French Sailor's Letters from the Sino-Franco War, August 1884 to June 1885

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Translator's note: All bracketed material, except for italicized names and material within italicized brackets, was added by the translator. Several changes were made to the punctuation to improve readability. Ellipses are from the original text, and all footnotes are Ferrero's.

I. Fuzhou and Mazu

[P. 65] *This first letter was written on the night of the first day of battle between the French and Chinese troops who fought for seven days before the Chinese arsenal at the port of Fuzhou.*

23 August 1884

Alive! Mama, I'm alive! Strong, nothing broken, except for my ears! My good, my dear, my beloved Mama, since I haven't told you yet, we fought our hearts out! Throughout the day, and that's why I'm not at all upset to be off my feet.

You know, there's more than one of my shipmates who is all the way at the bottom of the Great Cup. Not that we lost a lot of men: not too many, especially considering the victory, which was a true one that does great honor to our admiral. You know how much I admire that man. Not that he's likable, but he's got a sailor's mind.

[P. 66] At the moment, I'd like to put a bit of order to my ideas. But it's not very easy.

Remember when we went to Paris together and we were lodged in a hotel on the rue Montmartre near les Halles? You didn't sleep the entire night because of the carriages that rolled, jumped, shook-and-swayed throughout the night, not to mention the morning, when we heard the storm of rolling bearings. And you said to me:

– My mind is completely dazed. I don't know how to say two words.

I feel very much like that. In my head, it goes poum! And then rrrran! And then, top! Plac! Crac! Psss! And then also something even worse, some ha[s]! As brief as they are brutal, as if life were wrung out in a single cry, or really long, slow haaaa[s]! They seem to last ten minutes and tear apart your soul!

It's very beautiful, battle is. In the moment, one is little by little seized, intoxicated, drunk – that's the word – and one doesn't even pay attention to it. Everything [is devoted] to the work! We shoot, we serve, we run on the bridge, we fall, we catch up, we climb, we jump, we somersault, like true clowns, like the ones at country fairs. It's [only] afterward that it has a

singular effect. One had been in death, but one has left it. I don't know who it was who said he dreamed of Hell: it leaves you with heat on your back and fire in your head.

But I should tell you the whole story. So, you know the history: the Chinese are remarkable jokers, who sign with one hand the treaties that they break with the other. There had been, it appears, an agreement signed at Tien-Tsin [*Tianjin*] by Commander Fournier, and that should have been it; we should have embraced them with the left eye and then followed one of them back to their place.

We, French, who are as good as good bread, we don't wish ill on these yellowish monkeys whose little slanting eyes give them macaque-like faces, and we're always ready to trust in their good faith. [We should] just as soon count on a rotten rope. I've let myself be told that all men of the Orient are the same.

We were told that we were awaiting orders from France. They should have arrived without delay. And yet time passed, July and then August. We had made a little demonstration on Kélung [*Kelung*], on the island of Formosa, but that didn't count. What we should have done is destroy the Chinese fleet in one blow. [P. 67] I'm going to tell you, this idea isn't entirely my own. Admiral Courbet said it openly, one day, on the bridge of the *Volta*, and I was there.

But I'm chatting and haven't [yet] reached the great event. So imagine it when last night, the 22nd, my comrades told me:

– You know about tomorrow!

– About tomorrow . . . what?

– That we're cutting the fuse at the Chinese!

I won't lie to you. I didn't sleep very well. I had been there for the affair at Kélung, but I didn't do much. It was the unloading companies that had worked. They even bailed out hard. But not a word! We took our revenge. So things heated up. And in my hammock, I wondered what it could very well be but a great battle.

In short, at six in the evening, we knew that the dance was set for the day after tomorrow.

Half-past one![1] That's it. No bugle calls. Voice orders only. It has a superb solemnity for you. The signal is given, we're going to fight.

When one has heard this first, long, round, deafening explosion, one can never forget it: it's as if all of a sudden ten volcanoes erupted. Battle! Battle!

A man shouts:

– In the name of Heaven! I have a broken arm!

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[1] 23 August, 1884 at one-thirty in the morning.

– And I, responds the captain, I have a punctured eye and I'm not shouting!

Oh sure! After that moment, I don't know much more; there's a gap in my memory. One couldn't see where one was anymore, in a whirlwind of smoke and noise, and yet one acted like a robot whose spring had been pressed. I see myself as if in a cloud shooting on the *Fou-Sing*;[2] I feel the violent throw of the wave, then the abrupt backward swell. The mine has broken the Chinese propeller, and now, to the boarding! We climb like rats along the disabled ship. At this moment, it's clear what's happening: I see before me a half-dozen Chinese whose teeth are chattering. [P. 68] I hurry on above and I feel myself thrown into the air like a ball of cotton; I positively fly away, flat on my back with limbs spread out, and then, pfffflac! I earned myself a first-class belly flop.

What a funny feeling! The water was made so clear by the fire that I imagined myself swimming in the flames. At times, when enormous embers came right down on top of me, I had to dive down to avoid them and it was as if there were potato fries sizzling above my head. I went along inevitably at random, more or less in the direction of the French.

Again a bizarre feeling: when I dove, the noise of the machine gun only reached me like the sound of faraway bells, a day of baptism.

Finally, having my head above water, I spotted a French canoe ten meters off.

Ohé! My shipmates, the end of a rope.

No one had to beg me, and three minutes later, I jumped in the canoe, soaked, worn out, but we didn't have time to stop for details.

Needle by needle, or better yet canoe by canoe, I rediscovered my *Volta* and was reunited with my battery. And the admiral was there, two steps away, at the foot of the artimon mast [or mizen mast], and we heard his good voice, which encouraged us. That's what sets your heart square. At one moment even, when a recoil knocked me back five meters, I fell almost on top of him. And you know, Mama, he recognized me. The bravest of the brave, and he said to me, laughing: "don't dance like that, kid, save it for your wedding day."

In the end, it ended well. And now, Mama, they're calling me to soup. I leave you. I don't know if we'll work again today; still, I can tell you that the toughest [job] is done, and then that I love you too much to do you the pain of getting myself killed by a Chinese. I kiss you on your two cheeks and on your beautiful Mama's hair.

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[2] The "*Fou-Sing*" (or "*Fuxing*" in Pinyin romanization) is the name of a Chinese ship.

25 August 1884 [p. 69]

Nothing really new, Mama. We've been skirmishing for two days. Though yesterday, something nice happened. Our shipmates disembarked and removed the three famous Krupps[3] from the Chinese fuses. As for me, I rested. But not for long; they're ordering us to get ready. We have to leave the Min River, and it appears that it won't be done with the most delicious ease. Bah! We'll do whatever's necessary. What bothers me is that I haven't received any news from you. Are you well at least?

30 August 1884

You shouldn't be cross with me, Mama, if I haven't written in five days; it's because we've been terribly busy, and then – you want me to tell you the whole truth? – I preferred to wait until this story was finished. Between us, I can very well confess to you now, when we headed out to leave the hornet's nest of the Min River, I didn't manage it very well. First, these damned English, who, at bottom, are furious at our success, didn't cease repeating to us that we were caught in a mousetrap and that neither boat nor man would ever leave that place alive.

First understand where we were. Imagine a bottle: the enemy occupies all of the interior sides, but the bulk of the beast is at bottom, so we rush down there; we crush it. But once it's been throttled, we're at the bottom of the bottle and have to get back out. When we fill the neck, we're taken. That was our situation exactly: we had gone all the way to the end of the Min River to beat up the Chinese, but now it was a matter of climbing back out, and you understand well that the Celestials maintained a faint hope of shutting us in there and sniping at us at their leisure.

[P. 70] When the English told us that, when, with a charming complacency, they enumerated to us the 20-some odd batteries whose shells should stroke our spines as we passed, we claimed that we didn't give a damn. But in truth it made our hair stand on end.

However, there was one guy who found an answer to all [of their doubt].

– All that, he said, isn't worth a nail, because we've got Courbet with us.

That shut them up; to all the killjoys to dance in circles.

And the funniest thing is that the guy, who thought he was making a joke – since, after all, our admiral can't do the impossible – absolutely told the truth. Yes, we made it out of there, and to whom do we owe that? No need to puzzle over it, for [we owe it] to our admiral, to this simple man, whose cold-blooded boldness is amazing, and who knows his job as well as you know how to do the cooking.

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[3] "*Krupp*" is a brand of cannon, of German make. It was one of the first steel cannons that fired from the rear, first produced in 1866.

All these Chinese positioned their batteries to keep us from entering the river; so well that almost all of them are turned toward the entrance of the bottleneck and not at all toward those, like us, who are headed seaward. So the admiral had the idea to take them one by one, from the rear, without exposing us to their fire.

However, on the 28th, there was action. Those wretches had stolen from I don't know where a pair of machine guns, specifically Hotchkisses,[4] which blew down on us such a stream [of bullets] that the second of the *Triomphante* was killed on the spot. That [threat] couldn't last like this. The admiral's nose had been knocked in. So someone called Merlet, who came back after five minutes saying:

– We've got to shut those vipers up! Who wants to do it?

Needless to say that Bibi, your son, shouted first:

– Here!

[P. 71] And five minutes later, we disembarked with a hundred shipmates. I wasn't displeased to touch solid ground, [since it was] a chance to stretch my legs and arms and also because there would be fighting for sure.

The Chinese saw what things were coming to and they pinned us down; it rained bullets like they were millet. But that didn't worry us. You only die once, right, and plus we had been given a little *tricolore* bow to encourage us.

In short, we leaped upon the Chinese, on their machine guns, on all the rest of it. The thing is, they defended themselves like devils. They're not play soldiers, see, and on the whole they're nothing to laugh at. There was one who played the wretch so villainously, wanting absolutely to see what I had beneath my skin, that I had to stifle him on the ground like a bat and still he injured me by gnashing his teeth. It's true! They don't like us, those tomcats. In the end, we finished by seizing the two machine guns, not without grief. We had five killed.

However, when we re-embarked, did no Chinese come to block our path? In an instant! They were starting to become troublesome. Too many Chinese at the end of it all. We clambered up, arms outstretched, so well that [the Chinese] had the misfortune to watch us make our escape by canoe. Only there was one who, of course – one must say, Mama – who saluted us with a final gunshot. And I was the one who took it. Oh! Not seriously, in the fat of my thigh; they took the bullet out right away, a few days of rest and [the wound] will disappear. See you later, dear Mama, don't worry.

As soon as the battle was over, Admiral Courbet received a government telegram from Paris. It brought the enthusiastic congratulations of the Nation for his victory over the Chinese troops.

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[4] Name given to an automatic, 8mm machinegun with gas-powered reloading. It owes its name to the American engineer who conceived it: Benjamin Berkeley Hotchkiss.

Moreover, the Far-East squadron was given the order to pursue its operations. This time the offensive must be taken to the island of Formosa.

[P. 72] *The squadron therefore regrouped in the bay of the island of Mazu, situated facing Fuzhou and barely 180 kilometers distant from the north coasts of Formosa. That is where other ships rallied to the Far-East squadron, which thus was reinforced in men and in naval artillery. From then on Courbet had at his disposal a capital of 2500 men under his command. Despite this contribution, however, the French forces always seemed to suffer cruelly from a lack of effectiveness in comparison to the opposition forces that awaited them, under cover of the forts on the coasts of Formosa, and who were, moreover, ready to do whatever it took to thwart French plans.*

Bay of Mazu, 20 September 1884

Coucou! Ah, there you are! Poor dear Mama, how you must have been worried. But what do you want? War is war, and if there are fine moments, sure, there are also tough ones. And your dear son just experienced one of the former. I told you, at the end of my last letter, that I had taken a prune [slang–*bullet*] in my thigh, it was removed right away and it seemed that I would have [the wound] for 48 hours at most.

But these damn Celestials never wash their hands, all that they touch is of a first-class filth, including their bullets which they should wash well before using. The proof is that 30 hours after laying down peacefully on the small of my back, waiting for a healing of short duration, bam, I was seized by a shattering fit of fever. The bullet was gone, but the devil knew what it had left behind. But now I'm at peace: my leg is doing very well.

So, if you've experienced some bad days of worry, Mama, rejoice. Before 48 hours are out, I'll retake my service, and it won't be a moment too soon, since France needs all her children and I wouldn't want to let her down.

[P. 73] What are we going to do now? Between us, I tell you that we're not looking very happy here. You understand that when one has begun to slog away, one asks only to continue, especially when one has a leader like Admiral Courbet, who has talent and luck on his side. We want to push ahead, fall upon the Chinese and make mincemeat of them. But there you are, it's about politics, and I don't understand much of that.

We're at war, right?! Since we keep flanking each other with cannon blasts. And yet, it seems not. This is not peace, oh no! But it's war without being war, something like [using] slaps to maintain friendship.

The sailors don't like this neither-meat-nor-fish state of things. And they say that the admiral isn't happy either. He would've liked – I'm repeating to you what they say – to march right on Port Arthur,[5] on Canton, on Peking to shut those unfortunate mandarins up.

[5] Port Arthur is presently the port city of Lüshun, situated in the Chinese province of Liaoning.

But it seems that in France they're not listening with that ear. They still hope that the Chinese will come *a quia*, that they'll submit and pay a heap of millions. Me, deep down, I believe that they're wrong, but not a word! That's not my business.

22 September 1884 [p. 73]

They assure us that we're leaving to conquer a country that has a really pretty name, the island of Formosa! I'm going to see the country there! And I'll have plenty to tell you about it, because you know well that I record only the big things here.

II. Formosa [p. 75]

24 September 1884

It's decided, we're going to Formosa.

An old sailor gave us a bunch of details. First it seems that it's at Kélung that the Chinese have their mines and their stockpiles of coal. When we've gotten our hands in there, and it won't be long before we do, the Chinese won't look very happy!

[It is] a superb country, I'm told, where there are Chinese, Hakkas,[6] Pepo-Huans and Song-Fano.[7] There are the names!

[P. 76] The Chinese always look alike. These ones will be clean, though, which will be a real change. As for the Hakkas, I'm told that they're ancient inhabitants [of Formosa] who don't like the Chinese at all.

As for the Pepos, these are true savages, but not mean ones: they fish all the time. I'm told that they have a load of curious superstitions: they can walk on the blades of swords without cutting themselves. They've got a good God who has deer's antlers. To each his own.

Finally the Song-Fanos, even more savage, wretched as monkeys, emaciated and lazy. They say that [the Song-Fanos] pass two, three days without eating rather than work. These are not men! They paint their bodies blue and smoke from morning till night. As for their clothing, [they are] as economical as possible. They drape themselves in a thong, as I've heard said of Sarah Bernhardt.

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[6] Historically, the Hakkas migrated from the north region of mainland China, from which they were driven by violent persecutions. Thus in exile, they came to populate south and southeast China and in particular Guangdong and Fujian provinces. From there they established themselves on the islands of Hainan and Formosa.

[7] "Les Pepo-Huans" (a term one also finds written as "Pepohoans") in fact represents the *Pingpu* aboriginal community, which signifies: "people of the plains". The term "Song-Fano" (*Shengfan* in Pinyin, which one could translate as 'crude savages') here represents the aborigines who live in the mountainous regions.

A trait that completes them: they love rats and hunt them down to make little meals of them. Remember the neighbor who recounted with horror that he had eaten rat during the siege of Paris [in the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-71]. He'd only have had to come here. After all, all tastes are in nature.

I'm also told – but I need to see it or better yet hear it before I believe it – that in a river called Tamsui, there are fish that sing. What do you say to that? The whiting a tenor and the sole a singer of ditties! I'll have to bring you one, it will make a duo with your canary.

Are we going to Kélung, or to Tamsui? We don't know. It will be one or the other of the two ports, and it will be Admiral Lespès who will go to whichever one we don't. As for me, I confess that I have no preference. All that I ask is that I be able to pitch in and do my small part like the others.

My leg is doing well. [The healing] has been long, however. If I rest standing upright for ten minutes, I start to feel faint. I'll have to see that I don't act the little mistress like that, though. It seems to me that if you were here and you hugged me real close, it would go away in a hurry. [P. 77] I remember when I was little and had a toothache, you only had to touch your finger to my gums, and it would pass away immediately.

We're still at Matsou [*Mazu*] Bay, at the mouth of the Min River, awaiting reinforcements. We're bored.

On September 20th, Admiral Courbet, with part of the fleet, showed up at the bay of Kelung. The battle began and continued in two phases. At the outset, the first day was devoted to the seizure of Mount Clément and its fort, a strategic point for control of the bay of Kelung since it overlooked the harbor. In the second phase, the following day, the French, having captured this new position, headed south to attack the central fort adjoining the town of Kelung. It was only afterward that the French troops could control the town of Kelung itself.

2 October 1884

We've taken Kélung.

First, know that I crossed from Duguay-Trouin on the *Bayard*. Again an idea of I don't know whose, as if I must again and always be the ship's apprentice of Admiral Courbet. Judge for yourself if I was happy! That happened on September 29th.

So, en route for Kélung!

Admiral Lespès, who is also a good man, opened the way for us: two months ago he bombarded Kélung which, in sum, was ours already. We had nothing more to do but settle in. It was like an apartment where the key is already in the door.

So on the 30th, that's to say the day before yesterday, we arrived before Kélung, a pretty beach dominated by hills. Before it, a bit to the right, [stood] an island which looked exactly like the back of a hippopotamus. The Chinese aren't very bright, if on this hippo's back they had

only a half-dozen Krupps; [p. 78] we were able to salute Kélung [from there], but we didn't enter it. It's funny, those people are obviously very intelligent; I've tested it a hundred times. But it's the simplest things that escape them. They are above all schemers, tricksters, nitpickers; but when it comes to strong and clear logic, they disappear. That's the oriental way, incidentally.

From sunrise on, there was action onboard.

All in all, what we had attempted was not so easy. The Chinese had tried to relieve their forts; they had installed new batteries. See how these are people who don't want to let go of the bone! Sometimes I tell myself that if we really were to invade a country like this, we would have a devilishly hard time of it. Everyone loves his country. For the Chinese, it's a sort of rage. When we set foot on [their soil], it seems a sacrilege to them. They may run at the first volley, but a hundred meters on they regroup. Then it will recommence. And the ambushes and the assassinations, guerilla warfare!

With the hundreds of millions of men who exist in this country, I wish that we would never have a run-in [with them] in the interior. We're strong, but they're clever and tenacious. It wouldn't be cheap for us, you don't have to tell us twice.

At Kélung, Europeans have come and gone twenty times; we've destroyed everything with cannon blasts. So what? With the tenacity of the spider whose web has been torn, [the Chinese] rebuilt the fortifications. Admiral Lespès bombarded their three forts. Fine! They rebuilt the trenches and casemates. We smashed them in. Well, as the highest hills rise behind the town, [the Chinese] strove to transform them into citadels.

One must say that these Celestials are not alone. Europe is behind them; and what part of Europe? That of our worst enemies. These cursed Germans are furious at our success, which reinvigorates our young men and forces them to augur the future, when we'll fight them for Alsace and Lorraine. So, in the Chinese ranks, there is a load of German officers and engineers. That's clear from the arrangement of the batteries. They're not built in the Oriental style. They're Prussian through-and-through.

[P. 79] The leader of the Chinese calls himself Liu Meng-Chuan.[8] He's an old man with a green fear of defeat, because he knows well that it would cost him his head. He has put everything to work in defense of the town, and it appears that down there, outside of the view of our sailors, there is an entire second line of fortifications. And there are more than six thousand Chinese to defend it!

Let's hope that we don't fall into a trap! There aren't very many of us, even with the reinforcements. If you intended to set our deputies straight [from] here, you'd laugh. They are accused of wanting to be rid of us by having us crushed. There is even one among us who claims that they would like our admiral to be destroyed.

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[8] This is Liu Mingchuan, mandated by the central Chinese government to oppose the French army.

On October 1st, at 6 am, the signal is given. When you get moving, it warms your stomach; when you don't move, your back gets cold.

We were the ones who fired the first cannon shots. [They were] well aimed. The shells came down right in the underbrush of Fort Clément. Fire up and down the line!

And during this time, our soldiers . . . There they are on the river: they move confidently, coming round with a marvelous coordinated action; then they rush off. One! Two! One! Two! It's superb! And not one missing! Everyone arrives at his moment, at his place, as the admiral had ordered. They climb up the hill: we see the Chinese posts overturned. Those who aren't dead flee as fast as their legs can carry them. The gunfire crackles. All is enveloped, all is lost in the smoke. For over an hour we see nothing. But through the haze we make out that our troops are winning the field.

At 9 o'clock, a lull.

The firing recommences: we must chase the enemy from his entrenched camp. There's no time to lose. The Chinese make a hasty retreat. That's it. Good day. We're ready to begin again the next day.

[P. 80] *Thus, after two days of fighting, the French troops take possession of the town of Kelung, of which the population is estimated at around 4,000. There they find a large load of arms and blankets (in preparation for the winter, which can be harsh), which the Chinese soldiers must have abandoned in their haste. That's not all. In the port, and therefore the commercial part of the city, the soldiers spot several beautiful pagodas but also, and above all, a number of houses belonging to rich Chinese merchants. The sailors immediately organize the repatriation of several treasures toward the holds of the French ships, and indulge in a veritable pillage. Bronze and ivory Buddhas, sculpted wood, porcelains and earthenware of all sorts, nothing escapes the sailors' vigilance.*

The troops of Admiral Courbet's squadron are now stationed in Kelung, which little by little returns to a normal life under the eye of the French soldiers who patrol it.

5 October 1884

Finally the signal to depart had been given: I was the one who showed off in taking my rank. Moreover we went like princes, being escorted by a battery of canon revolvers, ready to spit machine gun fire at the nose of anyone who would have wanted to get too close a look at us.

I'm skipping the details because at bottom, it's always the same thing. We disembarked, made a little rush, bayonets in front. It had been so long since I last worked that I would not have been displeased to find a Chinese or two, just as a way of stretching my legs. Ouiche! No more Chinese than there were in my hand. From where they saw us further on, they beat a hasty retreat. Thus we've taken the eastern fortified works, as far as the Sow-Wan market.

Speaking of this market, just imagine that at the moment when we open onto the place, toc! We come to a halt. [P. 81] The scene we saw was curious enough to surprise us a bit. A

Chinese was on his knees and a devil – another Chinese, it was a family affair – armed with an oddly shaped cutlass, with a very large blade, and forming a crescent at the end, cut off his head in one swipe. Ah! If only you'd seen how finely it was done! No need to take it up a second time! What a sight and what a firm grip! These men, moreover, did not appear in the least preoccupied with our arrival. One might have said they were simply on their way to have a coffee.

We asked them – and not very nicely, you might imagine – what were they doing there?

As we spoke one language and they another, you're thinking that our meeting was not very clear. But in the end we finished by understanding that the executed was a thief. He had been condemned, it seems, before the arrival of the French, and he had been waiting in a fort for them to proceed with his beheading. Moreover, you'd be wrong to believe that he had dreamed in the least of escaping. He was condemned and he had played his part. It was an affair that had to be settled.

Also, since, in leaving, the Chinese authorities had given the order to dispose of him, the executioner, obeying in the Chinese way, had gone to hang him, and finally had just killed him in public view. It was only a formality, and it was carried out to the satisfaction of all, even of the decapitated who, as we were assured, would have considered himself dishonored if the sentence had not been executed. Impossible to be more accommodating. What a funny people; how everything that seems simple to them appears extraordinary to us!

All in all, the affair occurred between Chinese and it was not our place to meddle. We have orders not to disturb the Chinese in their customs.

Only because they had, according to custom, hung the body from a bamboo tree so that it would remain exposed until the next morning, we invited them politely to remove their compatriot and do with him elsewhere whatever they pleased, provided we could not see them. Much negotiation was required. Finally they deigned to leave, carrying the man on their backs like a slaughtered cow. We noticed afterward that they had left his head. [P. 82] We picked it up and, my word, we buried it as if it had belonged to an honest man. Nasty spectacle and nasty job.

The case of the town of Kelung, conquered by Admiral Lespès and his men, from now on seems settled. The city and its surrounding areas are under the French army's control. This is not the case throughout the northern region of Taiwan, which is felt to be under the control of the French navy. The port of Tamsui poses a problem. Tamsui is another commercially important port city of northern Taiwan and the town is much larger than Kelung. [P. 83] *And it falls to Admiral Lespès to penetrate the furiously defended town. Thus he finds himself before the town gates on October 1st, 1884. His orders are still the same: attempt to seize the enemy positions. This is easier said than done, and the French ships cannot advance into the bay. Indeed it is infested with mines. [The infestation] is such that during the first two days of battle, the French sailors have the task of proceeding with a bombardment of two forts that guard the passage: the white fort and the red fort. The operation is ultimately crowned with success. It is now time to go farther.*

On October 8th, some troops disembark. Their goal is to take the forts in an effort to neutralize the mines that block the ships' advance. However, the Chinese troops have greater numbers and the strategy of the French offensive appears to be failing. Thus, the marine riflemen must fight a retreat and re-board their ships. Hence the French, contrary to what is happening at Kelung, must content themselves with a blockade of the port and the mouth of the Tamsui River, without the possibility of taking the town itself.

15 October 1884

My dear friend, I'm writing you today to give you the details on what has just happened before Tamsui. As it wasn't all fun and games, I don't want to tell Mama about it. I want her to know only that I'm well, which is true, and that I'm still happy. The truth is that if I'm in good health, and if, by some incredible chance, I did not bail out during the last engagement, [nonetheless] my morale is not good: there's no way around it, my good friend: we took a small beating, and from whom, I ask you? From these stupid Chinese!

But wait a minute, I've said it before and I'll say it again: the Prussians are behind this. The people here fight almost in the European style, except for the dirty tricks about which I'll tell you.

[P. 84] So, this is how it's going to be, you'll tell Mama what you judge is good for her to know and keep the rest to yourself.

I suppose you're caught up on our situation. In my last letter to Mama I told her that on October 5th my company and I were in the midst of settling into a small fort at Kélung where we would not have had any problems at all. I had written it that morning and believed that I would be at Kélung for some time when the order arrived to re-embark on the *Tarn* immediately. Why? It appeared that things were not going smoothly on the Tamsui side and that Admiral Lespès was demanding reinforcements. However, there weren't many of us at Kélung yet, and it seemed to us that we would be needed there.

I must tell you that Tamsui is much more heavily defended than Kélung. The Chinese had built a barricade at the entrance to the port and had even laid some mines to blow us up if we showed any intention of paying them a visit.

The weather was beautiful: calm seas – a real lake – and a magnificent sunshine; it was a good sign. Two forts, a white one and a red one, were set to repulse our attack. Needless to say the red fort's canons were top-notch Krupps: naturally they came from a German ship that we had chased from port two months earlier and that had taken its revenge in the German style, by selling its guns to our enemies.

You wouldn't believe how many strange details there are. Thus Admiral Lespès hired a pilot in Hong Kong. Do you know how much we give a pilot in wartime? We pay him up to two-hundred thousand francs! Excuse me a bit. I know they risk their skins, but I say one would get a lot of pilot skins for a hundred thousand francs. And what's more, this pilot who was now selling us his services was merely the same man who had directed the building of the defensive works of the Port of Tamsui. He had been paid to build; now he had himself paid to destroy.

Isn't that typical, and how it all gives you a fine example of human honesty! Would you believe that it was these damned Chinese who started all the commotion? On October 2nd, they positioned themselves to fire upon us from the red fort. This was just at the hour when we clean the ships, and it was a good while before each man was at his post: someone even made the observation that, on the battlefield, this regularity of habits has its disadvantage, because the enemy who knows our habits as well as we do knows when we're not ready.

[P. 85] Moreover, there was a hellish fog around the forts, whereas we were in full light. But that made no difference: we were full of confidence, and while the Chinese shells fell next to or around our boats (which received only some splashes), we began to demolish the white fort, which did not fight cleverly. As for the red fort, that [attack] did not go smoothly. It appeared [the defenders] were furious, those devils! We covered them with missiles; they didn't want to give in. They resisted for nearly two hours, and it was near 10 o'clock when still they were firing cannon blasts every ten minutes. Finally, they went silent. Not a moment too soon.

Still, up to that point it seemed like we were just strolling along, only we couldn't stop to gawk outside the port; we had to go see those gentlemen up close.

We're told that the English consulate has fallen[9]; but that [place] is secondary.

The Chinese are commanded by a mandarin of I don't know what rank named General Soon [*Song*], who, it seems, doesn't worry about a thing. While we destroyed his forts, he ate lunch with Champagne. His soldiers fought well, that was enough for him; we saw those like him on our side, we're told, in 1870. But that's not relevant now.

There were six hundred of us altogether for the disembarkation. The little exercise was set for the following day. That night I slept like a log, and in the morning I was fresh as the dew, and raring to go, you'd better believe it. It's always odd when you know you're going to have a fight. It makes your heart pound, and then it sends hot flashes to your cheeks. But that's not fear, certainly not, more like – how should I say it? – a heating-up of all the joints, like a locomotive into which an invisible hand is throwing more coal than usual. Moreover, we don't joke; the men are serious. [P. 86] They know that each man's life depends on the courage and cold-bloodedness of everyone else.

I, who had already seen fire and been in tough spots, I can tell you, I murmured to myself: "You know, my little one, even though your admiral is not here, you must work as if he were watching you all the time. They must be able to say that his sailor took good care of this little business. That would please him, this man."

Unfortunately there was bad weather: the sea, which had always been superb, stirred and shook us so strongly that it was impossible to think of disembarking. A junk carrying tea ran aground on the bar. We had to wait.

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[9] The British consulate of the time was located right next to the red fort. The red fort is an old fortification built by the Spanish in 1629 (Fort San Domingo).

We had to wait until 8 o'clock. But then there was another problem. It was not a good sign. Commander Martin had a terrible attack of rheumatism and couldn't put one foot in front of the other. In place of Commander Martin, we were given Frigate Captain Boulineau. I won't say what we lost there, but in the end I would have preferred the other [i.e., Commander Martin]: it seems to me that things would've gone more smoothly and without a certain error which cost us dearly.

At 6 o'clock, everyone is ready: all is forgotten, the disappointments of the day before, the problems as we waited for battle. There is nothing left to do but show oneself to be a good little soldier of France, and we are well-disposed to do so. At half past eight, we embark. Here we are in our nutshells: we have with us some mines which are charged with exploding the Chinese mines in just a moment. We hope. We advance. At 9 o'clock we disembark. Here we are in Chinese territory. This is not the time to check for lice.

A singular impression: when we talk to you others about Oriental countries, about China or Japan, you're convinced that we always walk among more or less elegantly-shaped trees, with little red women like one sees on folding screens…but you must understand that here as elsewhere, there is everything.

For a moment, upon reaching the riverbank, we were in the midst of some dunes like the ones at Dunkirk: a bunch of gray hillocks, swept incessantly by the ocean breeze, and under our feet a fine sand into which we sank our boots. What can you do?

[P. 87] When we march in front with the officers who lead us, we know neither where we are, nor where we're going. We trust those who lead us, and see nothing of the broader scope of our movements: each man goes peacefully along, and for a horizon one has only the man in front of him and the one next to him. In short, to tell you whether we were headed for the red fort or the white fort, at the time I knew absolutely nothing. I walked, or rather I ran, and then everything opened up. We took fire square in our faces, and suddenly there were Chinese upon Chinese on all sides . . . in other words, we had never seen anything like it.

When one sees Chinese, there's only one thing to do, and that's to look for a scrap; and I'm telling you I got it. In fact, there was a moment when one of these animals that I had disarmed with a bayonet thrust leapt at my throat, a real tiger. That didn't do anything, you know; those fellows are hairy! I fought back and grabbed him by the face, lost my rifle, [and] together we rolled on the ground. He was solid, the rascal. I'm no wimp myself, which tells you that our exchange was about as animated as it gets. We swiped at each other like two angry cats, each of us trying to free an arm to reach for a belt knife or revolver and finish the other one off. It was so rough that I began to feel myself tire, when a comrade who had just disposed of his own Chinese ran over to us and sank fifteen beautiful centimeters of white iron into the stomach of my inseparable opponent. What a strange thing! When the knife pierced his flesh, it made a plopping sound, followed by a crackling noise. But I wasn't prepared to be moved. I rid myself of him and leapt on my rifle.

– "Sapristi," I yelled to my comrade, "I owe you a lot."

I hadn't finished speaking when all of a sudden we and six others found ourselves surrounded by the Chinese. And how many were there? I don't want to be taken for a joker, but [there were] at least fifty if not one hundred, and we, a dozen altogether, separated from most of our comrades, there we were, closed off as if in a pretty circle of rifles and spears. But I assure you that we didn't take the time to think. Who gave the order? I haven't the darndest idea, but suddenly we grouped ourselves together, close, tightly packed, so well that we made ourselves into a single body, and we thrust ourselves [p. 88] straight to the right like a cannonball. It is to this stupid brutality that we owe our escape, [since] we made a hole in the mass of Chinese and tore down in the direction of the dune.

The truth is, I have learned since, it's that, I don't want to say his name [i.e., Frigate Captain Boulineau] had misunderstood or improperly executed the orders he received. We were supposed to take the red fort first, it seems, and, after that, to march on the white fort. It was logical: you understand, one does not thrust himself forward while leaving behind a fort and a garrison that will chase after you and catch you in a crossfire. But that's what happened. Whose fault was it? The best thing to say: no one's.

[The battle] had a rough effect on me, because, you see, friend, it was the first time I'd shown my back to the enemy. I was furious.

At the last minute, I was told that there is some discussion of peace with the Chinese. I remain with the men in having the impression from this latest business that that won't do. Ah! No!

So, I repeat to you, tell this to Mama in a gentle way, tell her that her boy did his job, and then – I know these damned French newspapers – I bet that when news of the taking of Tamsui arrives, they'll push the worst of it, as if all was lost! Unfortunately there is a bunch of intriguers among us, who use our affairs like bowling balls that one throws into his neighbor's pins. It's all very fine, but when, in order to overturn such and such a minister, they cry from the rooftops that all is lost, that no man will come home alive . . . And who listens to them? It's the Mamas who already believe they can see their sons mashed up in little cans, like the pâté of Tours!

In sum, except for some tumbles, we're doing very well, we want only to get back at it, and we have confidence, as they say. Goodbye, friend.

17 October 1884 [p. 89]

It wasn't true, about the peace! These damned Chinese wanted to bow and scrape, it seems . . . before Tamsui; but after that business, they've retaken their clever little airs, with their spiral-hole eyes . . . That's how it is and it's better that way . . . since we would've thrown a fit if we couldn't take our revenge. They want more, and they're going to get it!

[P. 90] *On 20 October 1884, a new mark was passed in the Sino-Franco war. Indeed, Admiral Courbet had just received a telegram. This one, coming from the French government, authorized the Far-East squadron to blockade the island of Formosa. This blockade was claimed to be peaceful, since we should not forget that war still had not been officially declared between the French Republic and Qing China. The blockade placed on northern Taiwan was*

intended more to seize Chinese commercial shipping than to prevent Chinese troops from receiving the contraband of war.

Here is the declaration of blockade:

Declaration of the Blockade of Formosa

We, the undersigned, Vice-Admiral commander-in-chief of French naval forces in the Far-East,

Declare:

That beginning on 23 October, 1884, all of the ports and harbors of the Island of Formosa, including [those] between South Cape, or Nan-sha Cape, and Soo-au Bay, in passing by the west and the north (these points being located at 21°55' latitude north and 118°30' longitude east of Paris for the first; and 24°30' latitude north and 119°33' longitude east of Paris for the second) will be held in a state of blockade effected by the naval forces placed under our command, and that friendly ships will have a period of three days to obtain their loads and leave the blockaded areas.

We will proceed against all ships that would attempt to violate the said blockade, which conforms to international laws and current treaties.

(Signed) COURBET

Aboard the battleship *Bayard*,

20 October, 1884.

[P. 91] *The area of the straits of Formosa was the focal point of commercial battles between the various Western powers. If it appeared that these powers worked together marvelously and collaborated on the goal of forcing China to submit at every level, behind the scenes, these countries, principally England, Germany, the United States and France engaged in the most underhanded games in an effort to achieve ascendancy in the region. And from there it is not surprising that certain nations, by means of supplying contraband arms, helped China in its fight against France. That said, the blockade was recognized by all of the Western nations that frequented the Formosa straits and which constituted the great powers that declared themselves neutral in this conflict.*

A leading example of the conflicts between Western powers that took place in the China Sea, before 20 October 1884, was the "China Merchants Company" fictitiously selling its steamboats to an American company, since the ships of neutral powers were not covered by the blockade. Thus the blockade could only be exercised against the junks that entered and left Taiwanese ports.

From the beginning, the blockade proved ineffective. For one thing, the neutral powers, even if they said publicly that they did not wish to hinder French actions, in fact facilitated the Chinese

resistance and impeded the movements of the French. Moreover, Admiral Courbet had to concentrate his fleet in preparation for an attack, and thus the blockade was less effective [than it might otherwise have been].

25 October 1884

We're making a blockade!

That doesn't mean anything at first glance. Such that maybe you're saying to yourself: "So much the better, we won't have to do battle and there won't be any losses to swallow" . . . it's possible, although this [work] is no safer, [p. 92] but what is certain is that we're going to shave ourselves with all the razors in both hemispheres until they chip.

It appears that we are not at war with the Chinese. We trade atrocious thrashings; we kill as many people as we can. That seems like war, right? And well! It is not. So much that although we declare a blockade, it is not a blockade. We blockade but do not blockade. Try to figure that out if you can. As for me, puzzling over it is making me forget things I never learned.

The truth is that the ships of neutral flags have the right to pass, unless they sail with at least a warship before them. You see what it would take for the blockade to be real. A safety line, done with boats worth upwards of three, five, or ten millions. That sure would cost a lot, eh?!

We certainly have the right to board suspect ships, but there's no danger that they will fall into our grasp.

It's a peaceful blockade, something like veal that would be sturgeon, or chopped truffles in a morsel of merinos.

Do you know what the Chinese have come up with? They've simply sold all of their steamboat merchandise to an American company. It's very clever. All of the Chinese ships sail under the Stars and Stripes, and we can't get them in our clutches. It's so irritating! All the more so as nothing makes you more furious than to have yourself mocked right in front of your nose.

But here's something even more surprising! I don't know if it will last, but the weather has been terrible. Two nights ago the sea was so stormy that we broke three [anchor] chains.

Would you like me to give you some idea of the blows this weather brings? One of our whaleboats was lifted from its hangers by a rolling wave.

We're already calling the coast the "tomb of the anchors": there are enough of them at the bottom to field good money. If only the fish could use them to clean their teeth!

The food isn't very agreeable, either: I'm not difficult and am not used to eating skylarks on a purée of pineapple, but we're out of fresh supplies and there are too many preserves, such that my little bowels . . . I won't go there.

[P. 93] Finally, as a Corsican friend who sometimes plays cards with me says, *patienza* ['patience'].

The situation seems to have calmed for the sailors since the announcement of the blockade. No more large battles. But along with this calming, there were other concerns that threatened the French sailor deployed to Formosa. The marines work a lot at their camp and at the raising of defenses around the town of Kelung. In addition, they are not very well fed, due to lack of supplies. Finally, as our sailor points out, in Kelung they are subject to a persistent stretch of bad weather. In reality, they are in full monsoon season, which began in mid-October that year. The monsoon (which in the north of Taiwan is as a rule rather virulent because it lasts for a period of around six months) brings more than seven times as much precipitation as France sees in a single year.

All of this means that the hygienic state of the French troops is deteriorating more and more. That is why what the sailors call "the sickness" or better yet "the sperm whale," and what the doctors describe as a "painful fit," survives. In reality it is cholera, which is claiming its first victims. The French forces paid a heavy tribute to the sickness before everything could be organized: supplies of fresh goods, clean lodgings, hospitals.

30 November 1884

Another bad day, my friend. Nothing terrible, but we're dying of boredom. Not the slightest serious scrap, no revenge. Isn't it infuriating to see yourself wronged and betrayed every day by these wretched Limeys?!

Now I understand why grandfather, who fought under the Empire, was always so angry at them. They are not loyal people. [P. 94] That's what disgusts us the most. And then, why are they taking the side of the Chinese against us? Aren't we closer neighbors to them than these Asian Celestials? Haven't we given them a hundred proofs of our generosity? But there you go, we have no more spite than a few larks, and [the English] take advantage of it to mock us to our faces. Judge it for yourself.

The *Triumphant* gave chase to a real English ship, the *Waverley*, which escaped and unloaded soldiers and arms on the Chinese coast! It's disgusting, and it will make you want to take a little stroll to the other side of the Pas-de-Calais one day to prove to them that we're not willing to let ourselves be outsmarted forever.

You've figured out that these adventures place the eternal question back on the mat: are we at war, yes or no?! If yes, the ships that play the game for our enemies are our enemies and we have only to pepper them with machine-gun fire. If we aren't at war, then what are we doing here?

Pay attention here, friend: I'm writing on a separate little scrap of paper, so that you won't let Mama read it at any price. I have a big, big word to write. Not that it frightens me but because it will sadden everybody, so much so that between us it is forbidden to mention it.

Thus you'll know the answer to the question: "How is the sperm whale?" You might think that it involves some large animal whose health concerns us. That's not it at all. What we call "the sperm whale" is an animal without feathers or paws but which nevertheless flies and has claws. Now there's a riddle. I'll bet that you're already at a loss. Well! Old friend, it is simply cholera. There's the big word.

The fact is that it has been bad, very bad, for some time now: of the fourteen hundred men who disembarked, it has taken down fifty of them and three hundred and fifty are in the hospital, in a sad state. Neither the officers nor the surgeons mention the word cholera any more than we do. The doctors call it "painful fever," and that makes it sound like nothing. Others simply call it "the sickness," and even this simplicity has something sinister to it. People die in three or four hours without making a sound. Pop! It's like a slap to the face that you give to someone invisible. [P. 95] There are those who resist, but honestly, they're hardly doing better: they become hollow, they stretch themselves out like those bits of marshmallow that children put down to play with. And no more cheeks, no more nose, no more eyes. All of that is sunken in. They die of it and we send them back home every day. The ambulances are full. Above all don't speak of that; that would turn everyone's heads around. There are nasty deaths here: from being harpooned like a fish by these damned Chinese to being burned at low flame by the sickness. It's not the most pleasant idea, but so much the worse! And long live France!

Incidentally, those who started to feel weak, in order to overcome it, would only have to look upon our admiral, our Courbet! They really don't make men like him anymore; he broke the mould. Every day, no matter what the time – and I remind you that it's raining cats and dogs here – he leaves the *Bayard*, sometimes all alone, other times with one or two officers, and he goes to make the rounds of the hospitals. This man was not made to sit and do nothing around a country like this island of Formosa: he's itching to strike another big blow like at Fou-Tcheou [Fuzhou].

Others are saying that we're going to finish it here, and it seems to me that they speak the truth, since for several days we have been working hard to build a ring of forts around Kélung, and they're talking of sending us landward to occupy them. I myself will do what I'm told: I'm made of good stuff, and I know only my orders. But how I wish the orders would be for battle. See you soon, friend, and wish me good luck. Above all, reassure Mama.

December 1884

Things are going better, much better. We're starting to get by. "The sickness" – with a capital 'S' – is starting to let us be. A transport ship, the *Tonkin*, arrived with doctors and then with supply officers to organize ambulance services, supplies, and provisioning at Kélung.

[P. 96] I've already said, it's no good being a gourmand. It's good to bite into something better than the ordinary – all in all too ordinary; above all monotonous.

Since we have to remain here for quite some time, blockading without blockading, but blockading all the same, it was time to draw up some plans: the proof that they are busying themselves with us in France is that they're beginning to organize us very seriously.

We don't lack for coal: a depot has been installed on Palm Island, at the entrance to the harbor; it appears that there are large reserves there that came from Hong-Kong. It is the bread of our boats, and we must think of them before all else. And then we now have as much potable drinking water as we need. That seems quite simple, to have water. But those who know maritime warfare know the value of a pure, fresh gulp of water. I know of no greater torture than that of having a terrible thirst when one is in the middle of water but can't taste it without retching.

We have set up distillation devices that render the worst water pure as liquid diamonds. We can also see the ovens smoking where our bread is made. It's as appetizing as anything. They're thinking of building [us] lodging: I don't know why, [but] there's a Limey who has taken on this job; he arrived with an enormous quantity of materials, and the houses rise before our eyes, real houses, made of stone and brick, and that look good and which, in any case, are worth more than the infamous Chinese thatched huts, those nests of plague and vermin that do us so much ill. I really don't know how the Orientals can live in them without catching plague. They must be resistant to germs, as our major says.

Now, I'm going to tell you something truly disgusting; I'd like to find the most brutal insults for the man involved.

Can you believe that while we're here to do our work, vulnerable, can you believe that there are those who seek only to steal from and exploit us? And who are they? Chinese, Iroquois, monkeys? Not at all, [but rather] Frenchmen. [P. 97] It's disgusting. A merchant of Hong-Kong had the bright idea to come establish himself at Kélung and open a store full of good things. Of course, we rubbed our hands together; there are so many things we lack.

I went with two friends to take a little tour of the bazaar. Oh, we're not very rich, but because we don't spend very much with what Mama sends from time to time, we had an old hundred sous coin to break.

I myself had two ideas: one, you're going to laugh, was to have a stick of licorice. I have always liked it since I was little, and you must admit it's not the most opulent treat! Also, I wanted to treat myself to a box of matches, another permissible luxury.

Of course, we had permission. We were happy as sparrows. [We saw] a grocer, a real grocer without a tuft of hair on his head!

We disembark and make our way slowly straight ahead toward the happy bazaar, which looks very inviting. Sure, there are no beautiful glass-walled shops here like there are on the boulevard de Strasbourg, but there is a fine collection of culinary delights: including candles and gingerbread.

"Are you the grocer?" I said to a fat man who looked just like he came from the rue aux Ours.

"Try to be polite," he said to me.

"You're not a grocer?"

"Once more, I'm telling you to be polite."

"Well then, whatever it is you sell, is it or is it not groceries?"

"Colonial goods of all kinds."

"So you're a 'colonial goods seller.' It's long, but that makes no difference to me; we shouldn't get upset over so little. Give me a licorice stick."

I say again, he looked flabbergasted, and he tapped his forehead.

"I believe I have what you're looking for," he said.

"What's that?"

"You don't know how to read?"

And he showed me three letters that were very clearly written on the lid: "Licorice of Paris, super fine quality."

"Ah, that's what I'm looking for, give me a stick." [p. 98]

"A stick? We only sell it by the can."

"Damn, and how many sticks in a can?"

"A dozen."

I did the math in my head.

"Wrap that for me so that I can take it and give me a box of matches, as well."

Very well, he put together a little package that he left on the counter, grumbling something that I didn't hear very well. I searched my pocket and produced the hundred sous coin, lovable orphan from which I regretfully parted. But one must pay, right? We're not thieves, especially when doing business with our countrymen. Since with his round eyes, this grocer was no less than a Frenchman.

The man said: "Aïe . . . ousse . . . ran"

No way to understand a word of it: he chewed his words, that overstuffed animal.

I said: "Pay up, fourteen sous out of a hundred, that's four francs and six sous change for me. Come on, we're in a hurry."

So this time the fellow said very clearly, his eyes popping out of his head: "Fourteen sous, are you kidding me? It's twelve francs."

"Huh, what did you say?"

"Super fine licorice, ten francs per can, a box of matches, two francs."

I leap up, the guys leap up, we all leap up. Of course, I scream like a fish,

"Isn't it shameful to take advantage of us like that?!"

He objects, I scream even more loudly, and I believe I started to place my fist under his nose when, stop, freeze! An officer enters. He had heard the noise. It is one of our lieutenants, by the way, a brave man whom I know well and who isn't harsh with the sailors:

"What is going on here?" He asked severely.

We who knew the trick say nothing. It works better if the other guy speaks first.

"It's an outrage," he snaps. "Some French marines come to insult a fellow countryman in his own store, a man who has risked everything, his fortune, his life, to do a service. I'll complain to the admiral, to the government." [p. 99]

"And why do these sailors insult you? What is the meaning of this quarrel?"

"They make you unpack the whole shop, and when it comes time to pay, they insult you till you're red in the face."

"What did they want to buy?"

"Here," says the trader as he shows the two boxes.

The officer reads the labels, and I see right away that he is pleased: he had believed that we wanted to buy a bottle of brandy or absinthe. But licorice, matches, those are honest colonial goods.

He turns toward me:

"And why do you not wish to pay for what you have ordered?"

"Because it is too expensive, lieutenant."

"The gentleman has the right to set his own price."

I take my hat in my hands:

"Lieutenant, I ask your pardon, but there are prices and then there are prices."

"Do you have money?"

"Here, lieutenant."

He takes it:

"Pay up, sir," the officer says as he lays the coin on the counter.

"That is not enough," [the grocer] says.

"Without a doubt," he replies, "I misunderstood you. Do you pretend that five francs is not enough to pay for a box of matches and some licorice sticks?"

"Do you suppose I came to Formosa not to earn my living?"

"So, your price?"

"I said twelve francs, I will leave it at ten francs, but that's my final price."

My lieutenant paled just slightly.

"Sir," he said, maintaining his composure, "there are degrees of dishonesty. What you are doing here is disgraceful for a Frenchman. This is like the speculators who shamefully exploited the suffering of their countrymen during the siege of Paris. I say no more to you. Sailors: bust it up, and in the future, before you enter a place, make enquiries. [P. 99] There are establishments where we do not go."

We turned our claws, like good privates, at the order. Oh, [the grocer] wasn't taken off to paradise; first, all day, there were nothing but chaotic scenes in his shop. Good men were angry, and there was a lot of damage done. The order was given not to intervene. It's truly by the grace of the State that everything wasn't destroyed. That proves that we're good children. All the same, the following day, he lowered his prices by half. That's still steep, but no one goes there. He'll gulp down his licorice himself.

1 January 1885

Really, friend, I don't have the heart to write Mama directly: I don't have happy enough things to tell her. Give her only the note that I've attached here, in which I wish her a Happy, Happy New Year. All the same, it's hard not to kiss her on her two cheeks and on her beautiful hair which must be graying, I'm sure of it, because of the concern she has for her boy.

I tell her only the good news, that my admiral and I are well. In truth I must have one tough body to resist this terrible weather we're having. We've never known a sea like this, even in the provinces. They say that it's paid by the hour to dance from morning to evening, not to mention the night!

And terrible food! What we would give for a bite of fresh meat sometimes!

At first, there certainly were inhabitants who stayed at Kélung and who asked for nothing more than to trade with us. They like money, the Chinese, and they don't waste their earnings. But, first of all they didn't have much when we arrived, and you can imagine that what they did have was gobbled up quickly; moreover, the mandarins were heavy handed. [P. 101] They forbade their subjects to sell us anything whatsoever, and those who were caught doing so . . . ouf! [They had their] heads cut off, or were beaten senseless, or were suspended before a

crocodile that tore into their chests or guts. [Or they were] slowly burned at the stake. That is what froze all notions of trade. I myself find, deep down, that the Chinese are right: during the War of 1870, if the Prussians had not found a bunch of bandits to sell them the supplies that [the bandits] refused to sell to our soldiers, our enemies would not have had so many pretensions. We're making war with the Chinese; they're making it with us. As long as it remains within those limits, there is nothing to say.

Unfortunately we have business with the savages, and horrors are occurring that would make you shudder just to think about them.

First of all you should know that the mandarins have put a price on French heads, just as we do for the vipers in the forests of Fontainebleau. [A head] is worth somewhere in the fifties of francs. So those beggars think of nothing but cutting our throats and they stop at nothing to catch us in their traps, each one as heinous as the next.

In the end, my friend, that won't keep me from wishing you a Happy New Year. I myself hope that the one to come will bring me a little satisfaction, of which the greatest – alas, not very likely – would be a short time in France so that I could hug Mama and shake the hands of my friends. In the end, he who lives will see.

In the course of January 1885, the French troops are henceforth well entrenched in Kelung. However, they are still under their full strength and real enforcement of the blockade remains very difficult. The major problem with which the Far-East squadron is confronted is well and truly the attitude of the neutral powers. Up to that point, notably the United States and England had been strongly suspected of collaborating in the transport of arms and troops to Formosa.

[P. 102] *But on the 22nd of January 1885, events take a more official turn and things between the French and British governments turn ugly. Indeed, English colonial authorities established in the ports of Hong Kong and Singapore prohibit, in conformity with the "Foreign Enlistment Act," any repairs to French warships there. Great Britain restricts the refueling of French ships – a key element in the conduct of the blockade – to a minimum. In response, Admiral Courbet receives the right, from the French government, to board neutral ships and to stop them if they are indeed loaded with troops or munitions destined for Formosa and China.*

In addition, French reinforcements arrive. They are composed of an African battalion that arrives in Formosa in the first days of January 1885 and of a battalion of the Foreign Legion that disembarks at the end of this same month. They are in total some 2,000 men who come to reinforce the French positions. One must note the very particular composition of these reinforcements. The men who compose the African battalion are called the "Zephyrs" (the sailor evokes one of them in the letter that follows). Being based in the African deserts of southern Algeria, the regular troops as well as the officers are habituated to a rude existence. In addition, some of the reinforcements are composed of convicts. These soldiers are known for being "hotheads" and ruthless combatants. As for the men of the Foreign Legion, they already have a solid reputation. Composed of Frenchmen and of foreigners – a good number of Germans among them – these men are devoted body and soul to their battalion and to their leaders.

And so it is that at the end of January 1885. Three thousand French soldiers are established at Kelung. Hostilities erupt almost immediately with the Chinese troops who maintain positions all around the port of Kelung. Despite the French reinforcements, the Chinese, who have themselves reinforced their troops with soldiers coming in large part from Fujian and with men recruited from the local population, hang on. [P. 103] *And the French do not succeed in spreading their domination elsewhere but around Kelung and its surrounding areas.*

30 January 1885

I'm seeing everything through rose-colored glasses: big things are being prepared, and there are severe changes in our situation. True, it wasn't a moment too soon: I can very well say that now, if we're not all swatted like flies, it's truly a lucky thing. But now [the situation] is straightened out.

So you know where we've been, in rough seas, and from the moment we disembarked [there were] all the possible tricks of the Chinese. That could not continue.

So at the end of the first week of January we suddenly made chase after the Chinese junks. The fact is they multiply like water skeeters.

First, we caught a bunch of Celestials. These imbeciles thought we were going to cut off their heads. There's a monomania about decapitation in this country. They think that we're some type of monsters and would not stop short of taking us for cannibals. It is their mandarins who put these ideas into their heads, so that they will tear to pieces all of the Frenchmen who fall into their hands. But we, as long as we're not carried away by the madness of battle, we are as gentle as lambs.

We don't kill them, but we do make them work, and truly, one should give them credit; there isn't a horse, a cow, or an ass that labors with the patience and energy of these beasts of burden. You've often seen a mason at our home: he takes a brick, feels its weight, throws it a little look on the sly to see if it's right, takes it to the wall, stops himself to relight his pipe, picks up the brick, and all of that over a quarter of an hour. A Chinese to whom we harness a load doesn't do one or two; he pulls, he goes straight where he has to, unloads, then comes back, goes off again, all of that without stopping. One would say they are machines that do not stop.

But we only take Chinese on the junks: we make good hauls and [they are] of no small importance, spanning from sacks of piastres that will fatten the State's coffers to provisions of all kinds. We pinch rice and tea first thing and we have good rations of them, and then opium, which we don't give ourselves, fortunately; one time I had the nerve to touch it, and I thought I was going to lose my head! But here, opium is like money. You keep it and it comes back to you.

At that time, there was suddenly a change in scenery. A dirty shot of MM, the English as always. We had gone often to load up on coal at Hong-Kong. But there you go, the *Triumphant*, which arrived as usual, was sent packing by the English. It seemed that idea had been cooked up in London; they treated us as belligerents, and as such, they henceforth forbade us to come take

coal; [we were allowed] only the amount necessary to get us to the closest neighboring port, again on condition that this port not be in a state of hostility.

That's the way of it, again a means to favor the Chinese against us. They carry themselves decently, the Limeys!

But the mustard is starting to reach our nostrils, and as the shepherd says to the shepherdess, we have declared that since the laws of war were being applied to us, we will apply them, too. Therefore, no more neutral flag covering contraband merchandise. From now on they must let themselves be boarded or face cannon fire. We should have been doing that for a long time, since it's too stupid that troops and munitions continually arrived at Formosa during our blockade. Do you know that there's talk that 25,000 men disembarked under our nose?

Never have wartime smugglers had such fine game; first of all, the Pescadores Islands were not included in the blockade, and as they are located right in the middle of the canal that separates Formosa from the China coast, I ask you whether the English profited from it by depositing arms and soldiers there in case of danger. When our attention was turned, naturally that became the way to Formosa, and it was as if we were lost in a wood.

[P. 105] All that is going to end. Reinforcements just arrived, and Colonel Duchesne, who comes from Tonkin, has begun operations that are going to do wonders. We have taken possession of the coasts for good, and we've repulsed the Chinese to the third line of mountains.

More than two thousand men in one stroke! Ah! If only we had had them at Tamsui! But patience! All of that will come back to us. But Kélung is very much ours: we demolished what remained of the dirty thatched huts, and we've rebuilt the buildings that could still be used. The other day I went to see a Zephyr friend of mine and truly, I was impressed with the barracks.

Some Chinese have come back, there's nothing to fear from them. They are merchants who ask for nothing but to carry out a near-honest business. There is no longer any question of cutting our heads off, and one can bow his head without losing his neck.

Patience and courage, there are things to come for our little fleet, and know this, that later we will say with a small feeling of arrogance: "I was part of the squadron of Admiral Courbet!"

At the beginning of March 1885, an expeditionary force is sent to the interior of the island in search of coal mines situated to the southwest of Kelung. The advance is difficult and fights between the French soldiers and Chinese forces are numerous and murderous. But after four days of engagement, the expeditionary force finally reaches the mines. However, on the French side, there were not enough troops to defend access to these mines. A definitive occupation could not be attained. This is the final action taken on the soil of Formosa before the announcement of new French objectives: the taking of the Pescadores Islands (Penghu in Chinese).

[P. 106] *Indeed, the objectives of the French government have evolved. In February 1885, this same government declares rice to be contraband of war, notwithstanding the exception made to Canton and other southern Chinese ports. Among the Western nations, only England and Sweden oppose the decisions of France.*

The taking of the Pescadores Islands are part of this plan. The archipelago includes in total sixty-four islands, of which twenty-seven are inhabited, for an approximate total of 127 square kilometers. Being situated between Formosa and the continent, these islands constitute a strategic point that permits the stoppage of rice en route from the south of China northward, and permits the French army to station itself and to re-supply there.

Beyond these considerations, the Pescadores Islands are, according to Admiral Courbet, a good means of settling long-term in the region and of establishing a refuge for the French fleet. In the same manner that the English possess Hong Kong, France could possess the Penghu Islands.

15 March 1885

My poor old friend, am I happy, unhappy? Oh my, I wouldn't know how to tell you. Out of a bunch of alternatives, we've passed by fifteen [of them], sometimes believing that it was there and then it wasn't. We came, we went, and in the end, it was as if we had never changed place.

Please don't think that I've become a complainer, as there are so many of them. No, for myself, at bottom, what do I have to complain about? I am quite calm, I do my little job very quietly, a lot of brave men respect me, and I have my four limbs. What more could I ask for?

And well! It's not true! Yes, I rage and rage again, because I sense that things are not going as the admiral would like them to. [P. 107] He has something in mind, as if he has a project that he mentions only to his cap and which never comes to fruition. I myself know him well: when the admiral passes next to a sailor without looking at him any more than if [the sailor] didn't exist, it is because there's something wrong.

Of course! First of all, it is always the same, this never-ending blockade that up to now hasn't accomplished much. We know very well that the admiral would like to really pound against the Chinese and make true war on them, without so much diplomacy surrounding it. And yet, look what he had come up with, this cleverest of the clever.

You know – or more likely you don't know – that each year, in February-March, the Chinese government receives its galette, I mean the taxes of these beloved Celestials. And yet there are no tax inspectors like we have at home who send you papers of all colors until you're executed by good money. There is a bunch of Chinese taxes that are paid in merchandise, mainly rice. It appears that this enormous Emperor of Peking receives rice like that each year, something like a million piculs' worth. And yet, to govern you, the picul is worth about 60 kilos, thus coming out to about 60 million kilograms.

And well! [What] if we blocked all of that rice! No way to get through by way of the sea. I know very well that there exists a big devil of a canal, running from the interior to Peking, but the Chinese have their own ways of maintaining public works. The people pay for it and the mandarins pocket the money, so much so that all of that [public works] is in a dilapidated state which absolutely prevents its use.

So, nevertheless, we had to show up by sea and be there to cry out to the weapons carriers: no one passes! We had to refrain from arguing and inhale their rice right on the spot, which was not at all the same thing. No more rice at Peking. That makes a hellish hole in the budget: no more pay to the troops; in short a general mess.

But there you go. Always by the same reason that we wage war on the Chinese without really waging it, [our effort] doesn't work on its own.

Once again we had to consult the doctors of diplomacy: it was explained to them that as rice was the central nerve of the war in China, we could clearly treat it as contraband of war. That would force the Celestials to give in. The paper-pushers were of the same mind, and it appeared that the French minister, the one who is supporting us over there, sent a circular to all of the foreign servants that smoothly explained the situation to them. And still we would permit shipments to Canton and the southern ports. That cannot pass for ferocity.

But England and then Sweden, how have they just stuck their noses in our business? They've claimed that the neutral flag nevertheless covers merchandise unless we can prove that [the merchandise] is truly contraband of war. Chicaneries! You understand: rice is not like cartridges and shells. Once again [the English and Swedes] were cutting the grass from under our feet, but we showed them our teeth by asking diplomatically whether they were ignoring us, and these gentlemen rediscovered their manners. That does nothing; believe me that they are out to get us, those dogs!

III. Makung and the Pescadores Islands

The Pescadores archipelago includes in total a dozen important islands. Its principal port, situated in the Bay of Makung and well protected from the whims of the sea, is thus an important commercial site in the straits. The Chinese government had already reinforced this position, and in 1885, therefore, the site was very well defended by Chinese forces.

It is the end of March 1885 when the Far-East squadron, under the command of Admiral Courbet, moves to attack the Pescadores Islands. Throughout the day of March 29th, the French fleet bombards the Chinese fortifications, and on the 30th, the French army can disembark to carry out terrestrial operations. So it begins to deploy. The fighting will last for two days, and in the afternoon of March 31st, Admiral Courbet's forces find themselves before the port of Makung, then seize it. At the beginning of April, the Pescadores Islands are under the control of France: the operation, despite the superior numbers of regular Chinese army troops, is a success for Admiral Courbet and his fleet.

5 April 1885

Perhaps you think me dead, old friend. The fact is that it has been quite a long time since I wrote you, but it is because since my last writing we have done some work! You must have learned that elsewhere by telegraph, and I suppose it pleased you. It won't take long to tell the rest. We've taken the Pescadores; five words for one victory, an announcement that won't break the telegraph.

Ah yes, my dear friend, we've played our little part as conquerors. A fine expedition, like jam being spread over a slice of bread. I'm going to tell you about it in minute detail since I took notes just as if I were sending reports to a newspaper, and after all, I wouldn't do it any worse than anyone else; and then, in any case, it would be true from the first word to the last, because if I have any fault, it's that I am not a liar.

On the 28th, we anchored in the large bay of Ponghou [Penghu]. We were merely going to take the Pescadores.

I already told you about these islands. They are an archipelago, between Formosa and the Chinese coasts: [the archipelago] is composed of three large islands, Ponghou, Phehoe [Baisha], and Fisher, and then twenty small ones, hardly inhabited, and finally a quantity of rocky islets that form a belt around the central group. [These latter] are natural forts and good for defense.

There's a remarkable position, a vast anchorage, right in the middle of the three islands which make of it a large port; nature has never made a better one, all the more so as there are only three entrances, one of which is cut into two little channels by a fortified islet.

That's the port of Ponghou. But there's a bunch of other little ones along the coasts of the islands, formed by the indentations of the land. Finally, [there is] another excellent port on the littoral side, the port of Makung, which is the capital of the Pescadores.

Makung is not the first village one comes to: 10,000 inhabitants, that's a number. Only two unfortunate things [about it]: the first is that there are far too many pagodas, the second is that it's the foulest smelling village in all of China, and I tell you that in this country, that's not an easy prize to take. [P. 111] Also, Makung is a true nest of plague, cholera, and other pleasant epidemics of this lovely region.

As for Ponghou, we estimate the population at 100,000 souls; [it is] less dirty than Makung.

In sum, it's not exactly a paradise, all the more so as we search in vain for trees outside the village walls, as the soil is nothing but stones, and as water is scarce and a hellish wind is almost always blowing. But there were very good reasons for taking this place.

The admiral had never put much stock in the taking of Formosa and of Kélung: he had been persuaded that deep down, the court at Peking couldn't care less, and that the first result of this expedition was to immobilize the squadron and the landing forces. And then we had it so bad there. You remember how some of us died in the first moments, thanks to the anonymous illness. And the idea came to him to make a swap, to take the Pescadores in place of Formosa, on the condition, of course, [that he] not abandon the one until he had been firmly established on the other.

But there you are! There weren't yet too many of us at Formosa, and the blockade absorbed the entire squadron. It was not very easy to arrange. But the mail and the telegraph were not invented solely for the Germans: we can make use of them, too, and the admiral used them to bug the Minister of the Navy in showing him his reasoning. In the end [the minister]

listened to him, [though] not without difficulty, it appears. So you see the situation: the port of Makung, a very carved up bay to the southwest of Ponghou Island. In front of it, the long and narrow Fisher Island. The [name] is from German – that [language] must be sprouting up everywhere – and it means fisherman, like Pescadore.

Between the two islands of Ponghou and Fisher, and the port of Ponghou, [there is] a low-lying island, Flat Island, and behind that another islet (also very low-lying), Observatory Island.

On the whole, all of that is well fortified; [there are] five forts of which three have covered artillery positions; there are English cannons, Armstrongs, rifled artillery, smooth chambers, not to mention a certain number of Chinese pieces.

The island was defended by an entrenched camp which was next to the village of Makung, and then, on Fisher Island [by] a battery which appeared to be quite solid. [P. 112] Finally, the port of Makung was enclosed by a dam.

All in all, no one said that we would cut through that place like a hot knife through butter. But one must recall that the sailor had an old score to settle over there, Tamsui, and that, you see, if we had to march in there on rods of hot iron, we had decided to enter no matter where. In short, we believed that the Chinese would defend themselves like fine devils, and I assure you that we were eager for it.

There were detailed instructions for all of the scenarios that could have arisen; it was ordered like music paper.

I would really like to know what those guys are saying on their side. The truth is that they know only what their leaders tell them; the Celestial does not reason by himself. They're ordered to march, being assured that they are going to eat the French and the treacherous Coupa like chopped oysters, and they go along with confidence. Only here you go: they flee in the same way, panicked and without knowing why. We sometimes tell ourselves that we have never seen a Chinese do anything that was entirely spontaneous, for example killing oneself rather than dropping the flag. That's part of the fight, it's true, but we sense that beneath this courage there is nothing, not the I-don't-know-what that makes a Frenchman fight, first under orders, next for the fatherland, and finally for his own sense of honor. I understand a lot of things in this way, but that would take too long to explain.

Ah! When the casting off was signaled, if only you had seen how beautiful it was. And then, you should have seen the men, too, from the first officer to the smallest porpoise [deckhand], all serious, some a bit pale, the others red.

While our 24-calibre shells fell right on the casemates of the fort and demolished the entryways, and the Hotchkisses riddled the cowled artillery pieces and busted the cannons and their gunners, the Chinese balls seemed to stray so as not to bother us.

An hour of this work, and the artillery has done its job. All clear. Things are going better and better. With the *Duchauffaut*, the *Viper* finishes demolishing the camp. Then the admiral tells the *Triumphant* to turn its attention to the North fort. [You] must see the entryways fly, [it's

like] a true game of bowling, and we win with every roll. [P. 113] The batteries are taken from the rear. We see that we must now speed up our movements, and go see the muzzles of those dogs up close.

Lieutenant Merlin climbs down to land with a disembarking company. [It's] a beautiful site, one that makes our eyes rejoice. And it goes so well! This time, it's the decisive move: all of the landing forces advance!

Basically, it was not very clear why we found so little resistance in a position that had everything necessary to defend it. There was something shady about it. Perhaps the large part of the Chinese forces was waiting for us in the north of Makung, and the place was [already] difficult enough because of some tough hills.

The best way to know what was there was to go see, right? All the more so because if we succeeded in seizing that point, we would take our Chinese as if in a mousetrap. It was all very well worked out! There had not been too much harm done: the marine infantry had marched straight as bullets, and, at five o'clock, it had taken the summit of the dome. There had been some backfires here and there among the skirmishers, but [the work] didn't take five minutes for our men. We set up the tents; it was conquered territory. Now it was a matter of passing the night in peace, and of getting ourselves ready to conclude our little celebration the next day.

The next day, things followed the daily routine, but you see, there was the most admirable thing, which was that our Courbet never let himself get carried away. He had first wanted the *Triumphant* to go destroy the dam [at the entrance to the port of Makung] to allow us to approach and to protect the landing troops with our cannon. I must tell you that the dam consisted of a thick chain held at three meters [above water] by buoys. At first we had thought that there were mines at the ends of the string. Fortunately there weren't.

This time the Chinese looked like they were concerned: they made hellfire, and my word, they killed one of our men. There's a man who can tell himself that he had no luck. He was the first!

In an hour – you see that it hadn't taken long – the way was open. At seven-forty, like gold, the *Bayard*, with its attendant ship, entered the Port of Makung. We had won the first round, but now there was the revenge, and it was the Chinese infantry that was going to hold the cards.

[P. 114] We killed fifty Chinese. In the evening we camped. The next day, March 31st, we finished routing the Celestials, who fled toward the north of the island, leaving many men on the field.

Finally the Chinese decided, a bit late, that they weren't a bunch of good-for-nothings. On leaving a village, we found a number of them entrenched behind a wall of stone, and we were greeted by a first-class hail of machine-gun fire.

At daybreak the troops entered the fort of Makung with guns ready. I believe that I have never in all my life had such goose bumps. Think of it: we plant the French flag on the ramparts and then all the bugles call the salute. It's marvelous!

There is no longer a Pescadores Islands, no more Spanish, nor Chinese, nor German names; it is purely and simply the "îles des pêcheurs." It's quite simple, and at the very least it's easier to understand. It's so silly to speak of foreign languages when it is so easy to speak French.

[P. 115] *So even though the fighting [still] rages, Courbet receives new orders: he must abandon Formosa, establish himself indefinitely on the Pescadores, and send reinforcements to Vietnam as quickly as possible. But some days later he is asked to suspend the evacuation of Kelung. With the change of government – Jules Ferry is replaced by Freycinet – opponents of colonialist policy come to power. In addition, agreements with the Chinese conducted under Ferry finally were signed. The Sino-Franco War comes to an end.*

25 April 1885

Old friend, I don't have much heart to write: for some time, I've been feeling all hot and bothered. First of all, there's the peace: I know well that it's a good thing and that I am probably going to make a visit to your side of the world. That makes no difference. It seems to us that we didn't do enough work against the Chinese. In the end, that concerns our betters, and they must act for the good of the country.

It appears that [the peace] was signed while we were in the midst of carrying out our little Pescadores business, and see how the clatter spreads that we won't keep it!

As for that, it would be a shame, as I've already told you. No colony of France is worth [the Pescadores], and truly, it would be painful for our admiral to have given himself so much trouble to no profit.

So imagine that we have thirty-four buildings here: that's not nothing. And they were part of an effort to organize a supply station at Makung. That would feed mouths, and we in the navy are hungry!

At bottom, we believed that that would not be possible: we can see that we didn't know our admiral. He was sent to Formosa with clear instructions, and everything went smoothly.

In no time, in this country where everything was in disarray, we had coal depots to bring fuel to our boilers. We found old warehouses, constructed when and by whom we do not know, that were hardly solid. And well! In less than ten days, we've straightened them, strengthened them, and dolled them all up so that they were brand new and all ready to serve in the best conditions.

A port of France, right?! With all of its administration.

Our engineer, Mr. Rollet de l'Isle,[10] drew a map of the country. I saw part of it, it's a marvel. One could walk it with his eyes closed. Considering how fine it is to be learned,

[10] Maurice Rollet de l'Isle is a French hydrographic engineer who is part of Admiral Courbet's campaign.

sometimes it angers me that I know nothing, but patience; with my admiral, I'll work so well that one fine day, I'll pass some exams. I'm not so old, right? And to see other people do such beautiful things inspires in you an ambition to be useful to the country, too, one day or another.

Don't you find that I'm already writing better?

We're eating well, my dear friend! Poultry, eggs. I who have wanted an omelet for so long, because I'm no gourmand, but omelets! Too much fish. My Chinese did not lie when he told me that we could fish all we wanted here; so much of it comes into the markets here that one gives it out sooner than sell it. Mama, who loves fish so much, would be in her element here!

The best thing is that we aren't at the mercy of all the profiteers and exploiters who fleeced us at Kélung, when they weren't killing us.

We're receiving mutton, fruits, and game from Japan! It's a stomach's paradise.

Our officers are in seventh heaven: they have all the passion of little Chinese fellows, of cartoons, and there are things to move here by the dozen. The finest thing is that the bonzes, who are the priests of this country, themselves bring their gods to sell and at very good prices. You're going to laugh: one day we saw our chaplain come back carrying in his arms a superb Buddha, statuette covered in gold, which he had just bought himself with his savings.

All of that would be very well if – and I don't know why – I didn't feel ill at ease. It's not that I'm sick, but rather it's all moral; it seems as though a misfortune is going to happen to me. My chest tightens and then I want to cry, for no reason; it's like a premonition. I'm trying to gather myself, [but] it's not taking. I'd rather stop writing; I feel like I would say foolish things. See you soon, friend. Hug Mama tightly.

And a misfortune did come. On 11 June 1885, he who had managed French military operations since the beginning, Admiral Courbet, died. He died two days after the signing of the Sino-Franco treaty which put an end to the war. But his death was not sudden. In fact he had been sick since the seizure of Makung. After a brief improvement of his condition, he finally succumbed. And that did not fail to move our young soldier, just as the disappearance of the admiral affected the Far-East squadron in its entirety.

So Admiral Lespès takes command of the squadron. The Sino-Franco war is reaching its end. It is time for the French army to evacuate Formosa and the Pescadores Islands.

15 June 1885 [p. 118]

Oh Mama! I'm writing to you, since it is to you alone that your poor boy can tell all of his grief. The admiral is dead!

I won't make pretentious speeches: I'm not very old, but I haven't felt pain like this since the day when, placing my hand in that of poor, dead father's, you told me never to forget it. Don't be jealous, but for me there was something of a father in our admiral. He was a brave

man, I tell you, and a great man, too, the kind we need more of in our France. This loss is a true misfortune.

Deep down, I can't say that I didn't have bad premonitions: I already wrote so several times to my friend. [The admiral] didn't look well.

No one will convince me that he didn't catch the illness of which he died on a day when we saw him – head bare under a sun that would melt your brain – accompanying the body of a naval undersecretary, Mr. Dert. [The admiral] didn't think about it. If it would not have been disrespectful, I would have put my beret on his head myself. From that day forward, he was unwell. It appears that for the past two months he worked to hide his condition, an intestinal illness, the kind one catches in this country, which only grew worse. But he didn't want to be sick; he resisted, figuring that he would overcome death as if it were a simple-minded Chinese. Indeed, the taking of the Pescadores did him good. A fine success like that cheers a man up, and at one moment, I, who looked him over carefully out of the corner of my eye, I told myself that he had the upper hand.

If I had been asked to die in his place I would have said, "present!," and with what joy! You must forgive me, Mama. What do you want? I loved this man. It seemed to me that as far above me as he was – and how far! – there was a connection between us. The notions of a child, you understand.

And yet, I must tell you this, however strange it seems to me to mix joy with my grief. Not four days after [the admiral's death], I learned that I had been promoted to the silver medal, second class.

[P. 119] Why? My word, something quite simple. It was the day of our first arrival before Makung. An ensign, while climbing down a ladder, made a mistake and fell into the water. Of course! I was right there, what did I have to do? I had to dive in and go help him return to the boat. That's what I did and, quite honestly, I was completely amazed that people congratulated me so. Come on, when a man is drowning, must we let him go under? That wouldn't have been right, and well, we must believe that I did the thing properly, since that's what earned me the medal.

But I'm no dupe. It's not for nothing that I'm called the admiral's apprentice. He had his eye on me, and he cared to do me a kindness, and he chose the first opportunity that came [to do it].

You don't think that was fine on his part, above all since he had other Chinese to fry rather than [busy himself with] your poor lad! [**Translator's note:** There is a pun here that cannot be translated. The French equivalent to the expression "to have other fish to fry" is "to have other cats to whip," but here the sailor has substituted "Chinese" for "cats."]

And you would like that I not have such regard for this man?! I know you too well, Mama. You would want just the opposite.

At one o'clock, when we knew that the agony had begun, I cried like a miserable dog, and you know, the old tough guys, who are supposed to have hearts of shoe leather, were scared, and there was more than one of them who blew his nose more often than expected.

It's so stupid, the death of men we care about! And say that we can't do anything about it – it's all so planned out!

How sad the next day was. I'm not a poet, but I feel that before the great sea, under the broad, blue sky that surrounds us, death has something grand – how should I say it – something august about it. Don't make fun of me, please, I'm expressing myself as best I can.

We hanged the rigging askew, the colors at half-mast – it is our way of placing a piece of crepe in our hats – and then, every hour on the hour, the *Bayard* fired a cannon volley. It hits you as if you'd been punched in the stomach. I would have preferred that for sure.

I won't tell you about the funeral ceremony which took place on the 13th. We all cried, that's it.

[P. 120] But something very curious did happen: during all this time, while we were firing the cannon to wake a dead man, which unfortunately was not possible, a little bird came to perch on the ropes above the poop deck, and he sang so sorrowfully that it was a pity, and he did not move from there.

Now we await our orders. What will come of all this? I myself have less confidence [now]; I'd like it to be over.

22 June 1885

It's done, Mama, it appears that the peace has been signed.

It was just announced to us that we're leaving for France with our admiral, the day after tomorrow.

We will take him back to our country, hearts swelling.

When I think of the triumphant celebration that would have awaited him there, how our brave Parisians would have cheered the hero of Fou-Tchéou [Fuzhou] and Makung; but it's over, over for good, unless his soul is somewhere that he can see the earth.

I would like that, since in the heart of his little apprentice, under the medal that he had me awarded and which I revere as my finest memory, he would see his name inscribed in deep letters.

The mail is being called, [so] I only have time to close my letter. Besides, what do I have to tell you from afar that I wouldn't soon be able to tell you while hugging you with all my heart, since I love you. See you soon, Mama.

Thus ends the correspondence of Jean, the apprentice of Admiral Courbet.