THE REACTION Translated by Jeffrey M. Russell

*Agitation of the Tai Uen Kun - The uprisings of July 1882 - The odyssey of Japanese refugees – Japan’s demands - Exile of the Tai Uen Kun - Conspiracy of 84 - Iron and fire in the streets of Seoul - Chinese and Japanese in Korea - Li-Ito Agreement - Return of the Tai Uen Kun - Port Hamilton Incident - Tong-hak*

Treaties of friendship, trade and navigation between Korea and the western nations were thus signed in rapid succession, but such a radical change in the direction of government could not reasonably be expected to win popular support.

A people accustomed to so many centuries of isolation, in whom traditional policy had sought to inculcate the most blind hatred of everything foreign, and accustomed to thinking of ​​a foreigner as an enemy, naturally took exception to this influx of barbarians into its homeland, and looked on the agreements made by the Government with the various powers as something very similar to an act of high treason.

The reactionary party headed by the Tai Uen Kun could not remain passive. Ever since the signing of the treaty with Japan, it had tried to stir up the people against the King and the Government; and subsequently, while the terms of the treaty with the United States were being negotiated, a petition signed by a large number of influential people in the capital had been presented to the throne, requesting that no treaty be signed. The petition, as we have seen, had no effect; the treaty with the United States was duly signed and a steady stream of foreigners, especially Japanese, began to arrive in Seoul. But the Tai Uen Kun could not remain inactive: thousands of leaflets were distributed throughout the peninsula, informing the people that the barbarians of the west were invading their land, and that there were only two paths still open to Korea - either to accept war or try and avoid it by eliminating its causes. To do otherwise would mean selling one's country to the enemy, and so every good Korean should resort to arms. The reactionary party tried by every possible means to stir up the people, who in its profound ignorance necessarily believed these warnings that came incessantly from above.

Now it so happened that the harvests that year were very poor, the rains failed, and a fierce epidemic began to claim victims both in the capital and in the provinces. The Tai Uen Kun and his accomplices immediately took advantage of this, and, having won over the most prestigious soothsayers and sorcerers, made them declare to the people that these were the first and most natural consequences of the new state of affairs, the result of the fatal influence of the western barbarians and their worshippers, the Japanese, which threatened to ruin the offspring of the legendary Tan-gun, the good people of Ciu-sen.

And then, one fine day, on July 23 of that same year 1882, when the King went to the Temple of Heaven to pray for rain, a handful of conspirators attempted to capture him. The King however managed to escape by returning to his palace. The Queen, the target too of the Tai Uen Kun who saw in her the greatest obstacle to the realization of his plans, also managed to foil the schemes of her persecutors: helped by her women, she escaped to the provinces and disappeared, and everyone believed she had fallen victim to the conspiracy.

In the meantime, the rumor was spreading that the King had been attacked by the Japanese in his palace, that the city’s royal guard had been powerless to repel the assault and that it was the sacred duty of every good citizen to take up arms and rush to defend his sovereign. Over four thousand troublemakers responded to the call; spurred on by the emissaries of the Tai Uen Kun, they fell to roaming the streets of the capital, killing every Japanese person they came across, attacking and destroying the houses of all those ministers or public officials who they were told were partisans of the progressive policy, among whom were members of the Min family, relatives of the Queen.

The gang of rioters then headed towards the Japanese Legation, where the Minister Mr. Hanabusa, the staff of the Legation, various private citizens and a number of gendarmes, forty in all, had just heard of an imminent attack and were preparing their defense.

Arriving at the Legation gate, the Korean crowd dared not face the revolvers of the Japanese gendarmes who kept guard there. At first they restricted themselves to throwing stones at the guards, and then they set fire to some of the surrounding houses; helped by the strong wind which blew that day, the fire spread rapidly to the whole Legation, which was soon in flames.

The Japanese, with their minister at their head and sabres in hand, then rushed against the crowd of rioters and managed to break through them. First they went to the royal palace; finding the doors barred, they decided to make their way to Cemulpo. In torrential rain, they reached the river around midnight, but the boatmen refused to transport them to the other shore. They had to seize the boats by force, and it was by the greatest good fortune that, in the dark of night, and with no experience of the difficulties involved in navigating the river, they managed to reach the other shore safely. Without food and without rest, they walked all night and most of the following day, until around 3 pm, completely exhausted and undone, they arrived in Yen-ciuan [Incheon], the Korean city near the port of Cemulpo.

There the prefect received them kindly and gave them what they most needed, food and rest. The staff of the Legation and the Japanese officials were put up in the prefect’s *a-mun*, while the servants and gendarmes found accommodation in a house nearby.

  But the torments of that small handful of fugitives were not yet over. In the middle of the night the minister and his companions were awakened by a very loud noise, as several blood-stained Japanese rushed into the *a-mun*, hotly pursued by a crowd of Koreans, who had been joined by about forty soldiers armed with rifles.

In the blink of an eye the Japanese were out and taking a side road they managed to reach the port of Cemulpo where, as soon as they arrived, they crossed the water and sheltered on the island of Roze, which was uninhabited, and therefore safe from new pitfalls. Their number was reduced to 26.

After renting a junk, they abandoned themselves to the sea, and on the 26th, after spending more hours lost in the fog, they were picked up by the English warship *Flying Fish*, which transported them to Nagasaki, thus ending their terrible odyssey.

As soon as Japan heard what had happened to its representative in Seoul and its subjects in Korea, it straightway mobilized its fleet and gathered an army in Simonoseki. War would certainly have broken out if the Korean Government, powerless to resist, had not hastened to comply with Japan's demands.

While a Chinese squadron was stationed in the port of Cemulpo, it was Mr Hanabusa himself, with an armed escort, who brought the demands of his government to the Korean capital. These comprised: the arrest within twenty days of the perpetrators of the attack on the Legation and its staff; their immediate punishment, following a regular trial to be attended by representatives of the Japanese government; the payment of an allowance of 50,000 yen to the families of the victims; the payment of 500,000 yen as a war indemnity to Japan; permission for Japan to maintain a garrison of soldiers in Seoul to protect its Legation; the dispatch of an embassy to Japan to present the due apologies of the Korean government, and finally the grant of new commercial privileges.

Upon his arrival in Seoul, the Japanese minister found the Tai Uen Kun in charge of the situation. The leader of the reactionary party tried to explain away the attack on the Legation as an arbitrary move by soldiers demanding arrears from the Korean government, which had no control over them. He affected to dismiss the incident as unimportant and appeared disposed to accept Japan's demands.

However, as the days passed and a settlement of the dispute seemed more and more distant, Mr. Hanabusa suddenly left Seoul and returned to Cemulpo, where he boarded the vessel that had brought him to Korea. This unexpected move by the Japanese envoy made the Tai Uen Kun understand how futile his delaying tactics had been, and the demands of the Japanese government were immediately granted.

Meanwhile, the Chinese government, which observed this consolidation of the Japanese in Korea with misgivings, and considered the Tai Uen Kun to be the prime cause of all these events, found some false pretext to have him board a gunboat that was waiting in the port of Cemulpo, which then transported him to China, where he was banished to Pao-ting-fu. Subsequently, fearing that the events in Korea could provoke a decisive action by Japan, five thousand Chinese soldiers, under the leadership of Yuen Ci Kai and two other generals, were sent to Korea, and on 9 October they camped near Seoul, where a guard of about 700 Japanese soldiers had already arrived to protect their Legation.

As soon as her worst and deadliest enemy had left, the Queen, for whom solemn funeral rites had already been performed, returned to the scene of Korean politics. She began by removing from power all those who directly or indirectly could be held responsible for the events of July, but on considering that it was China which had removed theTai Uen Kun, she became from then on the most fervent partisan of Chinese influence in the peninsula.

Two years of relative calm passed, during which, under the skilful direction of Yuen Ci Kai, the Chinese Resident at the Court of Seoul, who received direct instructions from the astute viceroy of Ci-li, the famous Li Hung Ciang, it seemed that, despite the treaties that were being signed, and perhaps even because of them, China’s influence was increasing all the time.

Then came 1884, the year of the war with France. China’s whole attention and all her armed forces were then concentrated in Tonkin. A Chinese intervention in the affairs of the peninsula was considered to be very improbable, all the more so as it would entail a break in good relations with Japan; so there was a new uprising in Seoul. What actually were the causes of this new insurrection is very difficult to say: it has been suggested that it was organized by Japanese emissaries, who, being aware of the deep hostility which characterized the Korean people’s attitude to Japan, tried to mask their true aims by spreading the word that the Tai Uen Kun, through his supporters, was attempting a new uprising, in order to provoke a movement of revolt in the reform party. The fact is that this movement, which started with decidedly anti-Chinese tendencies, was soon to turn against the Japanese themselves; if they did gain any advantage from it, it was at the price of considerable sacrifices.

At the head of the conspiracy was Kim Ok Kiun, a Korean nobleman who had fled to Japan in 1875 and then returned to Korea in 1882. He was considered to be the head of the reformist party loyal to Japan, and the plan which he and his followers devised must have consisted first of all in removing the pro-China ministers and replacing them with the same number of members of the pro-Japan party, thus obliging the King to accept the programme of reforms which the new ministers would present to him.

To implement this plan, December 4 was chosen, the day scheduled for the solemn inauguration of the Seoul post office, then established under the direction of Hong Yong Sik, a member of the reform party.

On the premises of the new post office, a grand gala dinner took place that day, to which the new director had invited all the ministers, foreign envoys and other notables of the capital. During lunch, the slow peal of the bell announcing a fire rang out, and Min Yong Ik, Minister of State and a relative of the Queen, who was believed to be one of the most influential members of the pro-China party, came out promptly to ascertain where the fire was. He was treacherously attacked by an unknown person who with his sabre in his hand inflicted a deep wound to the minister’s head. Alarmed by the shouts of the servants who accompanied him, the other guests panicked and fled, while the dying Min Yong lk was carried back inside the post office.

Meanwhile, either before, during or after the incident (all three versions exist), the Japanese minister, accompanied by a company of 150 men of the Legation guard, presented himself at the Royal Palace, where Korean soldiers offered no resistance to his passage. Presenting himself to the King, he informed him that the city was in the throes of revolt and that he had come to take him under his protection. The leaders of the reformist party also rushed to the palace. Kim Ok Kiun. having seized the royal seal, sent orders in the name of the King to all ministers and other important figures of the opposing party to come to him immediately. Answering the summons, they had not even passed the gates of the palace when, to use Griffis' phrase, they were relieved of their heads. Eleven people were beheaded that night. A new cabinet led by Kim Ok Kiun was immediately formed and important edicts prepared the same night.

The following morning the Chinese imperial commissioner tried to get an audience with the King, but was refused. Then General Yuan, at the head of 1500 Chinese soldiers and over 3000 Koreans, launched an assault on the palace which the Japanese garrison was defending; after an hour of intense fighting they managed to enter the palace, but only after the Japanese, under the brilliant conduct of Captain Murakami, had opened a passage through the ranks of the attackers and regained the Japanese Legation, which the twenty or so soldiers on guard had managed with great difficulty to defend against the attacks of the Koreans. The presence of the Japanese in the Royal Palace immediately led the population of the capital to believe that the new coup d'état was the work of their centuries-old enemies, and on the morning of that day, December 6, the cry of “Death to the Japanese!” echoed through the streets of Seoul. For several hours the city was prey to the bloodiest confusion; the peaceful Koreans, transformed into beasts, were seen going through the various districts of the capital in search of the Japanese and their accomplices, setting fire, plundering and killing wherever they met them.

The King, protected by the Chinese, fled to their camp near the city. The members of the new Cabinet found a way to escape, while Hong Yong Sik, who had not wanted to abandon the King, was also taken to the Chinese camp, and beheaded.

Meanwhile, in the morning, the Japanese soldiers and citizens, organized in military formation under the direction of Captain Murakami, attacked from all sides and, pursued by the crowd of rioters, headed for Cemulpo. With admirable discipline and level-headedness, having overcome all sorts of difficulties, they arrived on the morning of the following day, and from there, by means of a Japanese steamer, which fortunately for them was in the port, they continued to Nagasaki. Two years later, this was the second adventurous journey that Mr. Hanabusa had had to make in almost identical conditions.

In Seoul, meanwhile, the old party had taken over. The perpetrators of the insurrectional movement of December 4 were immediately punished in an exemplary fashion: twelve were put to death in the course of the following days after suffering the most barbaric tortures; eleven others, sent to trial, after endless tortures, were beheaded, mutilated and quartered, and their remains thrown to the dogs on the streets of Seoul.

  Kim Ok Kiun and his main accomplices, who fled to Japan under Japanese escort, were declared rebels, and a reward placed on their heads. Of these rebels, only Kim Ok Kiun remained in Japan, protected by the authorities who refused a request from the Korean Cabinet to hand him over; the rest fled to America.

The government of the Mikado then asked for compensation from Korea for the massacre of Japanese subjects, and Count Inouye arrived in Seoul for this special mission accompanied by 2,500 soldiers. The Korean government agreed to send a new embassy to Japan to apologize for what had happened; it also agreed to make a compensatory payment of 130,000 yen to the families of the victims, and to rebuild the destroyed Legation at its own expense.

Count Ito was then sent to China to reach an agreement with the Chinese government on Korean affairs. The plenipotentiary of China was Viceroy Li Hung Ciang, and between the two a convention was concluded; it was signed in Tientsin on April 18, 1885. Known as the *Li-Ito agreement*, the convention stipulated that the two Governments of Japan and China agree to withdraw their troops from Korea simultaneously and refrain from sending their own military instructors to train Korean troops; in the event that new events led one or the other to believe that an armed intervention in the peninsula would be appropriate, the State which believed it had to intervene should not do so without first giving notice to the other and obtaining its consent. Subsequently a dispute arose about the observance of this convention; it was this dispute that officially caused the war of 1894-95.

On 21 May 1885, the Chinese and Japanese troops left the Korean capital to return to their respective countries.

In the autumn of the same year, the Tai Uen Kun returned to Korea, recalled by the district leaders of his party, who, after the latest events, had taken over the conduct of affairs.

It was feared at first for some time that this move was aimed at the dismissal of the King and his replacement by the Tai Uen Kun. However, although the latter missed no opportunity to regain his earlier ascendancy over his son and his former preeminence in the decisions of the Government, which he had lost forever to Queen Min since her entrance to the Court, Korea enjoyed several years of relative tranquility. It was not until 1894 that passions took over again, popular unrest led to violence and blood flowed once more on the streets.

In the meantime the only noteworthy events were the occupation and return of Port Hamilton by England and the agitation of the *Tong-hak*.

On 14 April 1885, without apparent cause, the British had raised their flag on the small group of islands of Port Hamilton, and the Koreans, on hearing of this, had immediately sent a mission to Port Hamilton to protest vigorously against this violation of their territory. Lord Curzon in his *Problems of the Far East*, already mentioned elsewhere, states that Russia was necessarily behind the events of 4 December and that there was a secret treaty between Russia and Korea, according to which Russia would support Korea's claims to the island of Tsu-shima and in return Korea would cede the islands of Port Hamilton to Russia: hence the British move to prevent the plan from being carried out. With all due respect to Lord Curzon's views, and without going into the merits of the second part of his explanations, I would point out that his book is the only one where Russia is mentioned in relation to the events of 4 December, and that I have never found the slightest trace of a similar supposition in any other written or verbal report of the same events.

This occupation, however, caused a lot of diplomatic trouble, and it was only after Russia had agreed to make a formal declaration that it would never attempt to annex any part of Korea’s territory, that the English flag was lowered from the islands.

It was also around this time that the *Tong-hak*, “the disciples of oriental science”, began a fresh series of protests which gave the Government cause for concern. They were the followers of a certain Ciò Gè U, who since the year 1859 had begun to preach, in the Kieng-giu district, Kìeng-song Do, a strange doctrine mixing Christian principles, Buddhist elements and Confucianist precepts, explained by the founder himself in his book *Sieng-yeng-dai-giong*. In his book Ciò tells how, seeing so many Catholic missionaries come from afar and suffer the most atrocious martyrdom for the propagation of their faith, he began to have serious doubts, thinking that there must be something good in this doctrine if its followers were prepared to make such hard sacrifices. Wracked by these doubts, he fell ill and no medicine in this world could cure him. When one day he was a prey to new pains, a mysterious being appeared to him and said to him: “Get up, o Ciò! Do you know who is speaking to you?” He was terrified, and answered “No, who are you?” – “I am San-gé, the Dominator of Heaven, adore me and you will have power over the people.” - He adored him and went on: “San-gé, Dominator of Heaven, I am in great doubt: is the Catholic religion the true religion?” – “No”, replied San-gé, “the letter is good, but the spirit is far from the truth,” and disappeared.

Ciò Gè U, seeing ink and brush next to him, began to inscribe a prayer on a piece of paper, swallowed it, and was suddenly healed. He understood then that he had been called to preach a new faith and immediately set about gathering converts.

The new religion took the name of *Tong-hak* (oriental science), as opposed to *Sie-hak* (western science), as Catholicism was called. The number of converts gradually increased, until in 1866, when the great persecution of Catholics took place, they were confused with them and a large number lost their lives during the massacres ordered by the Tai Uen Kun. Ciò Gè U himself was beheaded in Tai-ku and the new doctrine was banned.

However, it was not totally extinguished and the Tong-Hak sect continued to expand in the south of the peninsula, attracting all the most combative elements and the many discontents who were unhappy with the abuses of the Government of Seoul. So although this movement started as a religious one, it assumed a political and social character which was later, albeit indirectly, to lead to the great war of 1894 between China and Japan.

In March 1892 about forty Tong-Haks appeared in front of the Royal Palace of Seoul and sent a petition to the King calling for an end to foreign interference in the affairs of the peninsula. A few days later, in April, the King issued a number of decrees against them, and at the end of the same month the Tong-Haks began to create disturbances in the southern provinces.