GAMES AND PASTIMES

*Stone-throwing contests during the First Moon – Tug-of-war - The kite season - The legend of the kite - The nyut - Card games - Dominoes - Chess - uì-ki.*

At certain times of the year special entertainments are customary. During the first fifteen days of the First Moon, a period which is generally one continuous holiday when all the offices and schools are closed, stone-throwing contests are all the rage in the capital.

These shows, which attract thousands and thousands of spectators, usually take place in a vast open space near the Great East Gate or on another site outside the West Gate near the Yong-whan-cin road. Two teams of young men armed with wooden sticks, each led by a chief half disguised as an ancient warrior, face each other and challenge the other to a battle. The fight always begins with each team hurling stones at the other. As soon as one of the teams shows signs of giving ground, the other rushes forward with sticks for the final victory, but most of the time the retreat is just a feint: no sooner have they advanced than their opponents start pelting them with stones again, forcing them to retreat in their turn. The show often lasts several hours and of course not infrequently a number of combatants end up badly hurt; there are even some fatalities. The spectators themselves are not always safe, as it happens quite often that a stone wildly thrown by an inexperienced combatant falls in the crowd and injures someone. In this respect, I remember an incident that occurred at one of these stone-throwing shows while I was in Seoul. An American who had come from the mines at Un-san to spend a few days in the capital, was watching one of them – they always attract Europeans, given the lack of distractions on offer in Seoul - when some stones fell near him. Whether he was afraid that he himself was the target of the combatants’ hostility, or it was just bravado, or he acted for some other reason, I could not say, but the fact is that that gentleman drew a revolver and began firing shots at the crowd - and one poor wretch was killed. The Koreans numbered several thousand, and no more than half a dozen Europeans were present. The first thought that occurred to everyone was that the angry mob would fall on them and slaughter them. And in truth, if ever such a thing can be justified, it was then. Fortunately, the Koreans showed the common sense which the American had lacked: there were shouts, protests, threats, but nothing more. The American was doubtless locked up in the United States Legation and, after due trial and conviction, sent back to America.

At one time stone-throwing contests used to take place regardless in any or all of the streets of the capital, but the government has now prudently restricted them to the two locations mentioned

above.

The origin of this barbaric spectacle goes back to a kind of mock combat which, at the time of the Ko-ryu dynasty, used to be held in the King's Palace for his personal entertainment; however, these fights aroused so much interest that they began to be imitated outside the palace grounds, and soon they were staged throughout the peninsula.

Now they are no longer in vogue except in Seoul. In the provinces their place has been taken by the game the English call tug-of-war and which is very popular with the crews of our warships – the sailors call it the "line game". An equal number of contestants hold on to the two ends of a rope, and each side tries to pull the other towards it. The winner is the side that manages to drag the rope over a certain pre-established mark (the line).

In the big provincial towns the contestants more often than not are people who have been specially chosen to represent the various districts of the town, but in the countryside what usually happens is that one village will challenge another to a tug-of-war. Before the agreed date, great celebrations take place in both villages, with banquets and speeches, while the champions of each village are chosen. When it is time for the contest to begin, a thick grass rope, about twenty centimetres in diameter, spliced at both ends with thinner strands for the contestants to hold on to, is brought to the pre-arranged site. People of all ages and conditions take part in the contest: you find a wretched coolie in rags next to a dapper *yang-ban* in immaculate silk garments, educated old men next to little urchins, and even women – most unusually for Korea - who rush to lend a hand to uphold the honour of their village. When one of the elders gives the signal, a great shout rises from the crowd, muscles tense and everyone pulls. Sometimes the struggle goes on for over an hour, with no discernible movement of the rope for a long time, so evenly matched are the two sides. When one of the two teams has managed to pull their opponents over the agreed point, the latter admit defeat and are obliged to offer food and drink to the winners in their village, receiving in return a steady stream of wisecracks and sarcastic remarks.

The first and second Moons are the kite season. Hundreds of them can be seen bobbing over the city, so high that they are almost out of sight. The Koreans’ kite-flying skills are truly remarkable, surpassed only perhaps by those of the Chinese, who are masters of the art. Everyone takes part in the fun, young and old, and anyone who is flying a kite is always surrounded by a crowd of onlookers who follow every move with great interest. The origin of the kite is also the subject of a legend, or rather legends, in Korea. According to one of these, at the time of the Ko-ryu dynasty, when the island of Quelpart was still a separate kingdom called *Tam-na*, and frightening stories were told about it and the Amazons who ruled it, the king of Ko-ryu decided to wage war on the island kingdom. However, he could find no ship that dared to brave the thousand dangers involved in landing on the rocky coast of that terrible island and bring the declaration of war to it. Faced with this difficulty, someone thought of building a kite, an object hitherto unknown, tying the declaration of war to it, and launching it from the Korean coast to fly over the island of Quelpart. The kite was to render equally valuable services during the war of conquest which was started in this way. The Amazons who governed the island had built a palisade of sharp stakes all around it as a defence against external attacks. The general who had been ordered by the king of Ko-ryu to direct operations was very nearly impaled on one of these stakes. After suffering one setback after another, it eventually occurred to him that a kite might afford the only means of penetrating the island’s defences. Choosing a point on the coast where the branches of a tree behind the palisade could be seen overhanging the fence, he launched his kite and manoeuvred it so that its line caught fast in the branches of the tree. Then, very slowly, using his hands and feet, he climbed along the wire until he reached the top of the tree, whence he fell unexpectedly upon a group of enemies, slaughtered them, and conquered the island.

For a long time now, the kite has ceased to render the Koreans such remarkable services, but for all that it is as popular as ever throughout the peninsula. Kite fights, where everyone tries to sever the opponent’s kite line with his own, are especially interesting. For this purpose, the lines are sprinkled with glass powder to make them sharp, and the contestants, who may be in opposite parts of the city, run towards each other until the lines of their kites meet, which itself is not a very easy thing to achieve. When the lines meet, the contestants, with sudden jerks, or skilful back and forth moves to evade the blows of their opponent, whom they cannot see and perhaps do not even know, fight a curious duel watched with ever-increasing interest by large crowds who gather in the streets, climb up on the roofs to get a better view and, *nil sub sole novi* – there is nothing new under the sun – place their bets on one or the other contestant to win.

Everyone should be aware that the Korean is a born gambler. A passion for gambling is perhaps the only one no Korean can restrain; it is indulged to such an extent that even the necessities of life are more often played for than bought. The desperately poor coolie who has earned the ten or fifteen cents that would allow him to buy just enough to satisfy his hunger, prefers to go to someone who sells food and drink and gamble all he has with him. Having chosen, for example, a portion of dried fish, or a cup of rice, or a carafe of wine, for a price of, let us say, five cents, he will agree with the vendor the terms of the bet: if he wins, he will only pay one cent, if he loses he will pay ten cents. Among the lower classes this is the most commonly used system of buying and selling. There are many different ways of playing, but the most usual consists of drawing from a bamboo cylinder one or two bamboo sticks, which have certain special Chinese characters printed on the bottom: the combination of the characters serves to decide who wins.

The game called *nyut*, cards, dominoes, chess and *uì-ki* are also very popular with all classes of society.

The game known as *nyut*, which is so to speak Korea’s national game, is very often played throughout the peninsula between the fifteenth day of the last moon and the fifteenth day of the first

moon. Broadly speaking it bears some resemblance to

A our “goose game”. On a sheet of paper twenty small

O small circles are arranged in the shape of a ring, and

O O another nine in two straight lines, one perpendicular,

O O O the other horizontal, inside the ring. The four points

O O O where these lines meet the circumference of the ring

O O (we will call them A,B,C and D) are of particular

B O O O EO O O O D importance in the game. Two, three or four players

O O sit around the sheet of paper (our board); they each

O O O have from one to four pawns, *mal*, the number being

O O O agreed beforehand. The players first place their pawns

O O near the little circle A, then one at a time they throw

O four small semi-cylindrical wooden sticks (*nyut*) in

C the air. Depending on how these pieces land, flat side

or semi-cylindrical side uppermost (the flat side is generally white and the rounded side black), the throw is worth a different number of points: one

white and three black scores 1, two white and two black scores 2, three white and one black scores 3, four whites scores 4 and four blacks scores 5. These different combinations are called respectively *lo*, *kai, kel, nyut* and *mo*. After each throw of the *nyut* the player moves one of his pawns forward one small circle if he has scored 1, two circles if he has scored 2, and so on. A player who scores a *nyut* or a *mo* (four whites or four blacks) gets another throw. The aim of the game is to move all one’s pawns round the whole circle; the first to do so wins. If a player’s pawn lands on a small circle occupied by one of an opponent’s pawns, that pawn is taken prisoner and sent back to the start; if however it lands on a little circle occupied by one of his own pawns, both pawns can be moved forward together from then on. A pawn that lands on B has to go back to A via the centre of the ring (E) and start again; likewise a pawn landing on C has to go back to A via E, but if a pawn lands on D it can continue round the ring to A.

A variant of *nyut* is the so-called "game of officials," *ciong-kyeng-to*, which is also widespread in China. One hundred and eight squares are drawn on a piece of paper, each of which bears the title of a Korean official. There are usually two players, who throw a small wooden prism, engraved on each of its sides with a number from one to five, to determine where they must place their pawn. Each square contains a written instruction which, depending on the number obtained from the subsequent throw of the prism, indicates in which square the pawn must be placed next. The winner, of course, is the player who reaches the topmost level of the hierarchy first.

Instead of the titles of officials, the names of the most celebrated localities of the peninsula can be written in the squares. The game is then called *nam-seung-to*, and the board has one hundred and forty four squares.

Korean cards, *tui-ciang*, are small strips of thick oiled paper about twenty centimetres long and one centimetre wide. Forty cards are used for the commonest games, comprising four equal series of ten cards, but sometimes there can be as many as eight series. The cards of each series, numbered from one to ten, are called *il* (1), *i* (2), *san* (3), *ssè* (4), *o* (5), *yuk* (6), *cil* (7), *pal* (8), *ku* (9), and *ciang* "general" (10). This last card is the only one that takes different forms in the various series.

The most common, and also the least interesting, game is the one called *yot-pang-mei*, which can be played by from three to nine players (*hè-ki-pè*). The game is played as follows: the players sit on the ground in a circle, and whoever proposed the game starts by dealing one card to each player. Everyone makes his own bet on this card, which the dealer immediately covers by placing an equivalent sum next to it. He then passes the cards to the nearest player, who shuffles them and hands them back to him, asking him to take two. The dealer looks at them, and if they suit him he keeps them, otherwise he can still take a third. He then takes back all the cards and, starting with any player, deals him a second card; if that player wants one, he too can have a third card. The dealer does the same with all the players. In the end, whoever has less points in his hand than the dealer has to pay, and whoever has more wins money. In this game 10 counts as zero and ten is subtracted from numbers higher than 10. If whoever deals (*mal-ciù*) has the combination *kué-mi* (two identical cards and an ace) he wins all, while if a player has the combination *sun* (three identical cards) he wins the bank even if these three cards are not three aces or three twos, etc.

A more interesting game is *ci-kú tengi*. A cup is placed in the middle of the players, and whoever is dealer places a bet in it, followed by all the other players who place an equal bet. The dealer then deals five cards to each player. Only those who can discard three of their cards (*ci-kú*), whose value is exactly ten or a multiple of ten (10, 20 or 30), may continue playing. Whoever has the most points with his two remaining cards wins the pool, unless someone has a pair of identical cards (*teng-i*), in which case he is the winner. If two players are tied, neither of them takes the pool, but the next hand is dealt, with all the players except the two just mentioned placing the same bets as before in the cup.

The rules for playing dominoes are the same as those for the *yot-pang-mei* card game, already mentioned. The value of each tile is shown by the number of red or black pips on its face. A variant of the game is *cyo-teng-i*, which is played by four people. Twelve tiles are removed from the stock. Each player is dealt five tiles face down, one of which he then turns up. If this tile is a 4 or an 8, he passes all his tiles to the player on his right, who passes *his* pile to the player on his right, and so on; if it is a 2 or a 10, he does the same, but to the player on his left; if it is a 1 or a 7, the piles are exchanged crosswise; and if it is a 5 or a 9, everyone keeps their own pile. The game then continues more or less as for the *ci-kú teng-i* card game.

The variety of chess, *ciang-ki*, played in Korea is regarded as a nobler game than the others and is especially popular with young middle-class Koreans; it is a variant of Chinese chess. The question of the relationship between Chinese and Western chess is much disputed. Although there are undoubtedly some similarities, there are many pronounced differences - but rather than dwell on a point which it is more prudent to leave aside, I shall restrict myself to a few words on the general set-up of the game. The Korean chessboard, like the Chinese one, has sixty-four squares of the same colour separated by parallel transverse and longitudinal lines, thirty-two at one end of the board and thirty-two at the other, separated by a row of eight squares forming what is known as the “river”. The pieces used are the following: *Ciang* (General), corresponding to our King; *Cia* (chariot), corresponding to the castle or rook; *Po* (cannon), which has no equivalent in our chess; *Pyeng* (soldier), corresponding to the pawn; *Sa* (counsellor), corresponding to the Queen; *Sant* (elephant), corresponding to the bishop, and *Ma* (horse – our knight). The initial position of the pieces in each field is as follows: Chariot (a1 and a9), Elephant (a2 and a8), Horse (a3 and a7), Counsellor (a4 and a6), Soldier (d1, d3, d5, d7 and d9), Cannon (c2 and c5), General (b5). They are placed, not as in Western chess in the middle of the squares, but, as can be seen from the illustration, on the intersections of the longitudinal and transverse lines. The pieces are not carved; they are small octagonal wooden discs, the names of which are engraved on their sides in red and green Chinese characters of different shapes.

The aim of the game is the same as in European chess and consists in checkmating (*cent-so*) the General, but the means of achieving this are very different. A player cannot, for example, check from one side of the chessboard to the other, but must cross the river with his own forces and check in the opponent's field. An exception is made when a player checkmates the opponent’s General with his own, which is possible if there is no other piece between the two Generals; but a player taking advantage of this situation is recognizing his own inferiority by doing so.

The *General* and his two *Counsellors* cannot move outside their Headquarters, which are established in the four central squares of each field. However, they can move along the diagonal lines that are drawn inside their Headquarters; as a result, there are only nine positions altogether that they can occupy, and they can only move one step at a time.

The *Chariots* have the same properties as our castles, but they can also move along the diagonal lines in the Headquarters of both fields.

The *Horses* also move in more or less the same way as our knights, but they must always start by moving one step forward or one step sideways before moving diagonally. They cannot jump over a piece which is in their path. Consequently it is very much easier to defend one’s General from being checkmated by the horse.

The *Elephants* move first one step forward, or one step sideways, and then two diagonally. At the beginning of the game the player who wishes can castle the horse with the elephant, either from one or both sides, and in this case it is advisable for the opponent to do the same (see the horse in a8 and the elephant in a7 in the illustration).

*Soldiers* may move forward as well as sideways one step at a time, but can never move backwards or follow a diagonal line other than one of those marked in the Headquarters.

*Cannons* are the most unfortunate pieces: they can move like our castles both sideways and straight ahead, but only when there is a third piece which is not itself a cannon acting as a shield between them and the piece they want to take.

Having briefly explained the moves of the various pieces, I must now draw attention to the two fundamental rules of Korean chess, namely that each piece can only move to take another piece and that within the limits of its powers, each piece can move along any of the lines drawn on the chessboard. Thus a *chariot* in a4 can be moved both to the centre of the Headquarters and to the opposite corner c6, as these points are connected by a line drawn on the board; likewise a *cannon* in the same point a4 can, if the centre b5 is occupied, go to c6 and take the piece positioned there. (Anyone looking for more information on the game of chess in Korea can turn to W.H.Wilkinson’s article on Korean Chess in the *Korean Repository* of March 1895, which is the source of my brief summary and which also contains an annotated example of a Korean game).

Although superior to the Chinese game, Korean chess clearly does not present the same difficulties as ours, nor the same scope for developing one's own skills. Nonetheless, on the whole it must be said that it does have a certain interest, and it is not as easy to play tactically as it might seem at first. However, unlike what happens in China, in Korea it is rare to see serious, well educated people, with their large spectacles blackened with smoke, or proud *yang-bans* in silk robes, gathered around a chessboard. They consider this game too frivolous; the only one they take seriously, and regard as altogether worthy of being played by their peers, is the noble *uì-ki* or *pa-duk*: the most boring and interminable game I have ever come across.

*Uì-ki* is played on a chequerboard containing 324 squares, drawn on a kind of sound-box. Inside the box a loose spring produces a faint sound like a distant bell every time a piece is placed on the board. The game is played with about 300 white and black discs made of bone, which are placed one by one on the intersections of the lines on the board, giving a total of 361 possible positions. The two players take turns to place one of the discs on the board, and the game consists in trying to surround as many of the opponent's discs as possible with one's own. Once surrounded, discs are removed and the spaces thus freed become the property of whichever player manages to surround them with his own discs. Once there are no more discs left, the player with the most free spaces to his credit is the winner. Explained like this the game seems very simple, or at least it does not seem to call for a great deal of skill. However, this cannot be the case, since in China, where the game originated, as well as in Japan and Korea, there are *uì-ki* teachers who are held in high regard – lovers of the game go to them to pass exams and obtain a diploma in one of the nine levels of skill which *uì-ki* enthusiasts can attain. According to Professor Chamberlain, one of the leading authorities on all matters pertaining to the Far East in general and Japan in particular, only one European, to his knowledge, has ever managed to obtain a diploma as an *uì-ki* player. For my part, while I admire that gentleman, I can understand perfectly well why the study of such a superlatively tedious game has failed to tempt anyone else.

Mr. Yang, among other accomplishments, was also an *uì-ki* teacher, or at least he possessed a very high-level diploma, and I will always remember the smile of compassion he spontaneously, unwittingly, bestowed on me, when I innocently asked him to teach me the game. Poor Mr. Yang! He was sure that I was not up to it, but he agreed with good grace. However, we soon had to give up. He was right: *uì-ki* was not my cup of tea.