TALES OF KOREA

Chris Eastoe, 2023

How it began

In the 1970s, when I was a doctoral student at the University of Tasmania, I had the great pleasure of meeting Moon Kun Joo and his family. Kun Joo was a geologist from South Korea, and he had come to Tasmania alone to undertake doctoral research under the supervision of Dr. Mike Solomon, who was also my supervisor. Eventually, he was able to bring his wife Lee So Yun and their boys Hoon and Joon. So Yun must have profited greatly from the experience in Tasmania for her eventual role as an English teacher in Seoul. For the boys, attending Sandy Bay Primary School was to lay the foundations of fluency in English that has served them well in professional life. I was involved in language-editing the first half or so of Kun Joo's dissertation in 1982, until I had to leave for an academic position in America. I could not have foreseen at the time how useful that first experience of editing for an Asian scientific writer would eventually be in my life.

By 1986, I had accumulated some savings, enough to consider some vacation travels. High on my list of destinations was South Korea. The Moon family had by this time settled into a house in Gangnamgu, the fashionable Seoul suburb on the south bank of the Han River, and Kun Joo was working for the Korea Institute of Energy and Resources, along with teaching a course at Yonsei University. So I was invited to stay with the Moon family for two weeks that would include a field trip to the mines with Kun Joo, another geological trip to a field area with a colleague of his, an introduction to a woman Kun Joo hoped I might marry, and a tour of some strata of Korean society that I would never have encountered on my own – all that in just two weeks. In 2013, I returned to Korea with my husband James for a one-week stay with Kun Joo and So Yun.

1986 VISIT

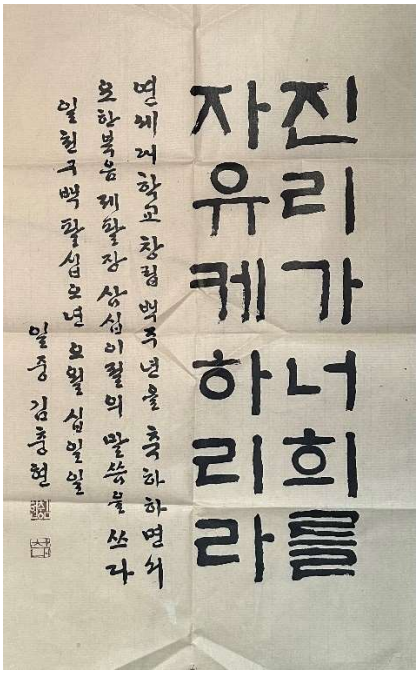
Seoul

At the time of my visit in May, 1986, Seoul was said to have a population of about 10 million. There was great excitement and much construction activity in anticipation of the 1988 Olympic Games. It was about 30 years since the end of the Korean War, and a new economy had taken root firmly. Seoul already had a subway system that looked extensive to me: a circle line with at least 45 stations, one of them near the Moon house, a shorter radial line through the city center, and a peripheral line to Incheon. The city did not have an extensive freeway system, and the traffic was dense and scary, as I soon found on being driven from the airport to Gangnamgu.

The Moons had a two-story brick house in Gangnamgu, over the Han River from downtown Seoul. The house was on a small plot of land and had little space for a garden. It was in a street of similar houses, most of which had two or three large, black, shiny crocks by the front door. These were for making kimchi and storing it through the winter. Making kimchi can scarcely have been necessary, however, because one could have bought excellent kimchi from the local supermarket. It had four kinds of kimchi for sale in large flat metal trays from which one could fill a plastic bag using tongs. The house was within easy reach of the Sollung subway station on the circle line. I walked around the area, to the summit of a

hill with a view down to the Han River. On the way, I passed a stone-mason's yard full of beautiful grey-granite garden lanterns. In the distance one could see–and hear–a sizable Protestant church that made its presence known by broadcasting religious music loud enough to constitute a disturbance from our part of Gangnam. The Moons regarded this as a nuisance, and I thought the noise obnoxious. Near the house was an ancient tomb (probably one of the Joseon royal tombs), a grassy mound with stone figures of soldiers and scholars. Hoon and Joon took me to see it.

Kun Joo took me to the center of Seoul to see the Namdaemun (Great South Gate) and the view over the city from Namsan (South Mountain). He asked me to give a lecture in English at Yonsei University, a Roman Catholic institution in the northern part of the city. In addition to his job as a geologist at the Korea Institute of Energy and Resources (KIER), he was teaching a course on ore deposit geochemistry at Yonsei. I was completely unprepared for the lecture but thought that I could easily give the opening lecture of the Isotope Geochemistry course I had recently begun teaching in Tucson. It needed no slides and was simply a thorough explanation of the definitions of stable isotope parameters that I could serve up from memory. One of the students told me afterwards that the topic was indeed very useful. After the lecture, I was introduced to the Dean of the school in which Geology was housed. He gave me a piece of Korean calligraphy on rice paper: "*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free*." I kept it on my office wall for the rest of my career. I remember two things about walking in and out of the campus. The first was the speakers playing traditional Korean music. The second was residual tear-gas. These were not entirely happy days in Korea, and students would frequently confront riot police. Strangely, the only two times I have encountered tear-gas occurred a few months apart; the first had been in Santiago, Chile, two months earlier.



The piece of calligraphy given to me by the Dean at Yonsei University

So Yun took me to see the Toksu Palace (Deoksugung). I remember relatively little of that visit—but see my notes from the 2013 visit for more.

The street in which the Moon family lived, Gangnamgu, Seoul. Gangnam has since become expensive real estate, with high-rise apartments instead of houses.

Hoon Moon is standing next to the family car

The Moon family on the front steps of their house in Gangnamgu, Seoul. From left to right: Kun Joo, Joon, So Yun, Hoon.

Lunch at a restaurant by the Han River, upstream of Seoul.

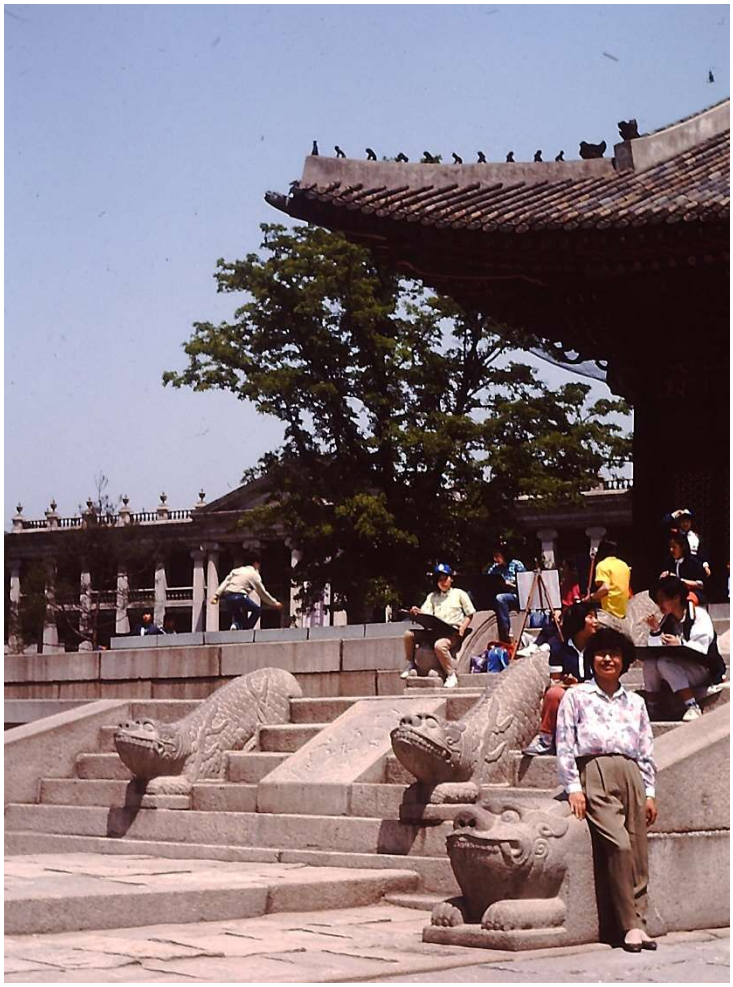
Kun Joo at the entrance of Yonsei University, Seoul.

With Hoon at the Joseon tombs, Gangnamgu.

At the Deogsu Palace, Seoul.

View across Gangnamgu, with the offensive Protestant church at the hilltop.

With So Yun at the Deogsugung, Seoul.



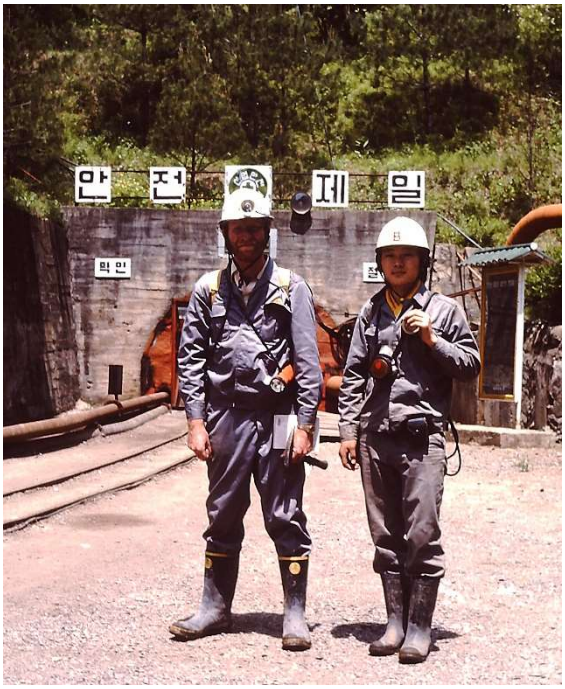
Social relations in Korean society

Korean society functions at a formal level on principles that center around family relationships and correct behavior. Correct and expected behavior includes making a marriage match at an appropriate social level and having children. Kun Joo told me that he was very interested in the plight of women who found themselves socially disadvantaged, for instance by widowhood, divorce, certain types of work, or even the activities of a black sheep in their immediate family. Such women would never be able to make (or remake) respectable matches. He was interested in how the women could manage to support themselves. His work as a geologist in the mountainous parts of the country appeared to provide him with opportunities to talk to such women from time to time. He set out to show me what he knew of that shadowy aspect of Korean society, during which process I was actually able to meet some of the women. One was the young lady he thought would make me a perfect spouse.

The lady in the restaurant. Since both Kun Joo and I had been students of Economic Geology, Kun Joo had arranged for a large part of my visit to be taken up with visits to geological sites. One such was Yeonhwa zinc-copper skarn deposit in the mountains southeast of Seoul. To get there we took a train to

Taebaek, where we had been instructed to wait for the Yeonhwa Mining Company president's personal car and chauffeur, who would drive us to the mining town. We arrived there after dark, about 8 p.m. As we approached the town, the chauffeur and Kun Joo were conducting a vigorous conversation. As far as I could determine, it concerned where we would be having dinner; the company president had offered to buy us dinner at any restaurant in the town. Kun Joo seemed very clear that he wanted to have a meal at a particular house, and the driver seemed to be protesting that we could go somewhere better than that place. Kun Joo prevailed, and so we found ourselves standing beside the rice-paper sliding door of the house. He knocked and pushed the door open. A middle-aged lady was cleaning up inside; it was a late hour to be ordering a restaurant meal in this small town. She looked up, said something like "Ah, Mr. Moon!" and asked if squid in spicy red sauce would be all right, this being all she had left. We assured her that the squid dish would be perfect and sat down for one of the most memorable meals I can remember. In addition to the squid, she served rice and four or five small dishes of vegetables, the standard practice in Korean restaurants. The vegetables included kimchi, radish, watercress and some others, each in its own delicious sauce. Kun Joo later told me that the woman was a widow who ran the restaurant on her own.

Yeonhwa mine, showing the mill, and two adit entrances.



The entrance of Yeonhwa mine, with our host, one of the geologists.

Yeonhwa town.

The coffee-house girl in Taebaek. Coffee-house girls are the Korean equivalent of the Japanese geishas who are better known in Western lands. They work as conversationalists in establishments that serve mainly coffee and ginseng to male clientele. In addition to serving drinks and conversation at the business sites, they may deliver their services to hotel rooms. When they do so, they are permitted to stay for 30 minutes only; for longer stays they must reimburse the coffee-house for the time spent, on the understanding that the client would pay them in turn. Kun Joo assured me that prostitution is never a part of their employment, but that young women who engage in coffee-house employment have their social reputations spoiled. Nonetheless, they take the social risk because of the prospect of an interesting life for a few years.

Once we had established ourselves in a hotel room in Taebaek, Kun Joo decided to show me how the coffee-house delivery service worked. He phoned in an order from some coffee for him and ginseng for me. Shortly afterwards, a beautiful, vivaceous young woman appeared at our door. Just before her 30 minutes were over, she informed us that she had the evening off, and invited us to go to a disco in her company. A most intriguing evening was about to unfold.

We walked in the dark to a rather dismal entrance and passed into a large windowless room with a bar, many tables, a dance floor and a runway of the type used in fashion shows. It was crammed with people enjoying beer, strips of salty, pungent dried squid and some rather brutal German disco music. The three of us found a place at a long table. Behind us sat a table of teachers, and the man directly behind me was an English teacher who badly wanted to use his English in a conversation with me. I felt

dreadful, because between the loud music and his accent, I could understand nothing he said; the situation was effectively shaming him in front of his colleagues. We soon let that rest, and went to the dance floor, all three of us. I did some standard disco moves with enthusiasm. This seemed to attract the attention of two young men, who wanted to dance with me. I thought "when in Korea, do as the Koreans do" and that it must be all right, whatever it meant to the Koreans. Soon after, one of them invited me to go and have a drink with his friends, asking me to join in a local ritual in which each person holds the beer for the other. Then we went back to the dance floor. At that point, Kun Joo and the young lady grabbed me and marched me back to the table. The young man came over to get me back, but Kun Joo was insistent on my staying. I asked him to apologize to the young man by saying that I would need to stay with my friends for the rest of the evening.

The evening's entertainment progressed to a floor show. Three beautiful young women in satiny, traditional garb emerged on to a runway in the center of the room. At the beginning of their act, the dancing seemed chaste and conservative. Twenty minutes later, they were in skimpy bathing suits, making lesbian moves.

At the end of the show, we left thought the dingy entrance, where some young toughs were coming and going. Kun Joo said that that was why our guide and he had not been enthusiastic about my fraternizing with local young men. The following evening, as we walked along the main street in Sangdong, I asked Kun Joo about the lesbian overtones in the entertainment at the disco. His answer surprised me: in the provinces, people might attempt something more daring than in the big city. I would have expected the opposite! He went on to say that homosexuality was an uncommon issue in Korea – although he had been approached by an acquaintance when he was young. I was soon to find out more about whether it was a Korean issue or not.

Market street in Taebaek.

Ms. B. The last woman I am going to describe is the one Kun Joo had picked for me to marry. He asked her initially to accompany me to a Korean-culture theme park in the country outside Seoul. I had expressed an interest in traditional Korean music, and the park in question had such a performance. We went by bus. The day's entertainment included walking among traditional farmhouses and farmyards, exhibitions of drumming, twirling (highly energetic dancing by men twirling streamers from their headgear – what neck muscles they must have had!) and the music, performed by an ensemble

including a singer, a percussionist, and musicians playing flute, Korean trumpet and zither. The style of singing is remarkable; the performer must focus so closely on producing the characteristic broad-amplitude vibrato that he or she is quite unable to move or act. The instrument-players follow the singer's vibrato closely. I had never heard anything like it, and still love the sound. It is quite distinct from classical Chinese and Japanese music. The outing was most enjoyable. I made arrangements to meet Ms. B. on two other occasions during my stay. We met with some of her friends for lunch at Itaewon, where the American soldiers on assignment to South Korea liked to go for entertainment. Walking that street was disturbing. The Americans seemed drug-crazed, lunging along the street though a society they had no real contact with or trust in. How different it was to be moving through that crowd with a Korean woman and her friends! The lunch was good – more squid in hot red sauce – though not as good as the same dish at the house in Yeonhwa. Ms. B. asked at this stage whether I could see any prospect of developing a relationship. I had to say, simply, no. Yet I liked her very much, and if I had been otherwise oriented, I could have done much worse had I wished to marry a woman. I think she liked me, too, because she invited me, my answer to her inquiry notwithstanding, to come and visit at her mother's house.

The visit to her mother's house took place on my last day in Korea. I made my way there on my own on the subway. Ms. B. was one of the disadvantaged women of Kun Joo's acquaintance. Her father's social reputation had been badly compromised though a situation that spoiled her chances of a satisfactory marriage. The evening was delightful, and Ms. B. was the perfect hostess, translating quickly and well between my English and her mother's Korean. We all got along so well that her mother was joking about having met in a previous life. Some years later, I was pleased to learn that Ms. B. eventually did marry a professional man, and I truly hope that she did well from that.

Drummers and twirlers at the folk heritage park outside Seoul.

What happened when I went out on my own.

Being able to recognize place names in the Korean *hangul* alphabet was essential if I was to move very far from the Moons' home in Seoul. I had tried to learn the alphabet from a book Kun Joo sent before my visit. Learning to say anything more proved difficult, because the method of the book seemed to be teaching stock phrases with no attention to grammar. Once I arrived, I looked carefully at the writing I was seeing. The day I was able to recognize *Seo-ul* on a car number plate was the day I realized that reading place names might be possible. For my last day, when Kun Joo had to focus on work, the family decided I could make a solo subway expedition that would include a visit to the Pi Won palace, then a clothing market, then Ms. B.'s house.

Using the subway on my own turned out to be quite different from travelling with a guide. A man came up to talk to me and asked if I could go with him to Panmunjeom in the Demilitarized Zone. (I didn't have any time left, of course, but was eventually to do that in 2013). Once I arrived at the station nearest to Pi Won, I stood looking carefully at a map in *hangul*, and was immediately asked by some young men whether I needed help. The gardens at Pi Won were a beautiful landscape of traditional pavilions, water-lily ponds, trees and flower beds. Afterwards, I proceeded to walk though some streets, stopping to buy an embroidered cushion at a little shop run by a lady who was most relieved that I could understand the price in Korean. From there, I took the subway to the clothing market, emerging with four polo-style shirts. At this point, I needed to ring Ms. B. to arrange a meeting place. I found a public phone on an upper floor and was making my call when I noticed two young men crowding in on me from behind. The phone "booth" consisted of two brief panels to my left and right, so I felt very uneasy as the young men began to approach me. I gave them to understand by body language that I was not happy about the situation, and they withdrew some distance. One of them went off, but the other remained and approached me again once I had finished the phone conversation, saying "I am one Korean kay boy." Clearly, he and his friend had very functional gaydar. I quickly pondered what to do. The young man had made himself very vulnerable, but I was alone in a city where I couldn't speak, read or write the local language. In other words, I wasn't about to go home with a new friend, but I also didn't want to be rude to him by walking off abruptly. There was a coffee house nearby, so I asked if he

would like to go there. He agreed, and we had a very halting conversation in English. He said he could never tell his parents about being gay. He kept pressing me to go home with him and was bitterly disappointed that I would not.

Pi Won gardens, Seoul.

Park Ki Hwa

Kun Joo had a colleague, Park Ki Hwa, at the Korea Institute of Energy and Resources, who had a project that he wanted to show me in the southeastern part of the country, near Gyeongju. It was arranged that I should accompany Ki Hwa for a two-day trip, during which we would look at his field area. Kun Joo accompanied me to the downtown Seoul railway station, whence Ki Hwa and I took an evening train to Gyeongju. The restaurant on the train specialized in Western food (i.e., American), which was passable, but not done well. I was much happier with the breakfast we had at the hotel the following morning. Ki Hwa went out into the street and engaged a vendor to bring food to our room. The breakfast included picked vegetables, including garlic and lotus root, along with a variety of strongly flavored smallgoods. Soon, we were off by taxi to his field area at a place called Weolseong. The feature of interest was a diatreme of rock fragments in a matrix of calcite and pyrite. Ki Hwa was hoping that I would be able to add some isotope measurements to his project (which I eventually did, and we published a short paper together). The exposure was a shallow cutting along a farmer's access road through fields surrounded by woodland. It was spring, the weather was pleasant, and cuckoos were singing. It was a pleasure just to be there. After taking some samples, we adjourned to a country store on the main road serving the farming area and had cold drinks as we waited for a car to take us back to town.

The following day, Ki Hwa wanted to show me some of the Silla Dynasty archaeological sites for which Gyeongju is famous. My memories of the day are becoming faint. I do remember seeing an excavated pleasure garden with a large lake and a wooden boat.

At the end of my stay, Ki Hwa came to Seoul Airport and presented me with a large, double-shelled celadon pot. It was a beautiful and virtuosic piece, and I can't imagine how expensive it must have been. I had it until 1990, when my partner of the time decided to rearrange the house while I was away for three weeks, and put the pot in a place where it could be easily pushed to the floor and broken. He managed to do just that before my return, to my great distress. Ki Hwa was not in good health. He developed stomach cancer in subsequent years, was forced to have drastic surgery, after which life must have been greatly diminished. He died soon after.

Park Ki Hwa walking back to the village shop at Weolseong.

Rural landscape at Weolseong.

Reconstruction of Silla palace gardens at Gyeongju.

Silla dynasty burial mounds, Kyongju. Park Ki Hwa.

Sangdong

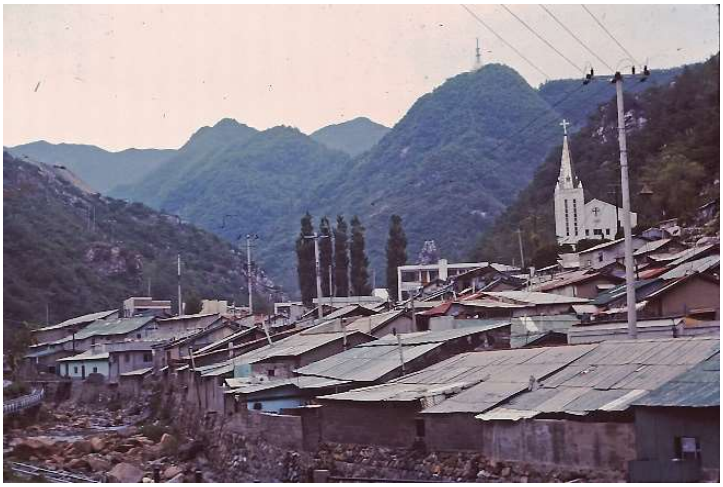
The official welcome at Sangdong tungsten mine was lukewarm compared to that at Yeonhwa. There seemed to be some friction. Kun Joo had, though his fluid inclusion study, located a zone of high-temperature hydrothermal fluid corresponding to the center of the known part of the deposit, and another high-temperature zone on its flank. He reasoned that further ore might be located around the flanking zone, and his prediction proved to be correct. The mining engineers dismissed any claim that Kun Joo might have contributed to the new discovery, saying that they would have found it eventually without his work. There was no invitation to visit. Kun Joo knew his way around, so he took me into the mine by the back door, so to speak. Nobody challenged us as we equipped ourselves with lamps and descended the shaft to the tenth level. The foreman of that level knew Kun Joo, and so we had our tour before lunch. We were still in the mine at lunch time and were invited to join the foreman and four other employees in the foreman's "cuddy" (the Cornish/Australian miners' term I had learned in Tasmanian mines for a chamber to the side of an adit). The five miners pooled the food they had

brought from home, heated it in a large pot, found two extra bowls, and split the food seven ways so that Kun Joo and I could eat with them. Coffee was served. The meal, rice with a tasty red Korean stew, was still a large lunch by my standards and was almost unbearably spicy as it followed the hot coffee down my gullet. Honor and courtesy demanded that I not flinch. As I completed my serving, the foreman made a comment to Kun Joo in Korean; it seemed to refer to my ability to eat the food. Kun Joo responded with a sentence in which I recognized the word Mexican. He was telling the foreman that I could handle the spicy food because I was accustomed to eating Mexican food in Tucson.

Our tour over, we made our way to the mining village of Sangdong, squeezed into a narrow mountain valley with a rushing stream and found a simple hotel.

Sangdong town.

Sangdong mine mill.



Two photos of Sangdong town.

Buddhism

Some of the most beautiful architecture on Korea is to be found at the Buddhist temples and monasteries in the mountains. The Joseon dynasty forced Buddhist worship sites to leave the cities, where there is still little evidence of Buddhist temples over 100 years since the fall of the dynasty. As a result, the beauty of the buildings is enhanced by their placement in beautiful and quiet mountain surroundings. Bulguksa is one of the pre-eminent temples of Korea. I understood relatively little of this at the time of my 1986 visit.

Buddhist temple outside Taebaek.

Three photos at Bulguksa, a Buddhist temple outside Kyongju.

2013 VISIT

Arriving

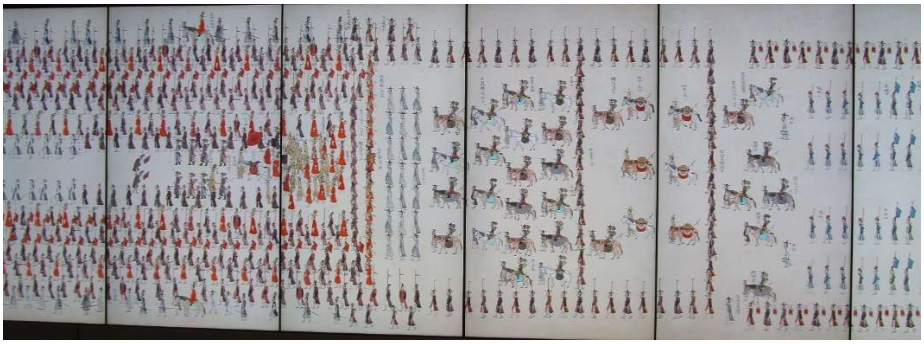
My husband James and I had just spent three weeks in China, and had decided to add a week in Korea at the end. So we booked our flights on Korean Air with a stopover in Seoul. Our return flight to Seoul was from Xi'an via Beijing, and could only be organized for an arrival time of 1 a.m. We did not expect anyone to pick us up at that hour, so we looked around (2 a.m. by that stage) for a quiet area outside the baggage and immigration halls. As in most airports, newly-arrived passengers are not encouraged to linger in such areas. But the Seoul airport arrival area did at least have a broad corridor with some flat-topped wooden benches. We occupied one of these during the small hours, dozing as best we could, but also keeping half an eye open for the sake of our safety.

This airport stay stood in stark contrast to the few hours we had spent in transfer lounges on our inward flight to Beijing. The transfer lounges are beautifully furnished and decorated with reproductions of some of the most famous Korean historical artefacts, for example a gold and jade crown. A moving walkway carried us alongside a wall on which was projected an animation of a historic scroll painting. For those who had time, there was an art studio where passengers could try their hand, with some instruction, at Korean handcrafts. We tried mother-of-pearl inlay. Finally, how could we not have called in at the Hello Kitty coffeehouse? This room was done out in Hello-Kitty pink, and the walls were decorated with feline parodies of famous western paintings. The transit lounge also had a transit hotel in which one could rent a tiny sleeping space. Unfortunately, we could find no such facility in the arrival area.

The Moons had moved from Gangnam, where the land had become too valuable for individual houses, to Bundang in the far southeastern suburbs of Seoul. We would be able to get there first thing in the morning by bus from the airport. At 5 a.m. I went searching and found the right bus-stop; the first bus would leave for the 90 minute trip at 7 a.m. Being tired of our overnight accommodations and the increasing crowds in the corridor, we gladly took the first bus, which provided us with a spectacular ride, first over the large bridge that serves the airport, and then along a very modern highway though a semi-suburban landscape of farmland interspersed with small towns of high-rise apartment buildings. Kun Joo had instructed me to ask any fellow passenger to call him on a cell phone. This we did as we approached our destination, and Kun Joo was there to meet us.

The bridge carrying the highway from Incheon airport to Seoul.

Hello Kitty coffeehouse at Incheon airport



Animated scroll painting, Seoul Airport

Seoul

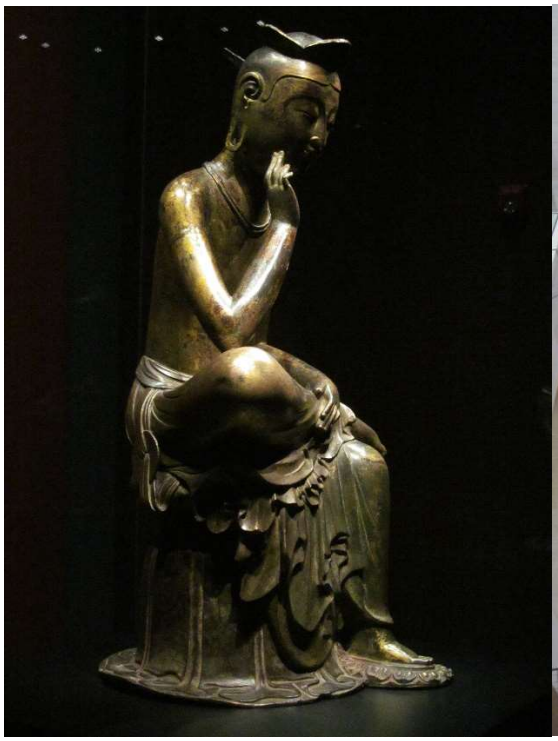
Almost 30 years had passed since my first visit, and the changes in Seoul were truly astounding. The metropolitan-area population was estimated at 20-25 million and possessed a subway system equal in size and complexity to Beijing's. The behavior of urban Koreans in the subway differed greatly from that

of Beijingers. The latter will yell into their cell phones to counteract the noise of the trains, heedless of the comfort of nearby passengers. In Seoul, it seemed that people were embarrassed at having to answer a cell phone while they were traveling. Getting from Bundang into the city center took between an hour and 90 minutes; the trip could be shortened by paying a little extra to use an express line that circumvented a series of stations – something I have seen nowhere else in a large city. By 2013, the old circle subway line was difficult to pick out on a map from the network of newer subway lines directed towards the city center.

The city center was festooned with tall buildings, dwarfing Namdaemun, the historic city gate which I had seen in 1986. The gate, dating from the 1300s, had been rebuilt following a fire in the early 2000s. Tall blocks of flats had supplanted the individual houses of Gangnam. Korea had invested generously in cultural facilities since 1986. Deogsu and Gyeongbokgung palaces had been restored, and both had regular changing-of-the-guard ceremonies at which traditional Korean military bands marched to interesting, somewhat strident military music played on drums, small gongs, conches, Korean trumpets and straight valveless horns. The median strip of a grand central avenue displayed statues of two luminaries, King Sejong who established hangul writing, and Admiral Yi Sunsin who led Korean military forces successfully against Japanese invasion in the 1500s. A small stream had been restored and flowed at the center of a long pedestrian mall.

Scenes from downtown Seoul: Changing-of-the-Guard at Deogsu palace; Yi Sunsin statue; Gyeongbokgung palace

The most spectacular cultural site was the Korean National Museum, a building of grand proportions, the mezzanine being tall enough to house a 10-storey 14th-century pagoda. We had about two hours before closing to sample the collections, of which my most vivid memories include the ceramics, a room of beautiful Buddha statues, and the Joseon throne.




Korea National Museum: Pensive Buddha, 14th century pagoda, canopy of the Joseon throne, ancient celadon double-shell teapot.

Bundang is a far-outer suburb of Seoul, set on relatively flat land between wooded hills. The subway stop is in the commercial district, where businesses are located on many floors of 5 and 6 storey buildings. On the upper levels, you can tell which businesses are there by the signs on the outside of the building—if you can read hangul. It was a short walk to the apartment building tract where Kun Joo and

So Yun lived on floor 21 of a building of at least 25 floors. We went out for meals in the commercial center twice. One restaurant had a unique style of service: customers at a table would order a whole meal that would be delivered in one "piece" on a board that became the table top. That is where we first tried fermented crab, a pungent, green, mucosal substance that one sucked from the legs and claws of the crabs.

Kun Joo had become a proficient painter, inspired by Van Gogh, in retirement.

Bundang: commercial center, and the apartment tract where the Kun Joo and So Yun live.

Korean Folk Heritage Park

The park is in the suburbs of Seoul, about 30 minutes' drive from Bundang. All kinds of Korean tradition are on display, notably rural architecture. Many of the traditional thatched houses that have been completely replaced in the countryside of South Korea have been preserved, along with their furnishings. In addition, there were performances: a country wedding, twirlers and acrobats. All was set in a beautiful landscape of woodland and ponds.

Traditional farmhouses and furnishings; twirlers; guardian figures at a village boundary, wedding ceremony.

Panmunjeom

The Moons insisted that we take a bus tour of Panmunjeom, the truce village in the demilitarized zone. They said they could not come, but Kun Joo was happy to accompany us to the Lotte Hotel in downtown Seoul, where the tour would be leaving. The bus set out with a guide and a mixed group of European/American tourists (as opposed to the Japanese tourists in another bus). The bus took us out of Seoul past Yonsei University, along the north bank of the Han River estuary, close to an area where the estuary also touched North Korean territory. The area was vulnerable to raids, so the bank between the road and the water was lined with coiled razor wire and guard towers at intervals. During the drive, the guide regaled us with a strident diatribe against Japanese militarism. At a briefing center, we were asked to sign liability waivers, which were available only in Swedish, and were enjoined to touch nothing and to take photos only looking north once we reached Panmunjeom (in case the North Koreans found a picture of propaganda value posted online, we were told). At this point, another guide joined us, and provided a commentary that was far more interesting than the previous diatribe. He pointed out a Potemkin village on the northern side of the DMZ, and explained that the DMZ, being largely uninhabited, provided habitat for animals that were rare elsewhere including the vampire deer, of which he happened to have a skull to show us. A few genuine villages are present in the DMZ, and the inhabitants are citizens of neither Korea. The guide also had stories of attempted border crossings on foot. We were allowed off the bus at the site of the meeting-house that straddles the border. We

entered the house, and walked around the conference tables, even at the North Korean end of the room. Outside, a few soldiers of both armies glare at each other, holding motionless aggressive stances for hours. The return drive provided us with a stop, the longest of the tour, at the gift shop where one could purchase a variety of DMZ merchandise. At tour's end, we were delivered to a large tourist restaurant near the Gyeongui rail bridge, built as a crossing point between South and North in the hope of eventual commercial relations.

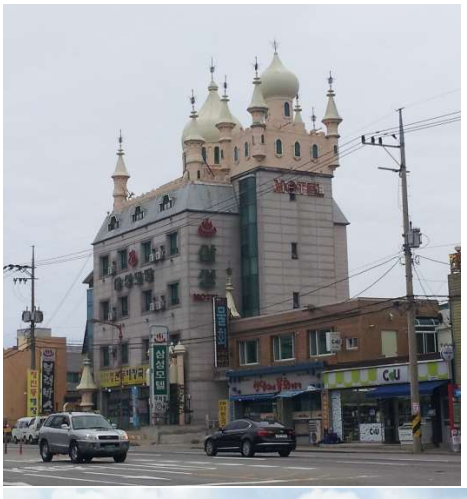
Roadside fortifications, and the conference house at Panmunjeom.

Sokcho and Seoraksan

We asked our friends about an outing we could do on our own to a national park. They suggested Seoraksan, a mountainous area on the coast of the Sea of Japan. To get there, we needed to take the Seoul metro to a bus station, followed by a bus across the peninsula to Sokcho. Seoul was under a dismal blanket of smog that probably stretched all the way back to China across the Bohai Gulf; once we crested the hills east of Seoul, the air cleared and we had fine sunny weather for our two-hour bus journey through incredibly green rural Korea.


Rural scenes along the highway to Sokcho

Sokcho is both a fishing port and a seaside vacation town. In its latter function, it has some garish fantasy buildings that made me think of Blackpool on the Sea of Japan. As a fishing port, it is a good place to look for fresh seafood. We wandered around the port, noticing first some restaurants on the wharves. They had tables in the open and some glass aquaria, but no kitchens that we could see. We eventually realized that they were serving raw squid, selected from the tank, chopped up with a cleaver, wriggling and jiggling all the way down. We decided to forego that kind of dining experience and walked on to a set of fishermen's cottages with cooked-seafood restaurants. The owner of the first one we investigated didn't seem to wish to deal with our lack of Korean, so sent us across the street. The lady who ran that restaurant spoke only Korean, also. As we walked in, she pointed at an electric skillet in which six small to medium fish of different species were frying. We nodded our approval, expecting to be given one or two of the fish. Soon enough, the skillet and all six fish appeared in front of us. They were delicious, having a wide variety of flavors. This might have been a full meal, but we discovered that she also served *sundae,* Korean sausage. In Sokcho, that meant squid with the body cavity stuffed with a tasty mixture of ground ingredients; the dish was rumored to be really tasty, not to be missed! There were two kinds, so it emerged, and a great deal of difficulty because she wanted to know which kind we would prefer. Eventually a Korean man at a neighboring table was kind enough to help us. So we added a plate of *sundae* to our lunch fare, resolving to do without dinner. Our seafood feast cost about $36.



Sokcho: Blackpool meets Korea; seafood feast (*sundae* on plate with red food item); fishing port and vacationland; fishermen's shacks.

Having explored Sokcho, we took the number 7 bus (with a grumpy driver who seemed to resent foreigners who spoke no Korean) to Seoraksan. The park is spectacularly mountainous, and we found ourselves wishing that we had come equipped for camping, or perhaps for an overnight stay in a Buddhist temple. But such things require advance organization, and we had to settle for a night in a hotel run by a couple who seemed to have little idea of how to manage the operation. We also settled on red bean ice creams on sticks instead of dinner.

There are three things I remember vividly about the park. First, we walked to Bi Ryeong Pok Po (Flying Dragon Waterfall), an outing that nicely took up the rest of the day. It was a lovely woodland walk, with a restaurant along the way (and another that was in the process of demolition). Once the track turned up the canyon of interest, it was steep enough to have metal stairs much of the way. The actual Bi Ryeong Pok Po waterfall was not large compared to other falls we could see coming from the crest of the large valley, but was a beautiful place to sit and put feet in the water. A crew of chipmunks begged for crumbs from the hikers, and native magnolias were in bloom.




Seoraksan: the hike to
Bi Ryeong Pok Po

Second, the park is home to a number of Buddhist temples. The Joseon kings disliked Buddhism, or at least the attempts of monks to influence politics in the cities, and so decreed that Buddhist temples should be allowed only in the mountainous parts of the country. There they remain to this day. Here, I will allow pictures to speak for themselves.

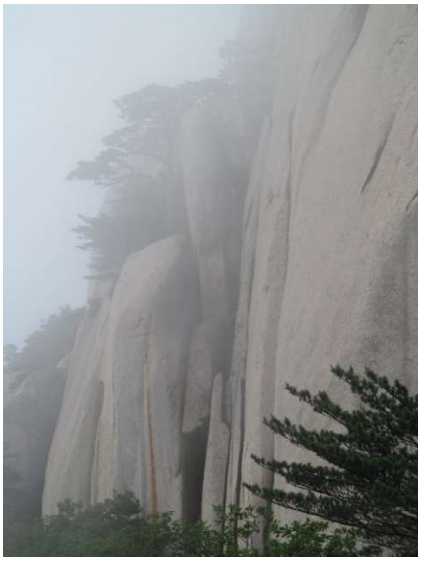




Seoraksan: Buddhist temples, and funerary stupas of eminent monks.

Third, we hiked to Ulsanbawi, a huge granite cliff. Local mythology says it was one of the rocks called together by the creator to make up a large mountain, but because of its size it moved slowly and arrived too late. On its way home, it decided that Seoraksan was a pleasant place to live. The trail led us through pleasant woodland past two open-air restaurants and two temples, one with a beautiful stone water basin for thirsty travelers, then to a hermitage high above the temples. This had been used by saintly monks in the 600s, and the cave is now set up as a temple with a central statue and small ones carved into the walls. Our path became increasingly steep as we approached the base of the cliffs. Very steep metal stairs led up to the rock face itself. We stopped where the route became rather exposed, being bolted into a sheer cliff face. There wasn't much point in climbing the last few meters, because mist was coming down. Many beautiful pine trees (*Pinus densiflora*) were growing from the rocks. As we were climbing back down, a man gave us a sample of wild mulberries near the hermitage. We stopped for a rest at a small temple we hadn't seen on the way up, and had lunch (*sundae* again, and a local variety of *bibimbap* containing bracken) at one of the trail-side restaurants.






Seoraksan: ascending Ulsanbawi; *sundae* for lunch.


The Community Garden

So Yun's sister and her husband owned a share of a community garden in a small valley of one of the preserved, wooded hillside areas a few km from Bundang. We went there to help harvest and to have lunch on the last day of our stay. The setting was delightful, with wildflowers and singing birds in the woods, and pleasant weather.

At the community garden near Bundang.

The following morning, we boarded the bus to return to Incheon Airport. The Korea Airlines Agent regretfully informed us that he could not seat us together on the flight to Los Angeles, but that we would be able to sit in Business Class. We did not argue! So began the most comfortable cross-Pacific flight we have ever had.