INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Getting Away From it All

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Dear Peter,

I've met my first real defeat in Korea. Rose and I had a noble project. We were trying to make it all the way from Pusan to Wando--clear across Korea's southern coast--by way of the local ferries that run between the thousands of islands there. It should have been possible. The magazine "Timetable," which updates its bus, train, and ferry schedules each month, listed enough runs to piece together an indirect route, even if we would have to change ferries in some fairly remote places.

But we never made it. Instead we got stuck five hours out to sea, on Geomundo, with a boatload of tipsy, singing and dancing "Halmonis" ("grandmas" in Korean), and had to throw in the towel. Despite the authoritative-looking departure times listed in the magazine, the islanders insisted that a ferry from nearby Chodo into Wando never existed.

But having made it three fourths of the way across, we did achieve our main goal--to see a little of Korea that did not stand, at least not directly, in the shadow of Seoul. We went to "get away from it all," figuring that the southern coast would be a good place to escape crowds, noise, and pollution, to find some beautiful scenery to look at, and some fresh fish to eat.

The Southern coast is blessed with good harbors, around which have grown several industrial cities, Pusan being the largest. Much of Korea's fishing fleet calls to port here, and in recent years the government has marked off more and more of the island and water areas for its national park system.

Like the rest of Korea, the southern coast is changing quickly. Many Koreans, everyone from peasants to office workers, now have time and money to spend just having fun. "Leisure" (pronounced
has become big business. There is enough demand now to support two thick, glossy color magazines on fishing alone. The southern coast is trying to cash in on the trend, and the government and some development companies are

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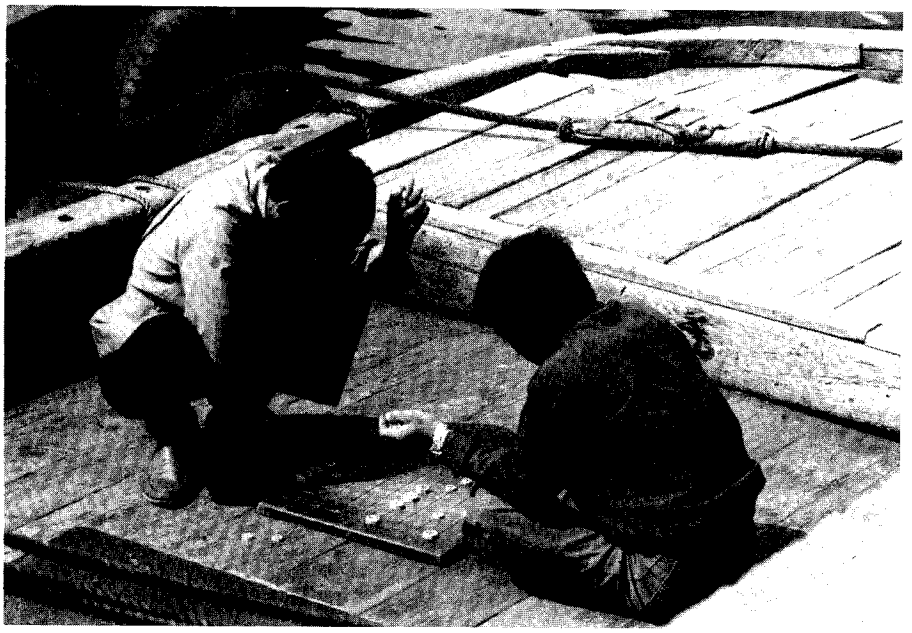

Leisure in the harbor

fast turning the waterways into a playground for Korean vacationers and honeymoon couples, much to the chagrin of people like us who like to indulge in the fantasy that we are setting out on unbeaten, if not uncharted, paths.

Alas, there are few paths left on the Korean Penninsula that are unbeaten these days. The romantic old slow ferry boats have been bumped aside by a hydrofoil that courses through the Hallyo National Waterway, stopping in the West at Yosu. It also makes regular runs to Jangseungpo and Okpo, on Koje Island, where Daewoo company has built a huge shipyard that houses, among other things, a couple hundred American and European technicians. Really the best you can hope for when trekking around Korea is good timing--that you don't get crushed in the stampede of other travellers headed the same way. We weren't always so lucky.

Just as it should be in any "get-away-from-it-all" vacation, everyplace we visited, down to Korea's other urban behemoth, Pusan, was nicer than home, Seoul. If truth be told, Seoul has all the ambience of a downtown bus terminal, not the sort of place where you'ld want to stick your hands into your pockets and stroll around just to absorb the sights and sounds. Sidewalks, where you can find them, are narrow and jammed with pedestrians. If you find a "quaint" back alley, you'ld better keep an eye out for cars whose drivers think your alley is a shortcut between major boulevards. The city stretches on in dazzling uniformity. It lacks theater districts, restaurant districts, entertainment districts that would invite you just to poke around in on a Friday night when you had nothing else to do. The extensive construction with its detours, noisy machinery, and dust clouds kicked high in the air only adds to the misery.

Our first stop on the trip, Pusan, was a place many people had told us to avoid, saying that it shared many of Seoul's unpleasant characteristics. So we did not spend much time there. But even one night wandering outside our hotel, we could see that Pusan had neighborhoods and even a little atmosphere.

Our hotel was a modernish-looking cement cube boasting views of the harbor and catering mostly to Japanese businessmen (with short-term Korean

girl friends) who travel on more of a budget than their American counterparts. Our window looked away from the harbor, but through the grime there would have been little to see anyway. The cigarettes of departed guests had long ago burned holes in the carpet and the bathroom was one of those modular compartments that looked like an elaboration of something designed for a submarine. But it did have lots of gushing hot water.

The neighborhood, at first blush, looked as rotten as any in Seoul--streams of buses honking their horns on the main street, narrow sidewalks. But walking outside the hotel in the early evening, we could feel breezes from the sea sweeping away the dirty air and carrying in smells from the wholesale fish market two blocks away. A turn off the main road brought us to a street blocked off to traffic and lined with Korean and Japanese-style restaurants, interspersed with the flashing lights and electronic beeps from video game parlors. Pusan has an entertainment district. Behind that was a shopping street of up-scale Korean goods (dominated by color televisions and sneakers) and from there rose a steep hill topped with a public park and a tower overlooking the city. Off to the side the park gave way to a huge open market complex of ready-to-wear clothing and, as we circled back to the hotel, we passed through a movie theater district with half a dozen theaters close together, separated by wide streets with no traffic on them. It looked as though somebody in city hall might have been thinking of people when they laid out plans for the section of Pusan that we landed in.

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Koje, the second largest island in Korea, was our next stop. The island's northern half, which faces Korea's southern coast, has a paved road running to the shipyards, and also connects to the mainland by a bridge in the west. But the rest of the mountainous island is densely overgrown and undeveloped.

Pusan dock workers

Our ferry to Heigumgang, a rocky outcrop on the southwest of the island, was cancelled at the last minute, so we took the ferry to the northern side of the island and found our way to the main road junction to await the cross island bus. Sitting on a pile of rocks under the warm spring sun, gazing out over an oyster farm in the cove below, our only

Dried seafood on the docks

Korean companions were a couple of knapsack-toting young men carrying fishing poles in vinyl cases. We allowed ourselves to think, for just a few minutes, that we had gotten away from it all. That delusion was shattered by the appearance of 50 middle school students just before the scheduled arrival of the bus. When the bus came, all the seats already had bodies in them, and more passengers stood shoulder to shoulder in the aisles--a "full" bus by most measures (by Korean legal ones too, I suspect). That did not stop anyone from trying to climb aboard though, except for Rose and me, that is. Some of the students crammed through the door to the bus as it opened, others dove through the windows. Every one of them managed to squeeze aboard, though not without some powerful shoving. We went back alone and sat on the rocks again, after restraining some enthusiastic students who started passing our knapsacks through the windows. The bus lumbered over the hill and vanished, with the ticket saleswoman hanging half out the door trying to shut it. (I later heard tale of such a bus that turned over. The passengers were packed so tightly that no one could fall very far, preventing any serious injuries.)

After sitting for another hour in the lovely afternoon sun, enjoying the light green spring foliage, a moderately full bus came by, and after another two hours of bouncing off our seats over rough, dirt mountain roads, and arriving safely at our destination, I gained a new respect for Korean-made buses. They don't get you there in comfort...but they get you there.

Our fear was that the earlier bus full of smartly-dressed students would have filled up the inn at Heigumgang before we arrived. I had mistaken the students for weekend travellers from the big city, but instead they were headed for home in the sprinkling of villages scattered through the island's steep, narrow valleys. The villages looked far less prosperous than their counterparts closer to Seoul, where most farmers have built solid new two-story cement houses, with brick and stone facades, tile roofs, and sealed glass windows. In Koje, thatched roofs had been replaced with corrugated sheet metal, but most homes still had adobe walls, open porches, and sliding doors that put only a sheet of paper between you and the winter outside. Still, by Asian standards, these were not poor villages.

Heigumgang was worth the trouble to get there. The inn, which did have rooms, sat on a rocky bluff. Our room looked out over a cove surrounded by precipitous rock formations rising straight out of the ocean like lonely sentries guarding the way to the docks and the fishing boats moored inside.

As the sun faded, we wandered toward the water in search of dinner--a peaceful walk interrupted only by a shout across the garden of the inn. "Hey, he looks like a foreigner!" Some American dirt-bikers from the shipyards had also discovered Heigumgang.

Dinner was live fish, Korean style. We chose a sea bass swimming in a tank in front of a small restaurant--really just an addition to an ordinary peasant's house. In about two minutes, the fish was gutted and carved up, with the flesh laid carefully over the skeleton and placed on top of a bed of shredded radish. The gills of the fish moved slowly up and down as they laid dinner before us. Undoubtedly the tail too would have flapped wildly had not all the connecting muscles been severed.

We returned tired to the inn, hoping for a peaceful rest. But that was not to be. The inn restaurant, located directly below our room, doubled as a "discoteque" at night. Discos, where young Koreans dance together in groups--there is little pairing off--to the beat of American pop tunes, are wildly popular. As a result I have learned most of the popular tunes since arriving in Korea, even though I never try to listen to them. The recorded music continued past midnight, when it was replaced by another Korean favorite--people taking to the stage themselves, belting out their own renditions of sad Korean folk songs. Sometime before the ruckus died down, sleep won out, but only til six in the morning when the village PA system went into action with music and the latest announcements. (I used to think that only socialist villages were nutty enough to use blaring public address systems to wake everybody up at the same time.) The weather also turned against us overnight. A storm billowed in, driving sheets of rain against the windows and blowing huge rollers into the cove. The storm ended our plans to hire a boat and poke around the rocks, which are Heigumgang's most famous attraction. But we did find out that those Korean buses do a mighty good job slogging through mud and torrents of rain, all the way to our next destination--Chungmu.

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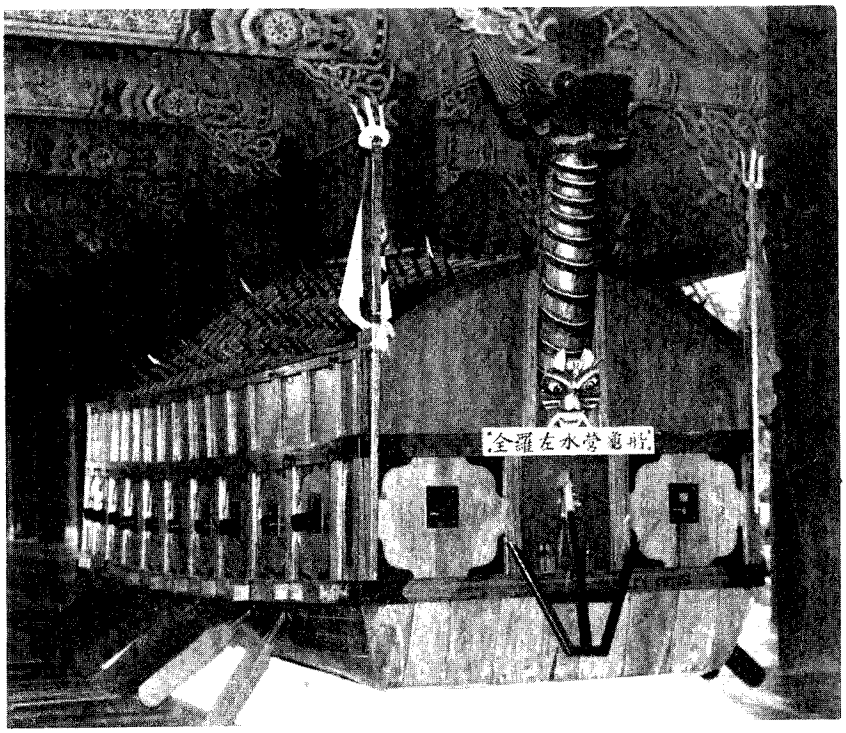
Chungmu literally means "loyal warrior," which is the honorific, posthumous title of the great Admiral Yi Sun-shin. The south coast is a real bonanza for Admiral Yi aficionados, and South Korea has plenty of them. According to recent public opinion polls, Admiral Yi is the most popular Korean of all times, and with good reason. In waters not far from Chungmu, he whipped the much larger Japanese navy about four hundred years ago, commanding a fleet of "turtleboats"--the world's first iron-clad vessels--which the Admiral designed himself. The ships were fitted with oars for easy maneuvering, and had canon projecting from all sides. Iron plates studded with forbidding spikes covered and protected the top of the ships. In the front, sulfur smoke emitted from the head of a dragon, contributing to the ship's fearsome appearance, and obscuring the fleet's movements. Japanese ships were defenseless against them.

For centuries, Koreans have rallied around the Admiral's memory, not only because of his brilliance as a military tactician and inovator, but also for his patient loyalty to the cause of Korean independence during the 16th century Hideoshi invasions. The Admiral has been especially welcome as an uncontroversial symbol of nationalism over the past forty years, while Koreans have tried to overcome the shame of subjugation to Japanese rule, and the widespread collaboration that everyone knows took place. (Of course, there was plenty of resistance too)

The late President Park took a special interest in Admiral Yi, dedicating a national shrine to his memory in Asan, where the Admiral was born. The late-President's calligraphy adorns the entrance to Admiral Yi's burial site on Namhae Island, overlooking the straits where the Admiral died in battle. (His fleet continued to victory without him.) Ancient shrines to the Admiral's memory can be found in Chungmu, as well as in the industrial city of Yosu. Huge modern statues of the man look out from hilltop parks in Pusan and Yosu, and, for that matter, in cities throughout Korea. On the monstrously wide boulevard leading up to the capital building in Seoul, there the Admiral stands proudly in full battle gear atop a stone pillar, with a replica of the turtleboat at his feet. In waters near Chungmu



A model of the fearsome turtleboat

Admiral Yi's resting place

a lighthouse in the shape of a turtleboat warns boats away from the rocks. Accolades for the Admiral continue to support a minor publishing industry.

In fact, the Admiral is so obviously and ostentatiously revered throughout the land, that some people have become suspicious and suggested that he is a manufactured hero for the cause of national unity. The historical record seems to argue otherwise. But it is curious that a Confucian society, which once loftily distained the military, should choose an ancient military officer to be its primary national hero. (Along these lines, public opinion polls published in the newspapers show that people have more respect for the modern military's integrity than any other occupational grouping. Entertainers, bar girls, and real estate brokers came out on bottom. The police did not fare very well either.)

The Admiral based his fleet in Chungmu, which today is a medium-sized, quaint fishing port. (Aren't all fishing ports quaint?) Actually the waterfront is grimy and sleazy looking, with lots of small inns and eateries that have dirty floors. Still, when Seoul is your standard for comparison, most anything looks charming.

The fact is that Korea is in that awful stage of development where breakneck economic growth is bulldozing away all of those things that took centuries of painstaking craft to perfect, and without much concern for the quality of what is replacing it. People are undoubtedly better off for it. Poverty is never really quaint. People in Chungmu are surely glad that their main street has store fronts with big glass windows that sell the same washing machines, color televisions, refrigerators, and gas ranges that you can buy in the big city. They can plunk coins into the same video games and buy the same pirated cassettes of American pop music. New houses in Chungmu have indoor plumbing and bathrooms. But really Chungmu's most distinguishing feature is that you can stroll around without being jostled by the crowds or overcome by bus fumes. Much of the growing city has an uncomfortable resemblance to Seoul's suburban sprawl.

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We tried once again to get away from it all on Namhae Island, further to the west. Namhae has a few mountains, but is generally far less hilly than Koje Island, and more suitable for cultivation. A paved road runs the length of the island, and after embarking the ferry, we rode the bus to Sangju, a farming village that doubles as a beach resort in the summer months. The inn was filled with college students on tour, so we stayed in a boarding house in the village, which was really just an old farm house. (I laughed to myself at how easy it turned out to be to find out how people really live in Korea. I spent six months living in a Chinese village yet was never permitted to pass the night in an ordinary peasant's house.) This house had no disco, but television served to keep us up just as well. The morning was greeted with Korean folk music over the village PA--a slow grinding chant-like style of singing to the accompaniment of a drum and a plucked instrument, the kind of music that is relegated to an obligatory hour on the national classical music station in a bow toward preserving "traditional culture." It apparently needed no encouragement here.

We packed a lunch and began climbing Kumsan, a mountain that rose sharply behind the village to a wall of sheer rock cliffs and spires. In 1979, Kumsan too had been encorporated in the Hallyo park system. There was a gate keeper and a ticket seller who wanted about ¢50 a head to go up. The friendly gate keeper, however, exempted me from buying a ticket since I was a foreigner. Rose, whose Chinese face people constantly mistake for being Korean, had to pay up, despite my protests that she was American too. (When people ask me Rose's nationality and I say she is American, they usually think I am joking.)

The trail to the top of Kumsan was rocky and steep, and the climb seemed far longer than the posted 5 kilometers. Every fifty meters or so we passed painted metal signs offering huge rewards, over 40 thousand dollars, for anyone turning in a spy. In a country where the per capita annual income is still under $2,000, that is a lot of money.

An old house in Namhae

Climbing really did seem like a good way to get away. But nearing the top we discovered an inn. A chorus of welcoming cries soon rang out from the hawkers peddling cold soft drinks and boiled noodles. As we wandered toward the summit we passed a military communication station packed with radio gear and bristling with antennae. The mountain

of course had its own buddhist temple. On the summit itself, rocks had been piled in a huge square about eight feet high, a labor that must have taken many man-weeks, for what purpose we could not fathom. On the way down, we passed the mountain's helicopter pad. Further down we happened on a hundred old men and women dressed in pastel silk brocade and straw hats dancing in slow rhythms to the beat of a drum.

Mountain climbing in Korea is good exercise (as it is anywhere), and often the scenery is very nice, but it isn't for those who like to indulge in the illusion that you have entered some remote place that man has given over to nature.

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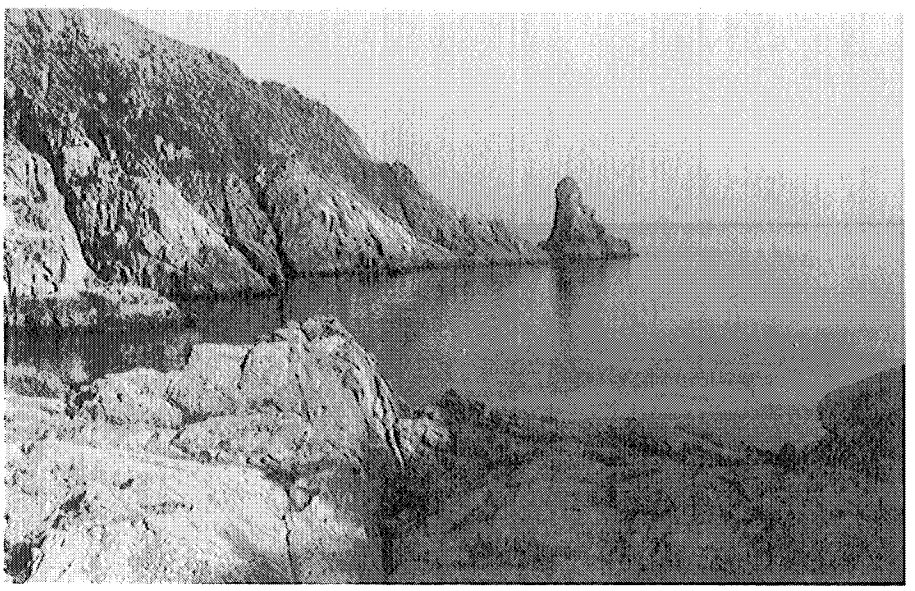
We rested for two nights in Yosu before heading out on our final leg toward Geomundo. We needed the rest for what was coming. The trip gave us another reminder, if we ever needed one, that old age in Korea is a time for indulgence, especially for women, who bear heavy responsibilities when they are young. Young Korean women can be very shy and retiring. (Or at least they are supposed to be.) But with more wrinkles on the brow and grey on the head, after women have raised their sons and become masters, and sometimes tyrants, of their family's fortunes, they can have fun. Our boat to Geomundo was filled with hundreds of these old "halmoni," many of them peasants, who had signed up for a package tour. (What better sign of changing life styles than package tours for peasants? Some told us they sign up to go somewhere twice a year.)

From the moment the boat shoved off, the action began--singing folk songs and dancing on the open decks, passing around beer and bottles of rice wine, and downing bottle after bottle of sweet-smelling energy tonics. The women were funny, and literally colorful, some dressed in hanbok, traditional formal dress made from pastel silk brocade, some dressed in loud purple and red polka-dotted pantaloons, the kind with loose elastic waist bands and inside pockets, into which the grandmas went fishing for cigarettes or loose change. Some sported tightly curled permanent waves. One



Rocks are a big attraction

The garlic boat

minute they would shove each other and laugh over some bawdy joke, the next minute argue loudly, and the next laugh again.

Being the funniest-looking thing on board, and Koreans always being very friendly to foreigners, I could think of no way to extract myself from the chain of bottle passing, although I did draw the line at energy tonics that had the sickly medicinal smell of cherry cough syrup. After trying for several fruitless minutes to shove one of those brown bottles my way, one woman chugged the whole thing, threw the empty bottle into the sea, and walked away in disgust.

The ferry stopped at three or four fishing islands on the way. An hour before arriving at Geomundo, the sea turned a deep, satisfying blue. At one in the afternoon, after five hours at sea, the revelry had not died down. Rose and I tried to rush off the boat to find a room before the inns filled up. That plan, however, was foiled by the Korean navy. We were stopped and subjected to careful, though meticulously polite, questioning about why we had come, what we were going to be doing, where we would stay, and when we would be going back. The Korean armed forces, ever worried about North Korean spies landing on one of the thousands of coastal islands, keeps a close eye on all comings and goings.

The grandmas beat us to the inn, but there was still a vacant room, since the women were sharing nine and ten to a cubicle-size room. The women ate

lunch and piled back aboard the boat for a tour of some rocky, uninhabited islets nearby, while Rose and I chose some peace and quiet hiking. By the time we returned the women had removed their revelry from the boat to the large open roof of the inn, where they danced to the beat of a booming drum. Sometime after midnight the proprietor of the inn had the women move off the roof, whereupon they brought the drum and the whole show to a room down the hallway from us. After another hour or so the inn keeper asked them to knock it off with the drum. The singing continued further into the night, how long I don't know, and then all was quiet until 5:30 AM, when everyone got up again. By the time Rose and I got ourselves up and out the door, the women were long gone, leaving in their wake an incredible clutter of empty beer and blood tonic bottles, dirty dishes, and cigarette butts--strewn across the rooms where they slept and out into the hallway. The young woman who managed the inn laughed and laughed with us on our way out. "Imagine, those old grandmas brought a drum with them!" she said.

After determining that we could not pursue our journey further to the west, we followed the women back onto the boat where they danced, sang, drank, and smoked cigarettes for five hours all the way back to Yosu.

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After an eight hour train from Yosu, we arrived in Seoul late in the evening. If we had ever really gotten away, the Seoul train station was enough to bring reality back into sharp focus again. Hundreds of riot police were on patrol in the station, and thousands more throughout the rest of downtown Seoul, searching anyone who looked like a student. We had arrived on May 17--the anniversary of the 1980 Kwangju revolt and a time when students register their opposition to the government by taking to the streets, if they can. That, the police would not permit.

Best,

Steven B. Butler

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