

Mister Pang

by Ch'ae Man-shik
tr. by Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton

Host and visitor alike were growing quite tipsy. The host was Mister Pang, the visitor Paek Chusa, a man from his hometown.

Mister Pang was exultant as could be these days anyway, and now, the more tipsy he became, the more exuberant he felt, until the sky looked just like a single large banknote.

"I'm not bragging, no sir, but nothing can stop me now, nothing," Mr. Pang snorted. "No son of a bitch is going to find fault with me, no son of a bitch is going to look down on me, not now, not ever." Again he snorted. "No sir, no way."

You might have thought someone was actually there beside him, finding fault with him, looking down on him. For why else had his protruding eyeballs grown so animated? Why else had his nose, which bent a good thirty degrees to the left, kept twitching as he carried on?

"I may not look like much, no sir, but I'm Pang Sam-bok, and I've tasted everything the three kingdoms of the East have to offer. Don't I speak Chinese? Don't I speak Japanese? Not to mention English...."

Mister Pang rediscovered his glass of beer, hoisted it, gulped it down. Sweeping the back of his swarthy hand across his lips, taking a piece of kimchi between his fingers and plopping it into his gaping mouth—such had been this man Pang. Still these habits survived, whether you called him "Mister Pang," "Gentleman Pang," or simply "Sir," but now it was beer foam he wiped from his lips, and Chinese-style deep-fried chicken he picked and munched.

"When it comes to drinking, beer is the thing, yes sir."

If anyone were to provoke him just then, or look down on him, he was ready to seize the fellow on the spot and chew him out as if he were a piece of chicken. But suddenly his indignation disappeared in favor of a eulogy on beer.

"The Americans are civilized even when it comes to drinking. Us Chosn people have a long way to go."

"Indeed we do," echoed Paek Chusa, humoring his host as he refilled Pang's glass. Paek's mousy face with its sparse, brownish beard was tiny as a Chinese date seed.

"Drink up, Paek-san!"

"I've had more than enough, thank you."

"Listen to you! I know your capacity, Paek-san. Even though it's been a long time since we drank together."

"That's back when I was young. Now I'm—"

"You know, I was just about to ask—how old are you, anyway?"

"I was born in the kapsul year, which makes me forty-eight, believe it or not."

"How about that," Pang chuckled. "Eleven years older than me. Well, you don't look it, Paek-san."

"What are you talking about? Look at my hair."

"Prematurely gray—that's all."

As Paek Chusa kept up the banter he hid his true feelings—namely, that he couldn't stomach Mister Pang's behavior.

According to the etiquette of their home

village, you performed a full bow, prostrating yourself, to anyone ten years or more your senior. You addressed such a person with courtesy and respect, sitting with knees bent. Normally you didn't smoke or drink in his presence, but if circumstances compelled you to drink, you turned away and did so discreetly. Paek found Pang's manner of speech disgusting: "Paek-san," "Drink up!" "Prematurely gray," and the rest, as if Paek were a close, same-age friend or else a stranger. Crossing his legs, staring him in the face when he drank, sucking on cigarettes—never had Paek seen such insolence.

And it wasn't just a matter of age. If you took lineage and family background into account, then such behavior was utterly unforgivable.

You might not know it from looking at me, thought Paek, but I come from a distinguished clan. My grandfather was a *chinsa* (I can show you the certificate), his grandfather was Revenue Minister (you can look it up in our family register), and his grandfather was the Prime Minister of the nation (you can look that up, too). Yes, a distinguished clan. And one of my distant cousins was a county magistrate, and one of his sons was a village headman in Manchukuo. But now this cursed "Independence," or whatever they call it, and look at how things have turned out. Until two months ago wasn't I the respected father of Paek Pujang, head of accounts at a police station, a recipient of the Eighth Order of Merit, a man you wouldn't dare cough in front of? Two months ago I would have dressed down a man like Pang, could have had him drawn and quartered on the spot. And now things were brought to this pass. If only.... Where had those good old days gone?

In any case, compared with his scintillating pedigree, that of Mister Pang was nothing to write home about.

Mister Pang's great-grandparents, it was rumored, were outsiders of no distinction who had floated into town from who knows where. His grandfather was a petty clerk in the village bureaucracy, his father a peddler of straw sandals. The father had grown infirm, but even now, at the age of seventy, this Pang Ch'mji was the villager you went to for a beautiful pair of straw sandals. And then there was Pang Sam-bok....

He had been an unskilled laborer, who knew no life other than eating, sleeping, working as a beast of burden, turning out the little ones. Crooknose Sam-bok, who, closer to age thirty than twenty, still migrated from house to house working as a farmhand. And of course he was utterly ignorant, couldn't have copied the native script if his life had depended on it.

If you're going to do unskilled labor, you might as well be a tenant farmer and get yourself a parcel of someone else's land to work for yourself. But not Crooknose Sam-bok. And so, pushing thirty and still hiring out as a farmhand, he decided one morning to earn himself a bit of money. Leaving the wife and children with his parents, who had trouble enough feeding themselves, he disappeared to Japan, free and easy. Twelve years earlier, it had been.

There must have been no miraculous windfall, for he sent not a penny home during the next seven or eight years. And then one day, from out of the blue came word that he was in Shanghai. Nothing further was heard from him until three years later, when he popped up in his hometown. For a good ten years, as he liked to say, he had tasted everything the three kingdoms of the East had to offer. And yet he looked as unsophisticated as ever, and rather more shabby now—his suit in tatters, his leather shoes mended—than when he had left in his cotton jacket and short pants, which though patched in

places had at least been washed and ironed.

For a year he loafed and idled, eating or starving on the proceeds of the blood and sweat of his aged parents and his young wife. But then he must have done some soul searching, because he left again, this time for the capital, and this time taking his wife and children.

In Seoul the family occupied a cramped servants' room in a hillside neighborhood in Hynj-dong. For the first year he lived a hand-to-mouth existence working at the Japanese camp for Allied prisoners of war in Yongsan—at the same time adding a bit of polish to the broken English he had acquired in Shanghai.

For another year or so, using this same broken English, he worked at a shoemaker's and managed to scrape by. But with all the shoes going to the Japanese war effort—a lost cause if ever there was one—shoe leather became extinct. Shoemakers large and small closed down, and Pang felt compelled to strike out as an itinerant cobbler.

If Pang was going to be a cobbler, whether he made the rounds of the alleys with his box of tools or parked himself along the main thoroughfare of Chongno, it was only natural that from time to time he would catch the eye of someone from back home. The news spread to his hometown, and not a soul had anything good to say of him—all you could hear were cynical remarks:

"The no-good spent ten years in Japan and China, and that's all he has to show for it?"

"Chip off the old block. Dad sold straw sandals, Sonny mends leather shoes."

"Bound for the Shoe Hall of Fame."

Such was his humble background—nothing to his name, no position, wrackingly poor. For his livelihood he squatted on the street patching the wornout, stinking leather shoes of passersby, fixing them with heel plates, polishing them. Such was Crooknose Sam-

bok's wretched occupation.

These thoughts made Paek Chusa indignant. This frog doesn't remember he was once a tadpole! he silently snorted. Ill-bred son of a bitch! Uppity bastard!

But on the other hand, he had to admit that Crooknose Sam-bok, whether due to this "Shoe Hall of Fame" business or to some freak of nature, had enjoyed great good fortune in the space of only a few months, had become rich, had become "Ass-wipe Pang"—well, that's what it came out sounding like when the Japanese tried to say "Mister Pang"—that this "Smelly Pang" had all the comforts of life, had nothing to fear in this world, could prance and strut to his heart's content. If you thought about it, the whole thing was partly amazing, partly enviable, partly annoying.

Deep inside, Paek Chusa felt a sincere wonder that he couldn't deny: When it comes to a person's fate, you just can't tell.

This dazzling metamorphosis of Crooknose Sam-bok's was not some miraculous vicissitude, was not, as Paek Chusa had wondered, a freak of nature or the result of being fated for the "Shoe Hall of Fame." Rather, it was something extremely simple and easy, though in Pang's case a kind of special condition: he was resourceful after a fashion, and bright enough not to have forgotten the bits of English he had picked up early on.

August 15, 1945—a historic day.

Cobbler Pang Sam-bok welcomed Liberation Day as he had any other, by squatting in the shade across Chongno from Pagoda Park fitting shoes with heel plates. He knew no deep emotions, no joy, though. To Sam-bok the sight of utter strangers embracing each other on the street, reveling, weeping, was alien to him; it was just rather unseem-

ly. He found the surging throngs annoying, the hurrahs painful to his ears; it was enough to make him scowl.

With everyone shouting "Mansei!" and jumping up and down in mindless abandon, business was slow to nonexistent.

"Hell! Is independence supposed to fill your stomach!" he groused, full of animosity.

But in the space of a few days Sam-bok was partaking of the benefits of Liberation, such as they were for a cobbler.

For there were no policemen now to dress him down for overcharging, and he now received fifty *chn* for a heel plate that used to be ten or fifteen *chn*. With no police around, he could swagger free as he pleased, get away with any sort of mischief, and have nothing to fear.

"Well, they're right. This independence is something to write home about after all," he muttered to himself. Nail ten heel plates, and he had himself five *wn*.

But within another few days Sam-bok was obliged to curse Liberation once again. His decision to charge more money was not as harmless as it seemed—the wholesalers, for their part, had increased the price of materials. Heel plates, leather, rubber, thread—everything became five, ten times as expensive. No matter how much a cobbler charged his customers, he had to pay dearly for his materials. In the end, only the wholesalers grew fat; Sam-bok's net earnings were no greater than before.

At sunset he shouldered his cobblers' box and in a fit of pique went to a *makklli* house, where he drained several bowls of the milky rice brew.

"They can go to the devil! Did they all drop dead, those damned economic ministers? What the hell use is Independence, anyway!"

In the meantime, August passed and then a week and a half into September the streets of Seoul grew thick with American soldiers

and their jeeps.

Sam-bok saw the frustration of these soldiers when they couldn't communicate while sightseeing or shopping, and eureka!

Sad to say, however, his prospects were hopeless as long as he continued to present himself in his grimy, sweat-soaked rags. There must be a way, he thought.

All morning long he mulled it over, and finally at noonday he saw the light.

He scurried home and had his wife bundle up his cobbling tools and materials along with a quilt and his wornout clothes and take them to a local pawnbroker. There she consigned the items for a month and returned home with a hundred *wn* repayable at three percent interest.

Sam-bok took this money to one of the secondhand shops you could find all over the city and spent the lot of it on something they called a suit, along with a hat. As for footwear, he was compelled to swap his own shoes for his landlord's army boots, with the understanding that he return them in five days and resole them in the future.

The following day found Sam-bok setting forth rather later in the morning than when he was a cobbler. Even in his wornout suit, wornout hat, and wornout boots, he was more smartly turned out than he was as a cobbler. But as he was about to leave, his wife suddenly tugged at his coattail, his one-eyed wife who since the previous night had been pouting, who had done little in the way of waiting on him or answering him.

"Out with it—what are you up to?"

"Are you crazy? Let go!"

"Look at yourself, blockhead—who is she, huh?"

"Shows how much you know. Don't get notions, you idiot."

"Over my dead body!"

"Keep this up, woman, and the first thing I do when I get me some money is find

myself a concubine."

"More power to you! Go ahead, then, get rid of me—"

"Bitch—I ought to put the leg screws to you!"

He knocked her down with a sweeping punch, then left their cramped hovel and set out for Chongno.

If a slave is going to be sold, he told himself, can't he at least be free to choose his own master?

Sam-bok got off the streetcar at Chongno and ambled east, looking for someone—someone with a good appearance. A common soldier wouldn't do—he would have to be a lieutenant or better.

In front of the Youth Center he came across a man trying to buy a pipe. A stout man, he didn't appear to be a common soldier, and his face looked as good-natured as could be. Sam-bok immediately took a liking to him. Playing the curious onlooker, he approached unobtrusively.

The man, an American officer, picked up the pipe and examined it with great interest.

"How much?" he asked over and over, peering at the pipe peddler.

The old man shouted the price, which the officer, of course, couldn't understand. Cocking his head in puzzlement, he asked yet again, "How much?"

Here was Sam-bok's chance. "Tutty won," he said in a low voice.

The officer's head whirled around. "Oh—you speak English?" he said with a look of such delight that Sam-bok thought he was about to be embraced. He then shook Sam-bok's hand raw.

Sam-bok was on the verge of disgust.

What did Sam-bok do? the officer asked.

He'd just lost his job, came the reply.

Well, then, how would Sam-bok like to be his interpreter?

That would be fine.

Then and there he boarded the officer's vehicle not as Crooknose Sam-bok the cobbler but as Mister Pang. And so he became an interpreter for the man, who was a second lieutenant in the American occupation army, at a salary of fifteen dollars, or two hundred forty won, a week.

Most days the routine was the same, Mister Pang taking the lieutenant sightseeing during the day and guiding him to drinking houses with serving women at night.

Once, while observing the tower at Pagoda Park, the lieutenant asked how old it was. Whenever the place in question dated back thousands of years, Mister Pang gave the same answer: "Too tousand eels."

Another time the lieutenant asked about Kynghoeru, the pavilion where kings took kisaeng to drink, dance, and sing.

Mister Pang answered without hesitation: "King dooringkuh waen enduh dahnsuh enduh shing, widuh dahnsuh."

It looked to him, ventured the lieutenant, that Chosn women's clothing was lovely and graceful. Why, then, did some of them wear Western clothing?

They wanted to marry Westerners, Mister Pang answered.

Seeing the excrement that fouled the streets, including Seoul Station, the lieutenant asked if Chosn dwellings lacked toilets.

By no means—every house certainly had one, Mister Pang replied.

When the lieutenant said he wanted to buy a very good Chosn painting, Mister Pang bought him a five-won reproduction of the sort you often see hung above the door—deer feeding on an elixir of life, a Daoist wizard seated.

What was the best-known and most interesting Chosn novel?

Ch'oe Ch'an-shik's Hue of the Autumn Moon was Mister Pang's reply. The lieu-

tenant said he would like to buy a copy, and after several days of searching, Mister Pang was finally able to obtain one from a neighbor for two won.

Such was the general outline of Mister Pang's new position, though he rendered great service in many other ways as well while introducing the lieutenant to his country.

Mister Pang grew more excellent by the day, in direct proportion to these services. He had moved to his present house—said to be the company house of a bank director before Liberation—from the Hynj-dong rented room three days after becoming an interpreter for the lieutenant. Upstairs and down, it was decorated half in the Western style, half in the Japanese—altogether a palatial mansion. The garden featured colored foliage and autumn plants at their peak of loveliness; carp frolicked in the fish pond.

The room where host and guest sat drinking was the best of the several rooms in the house, a bright, sunny room that led out to a balcony. But inside, there wasn't a single picture on the walls, not a single piece of furniture. It was merely a vast, tasteless chamber. Mister Pang still had little idea of such things as interior decoration.

At first Mister Pang kept a housemaid. Next he added a seamstress. And then an errand girl.

Gentleman Pang received several visitors a day. The bulk of them arrived in motor vehicles, but quite a few came in rickshaws as well. It was the rare person who arrived emptyhanded. A box of Western cookies would be brought, an envelope of money inevitably attached to the bottom.

His metamorphosis from the cobbler Crooknose Sam-bok to Mister Pang was so very simple and straightforward.

"Kimiko!" shouted the host as he prepared to pour Paek Chusa another glass of beer.

"She's running an errand," came the voice of his one-eyed wife from the ground floor. The tone was pointed.

"What about the snacks?"

"That's what she went out for."

"Do we have any *chōngjong*?"

Instead of an answer there came steps on the stairway, and then a head of permed hair, a pinched forehead, a single eye, a powdered face, a dress worn over a mammoth bust, and finally a pair of massive, tablelike legs sheathed in silk stockings.

"Sō Chusa left this for you." She handed her husband an envelope.

"Let's see what we've got here." Mr. Pang opened the seal and a single bank draft appeared. It was for ten thousand won. "Is that all?" Mister Pang's temper flared and he tossed the draft to the tatami-covered floor.

"Don't ask me," said Paek Chusa.

"Worthless son of a bitch, just you wait. I know his game—buy a hundred thousand won property from the government, resell it for a million won profit, easy, and this is all I get? Damned son of a bitch—he doesn't realize that one word from me to the MPs and he's up the creek."

"Shall I bring the *chōngjong*?"

"Doesn't realize that one word from me means life or death." Mister Pang snorted. "Son of a bitch is going to learn the hard way.... Heat up the *chōngjong*—it's kind of chilly outside."

More drinking snacks arrived, and the two men exchanged several rounds of the warmed rice brew.

Finally Paek Chusa broached the reason for his visit.

Paek Chusa had a son, Paek Sn-bong, who could boast of seven years' service as a constable until the day before Liberation. During that time he had rotated among three substations and two station houses and had accumulated land enough to provide him

with two hundred sacks of rice annually, had put away ten thousand won in the bank, had silks and other fabrics worth more than that amount, and had provided his wife with another ten thousand won worth of jewelry.

While others were tightening their belts and starving, his granary was piled with straw bags of polished rice that resembled jade, and not a day passed that his table didn't contain meat and fish—items that others wouldn't see for half a year, for a year even.

Over the previous two years, when he was head of accounts at a station house, he had been even more the deluxe edition. On the night of August 15, Liberation Day, when the masses raided his house, the items that poured out of it, not to mention the sacks of rice, were as follows:

- 6 bolts of cotton cloth
- 23 pairs of rubber shoes
- 8 pairs of Japanese-style shoes
- 3 boxes of laundry soap
- 50 pairs of socks
- 13 bottles of *chōngjong*
- 1 sack of sugar

So it was reported. And of course there was his wife's jewelry, his fabrics and silks, and his bank account, each worth ten thousand won or more.

Every last one of these articles was seized, his house and furniture laid waste. Paek Sn-bong himself had his arms broken and barely managed to escape with his life to the ancestral home, leaving behind a concubine with half her hair plucked out.

There in the home village Paek Chusa, through the misdeeds of his son, had accumulated land and taken to treating his neighbors haughtily. To his tenant farmers he charged 80 percent of the harvest. He lent out money at usurious interest. And so the night Paek Sn-bong returned in a state of collapse, Paek Chusa, the master of the house,

had his dwelling raided.

The house and all the furnishings were destroyed and the wealth of rationed items sent by his son were confiscated in their entirety. The family members were beaten within an inch of their lives, and father and son stole away, to Seoul and the in-laws, respectively, preserving their hides above all else.

In Seoul, Paek Chusa went to the expense of rooming and boarding at an inn. He roamed the streets in dejection. How could he gain revenge? How could he regain his wealth and possessions? But no clever scheme presented itself.

And then that very morning he had come across Mister Pang. He was walking aimlessly along Chongno when a passing vehicle stopped. The distinguished-looking gentleman riding with a Westerner got out, looked him in the eye, and said with delight, "Aren't you Paek Chusa?"

He had inspected the man. Without a doubt it was Crooknose Sam-bok, the street-side cobbler.

"You—you're—you're Pang—Pang...."

"That's right—Sam-bok."

"But—but—how did you...."

"Every dog has his day," Mister Pang sniffed.

And he had let himself be led to the other's home.

To Paek Chusa's utter surprise, Mister Pang managed a house complete with maid, seamstress, and errand girl. His mien was completely transformed and his speech seemed rather dignified. Sewers could indeed spawn mighty dragons!

Paek Chusa realized his past prosperity was but a dream, that he'd been ruined in the space of a day, and he couldn't help cowering once again—he felt like the wretched dog who is ignored when a house goes into mourning. And now this rascal Pang—when had he become so audacious? It

galled him in the extreme.

And so it occurred to him more than a few times simply to get up and remove himself from this situation. But he endured.

For it had become clear that his host wielded great power. His one remaining hope, it seemed, was to be lucky enough to utilize that power to revenge himself and recover the fortune stripped from him. Revenge, the recovery of his fortune—to this end he would bow his head to fellows even worse than Crooknose Sam-bok.

“In any event, Misshida Pang....”

Paek Chusa, having embroidered a bit to spice things up, concluded his account by saying: “You must round up those scoundrels, every last one of them. The ringleaders deserve to have their heads chopped off, and the others, beat them to a jelly and make them kneel on the floor till they surrender. I demand everything back that they stole from me. House, furniture, everything else they destroyed, I demand full compensation for. In return, I’ll—I’ll give you half of all I own. Mark my word, Misshida Pang, you and me, fifty-fifty.”

“Don’t you worry.” Mister Pang seemed delighted to be of service.

“Do you really mean it?”

“Why, right this minute, one word from my lips and a hundred, a thousand MPs with machine guns will swarm down and make mincemeat out of them, mincemeat!”

“Thank you so much!” Envisioning his revenge, Paek Chusa clutched Mister Pang’s wrist. “I’ll remember your kindness until these bones of mine are dust.”

“We’ll kill off every last one of those scoundrels, just you wait.”

“I have no doubt, as long as you have anything to say about it.”

“One word from me and Dr. Syngman Rhee himself would be on his knees—this is no lie.”

So saying, the host took a mouthful of water and swished it around. It was a kind of habit that had developed after he had become Mister Pang.

Mister Pang looked about for a place to dispose of the water, then rose and strode out to the balcony. Directly below was the front door.

It happened just as Mister Pang spat the turbid liquid from where he stood on the balcony. By the most unfortunate coincidence, the American lieutenant had arrived—had gone up to the door and hearing Mister Pang above him had stepped back a few paces to look up.

“Hello!”

“Oh my god!”

But it was too late. The foul liquid had already splattered onto the lieutenant’s smiling, upturned face with the force of a torrent.

“The devil!” roared the lieutenant, brandishing his fist. “You’re dead!”

Mister Pang scurried downstairs and out the door in his stocking feet rubbing his palms together in supplication, only to be met with a curse—“Low-class son of a bitch!”—and an uppercut from that same upraised fist.

Ch’ae Man-shik (1902-1950) is one of the great talents of modern Korean literature. His penetrating mind, command of idiom, utterly realistic dialogue, and keen wit produced a fictional style all his own. “Mister Pang” (Misūt’ō Pang) was first published in the journal *Taejo* in 1946.

Bruce and Ju-Chan Fulton of Seattle, Washington, are the translators of *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers* (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989) and, with Marshall R. Pihl, *Land of Exile: Contemporary Korean Fiction* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 1993).