. It was enough that shortly afterwards a fortune teller led His Majesty to believe that the location might be harmful and the late Queen’s spirit uncomfortable in it, for the Emperor to order the body to be exhumed and the royal remains to be transported elsewhere, at the same enormous expense.

This influence of fortune tellers at Court is something that should always be kept in mind in diplomatic relations with the Korean Court. How many procedural delays, how many troubles of all sorts can be spared and removed with a simple word uttered in time by one of these sorcerers!