POSTS such as local magistrate were not worth mentioning. Six generations back an ancestor had been a Third Minister. Now empty-handed – the family had been ruined in his father’s time – and an unworthy descendant, unable to enjoy the prestige of office, Cho Chun’gu could bring no honour to the family name by referring to his middle-class job as an interpreter. Even so, he probably felt no shame, for times had changed and it was said to be a position which, handled well, could put you in touch with the strings of power and seat you on a cushion of money. Riding the winds of enlightenment, he intended to find himself a good place. In the garden house on the day of his arrival in the late spring of the previous year, when Ch’isu had teased him saying, ‘As their interpreter, you should know that,’ he had been rather put out and said, ‘No need to call me an “interpreter”. To understand what was going on outside, I read some foreign literature, which, naturally, led me to become acquainted with them, that’s all.’

When Ch’isu had replied, ‘You don’t have to feel bad about it. What’s wrong with being an interpreter? It is not like the old days, is it? They say that they are the ones who sway national affairs one way or the other, and if you manage well you can gather in enough silver to fill your store-room,’ he had seemed to be implicitly in agreement: ‘I admit there is something in that.’ Now, however, he had been insulted over the title of interpreter by Kim-hunjang, who until this point had never failed to respect him for his family connection. Bored after returning from Seoul with the guns, Chun’gu had gone to see him. After displaying his knowledge of rifles and hunting, he had naturally gone on to talk, with some exaggeration, about his work as an interpreter and his close connections with foreign envoys. It was here that Kim-hunjang’s attitude began to change. Until then he had been careful in his manners and had held back his own opinions, but now, treating Chun’gu as if he were a child, he even went as far as to lecture
him on human obligations and how a gentleman should behave. As he argued fervently, swaying his top-knotted grey head, Chun’gu asked sarcastically, ‘Do you think the “honourable poverty” of gentlemen feeding on vegetables and water can stand up to warships and artillery?’

‘So you are saying that those who have cut off their hair and throw away their robes and even pulled out their guts – that they are now stopping the warships and the artillery? Well, Mr Cho, as you seem to be the mouthpiece of the Koreans, and the Japanese as well, you must be familiar enough with the situation.’

‘Huh, mouthpiece, indeed! That’s a very unpleasant way to put it.’

‘People old and young, who are after power and wealth, like a swarm of flies after honey, touch the ground before foreign dogs with foreheads that used to bow only before the king or the tombs of their ancestors. How can a nation that has lost its honour keep its land? The country has been brought to ruin without needing any guns or warships.’

‘In a land known as “the country of courtesy”, is there anything wrong in treating foreign envoys with politeness?’

But Kim-hunjang, seeming not to hear, was to have his say: ‘Some enlightened gentlemen got hold of a few odd Japanese guns and swords and trampled over the royal palace to hold the king to ransom. When this treacherous plot failed, they ran off to that island country. Now I hear they’ve been behaving childishly over there, complaining that they are not well treated. Huh, really – for their own safety, they run off to another country and even there they make a fuss. Are you trying to tell me that the men who plotted such treachery are going to put the country right and deliver the people from exploitation? This damned enlightenment is like a nicely coloured dog-apricot. How can men who trust only in guns care for the will of Heaven? Even though the Tonghak were a rabble of fools – yes, they were a rabble – they did uphold the mottoes of “Out with Japan – Out with the West”, and, regardless of the consequences, they went right through to the end. Doesn’t it seem that after all it is the lower orders who have kept the nation’s honour?’

‘You may live in the backwoods but you’d shame the intelligentsia in Seoul, from the way you know the detailed movements of the exiles in Japan.’