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The Changing Look of Korea

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Dear Peter,

I have the inescapable feeling when I leave Seoul and travel in Korea, as Rose and I did in late August, that I am visiting Korea's past. That's ridiculous of course. Korea's other cities and the countryside are changing rapidly. But in Seoul the pace is so quick that the city seems suspended in time, without any history. The Korean War destroyed most of the city, and much of what survived the war has fallen victim to bulldozers. Even the remaining ancient city gates, the walls, and the palaces (all of which show heavy reconstruction and restoration) seem like a mere decorative appendage to the monuments of concrete and steel that now tower over them.

We drove due east across the Korean penninsula, over the Taebaek mountains to Kangnung. From there we wandered south along the east coast highway for a few hundred miles and cut in toward the city of Andong. We finished in the ancient Shilla dynasty capital of Kyongju, before taking the marathon drive home on the Seoul-Pusan Expressway.

As much as I'm tempted to think of the rest of Korea as something out of the past, it is, more accurately, the hinterland of Seoul. Seoul dominates the nation's economy. More and more the hinterland has become a place to play for Korea's urbanites, a place to reestablish tangible evidence of the nation's historical roots, and, in a never-ending quest for tourist dollars, a place to sell to foreigners some of the greatness of Korean history.

Rose and I invented a new verb on the trip: to be "Parked." President Park Chung-hee was assassinated in October 1979 after twenty years of dictatorial rule. In his final years, he grew increasingly harsh and unpopular. The chief of his own intelligence agency shot him to death, believing that he was doing the nation a favor for which he would be thanked (he was executed).

Today, many Koreans remember Park favorably--even many opposition politicians. They give Park credit for Korea's economic development. But Park did more. He helped to create some of the modern symbols of the Korean nation, by plucking men and events from the

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past and memorializing them--by razing neighborhoods, paving huge cement parking lots, building new gates and walls, erecting signboards, and surrounding reconstructed historic buildings with walkways of square, fresh-cut granite blocks.

In an earlier report, I poked fun at one of Park's creations--Admiral Yi Sun-shin, who demolished the Japanese navy in the 16th century with a tiny fleet of armour-clad "turtle" boats. Only on this trip did I begin to appreciate the extent to which Park succeeded in creating a range of historic monuments, and the extent to which the late President changed the appearance of Korea's countryside--not always for the better.

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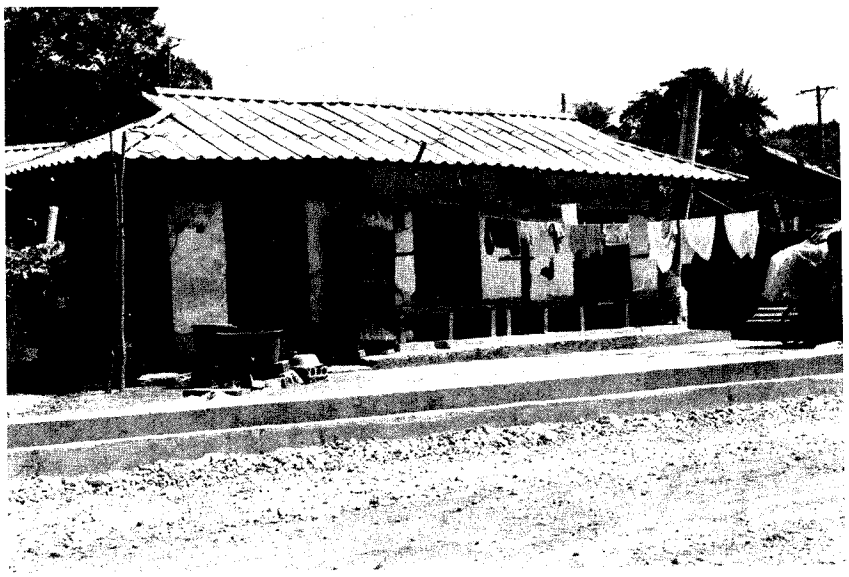
Park grew up a peasant. After he set Korea well on a course of rapid industrialization during the 1960s, he turned his attention to the transformation of Korea's impoverished villages. (This was not strictly a humanitarian gesture--it had important political ramifications.) The program he launched, the "Saemaul" or "New Village" Movement, provided cement or steel as a seed for village self-help programs. The program took place in the context of rapidly rising rural incomes, due to steep increases in state purchase prices of grain, and was administered with the full force and fury of the Home Ministry behind it.

Park liked bright colors and hated thatched roofs. At one point in the 1970s, the government in fact declared that it had finally eliminated thatched roofs. Some long-time Western residents of Seoul, not to mention Koreans, still claim that to be the truth, citing a ceremony that Park attended to celebrate demolishing the last thatch. A drive along the highways of Korea, and along older paved roads would seem to provide confirmation. Multi-colored "Saemaul" houses look out from villages beside major roads. The nice ones are cement with tile roofs, built after Saemaul architectural models. The less-nice ones, usually farther off the highways, are simply older mud houses where the thatch has been torn off and replaced with a corrugated, waterproof fiberboard.

Corrugated Roof: Waiting for the Road to be Paved



Hahoe Village: The Real Thing

Tile is an excellent roofing material. Fiberboard in Korea is thoroughly impractical. A thick layer of woven thatch looked messy and primitive--nothing seemed better to symbolize the apparent backwardness of the villages. But thatch was cheap, made from locally-grown materials, and provided excellent insulation against Korea's cold winters, and hot summers--something a thin piece of fiberboard could never match.

Some farmers in fact managed to subvert some of the pressure. They put a layer of fiberboard over their thatched roofs, or after the fury of the movement passed, they attached thatch over their fiberboard.

Hahoe Village (pronounced ha-hway), about 20 kilometers west of Andong, resisted the Saemaul Movement's architectural meddling. Hahoe was the renegade of the 1970s. It acceded to pressures to put up a cream-colored, concrete-cube schoolhouse near the village, and then decided enough was enough.

But as luck would have it, the government had a change of heart and eventually decided that Hahoe was a quintessential and valuable example of traditional **KOREA**, and that its mud and thatch huts and rambling aristocratic manors must be saved. In 1980, the government declared Hahoe to be a "protected folk property," and instead of providing support to tear down the village and put up a new one, the government now gives money to restore it.

For Hahoe the change is fairly dramatic. It was a renegade conservative village struggling against government pressure and economic change to preserve a traditional way of life. It has become a ward of the state and an increasingly popular destination for tourists (mostly Korean).

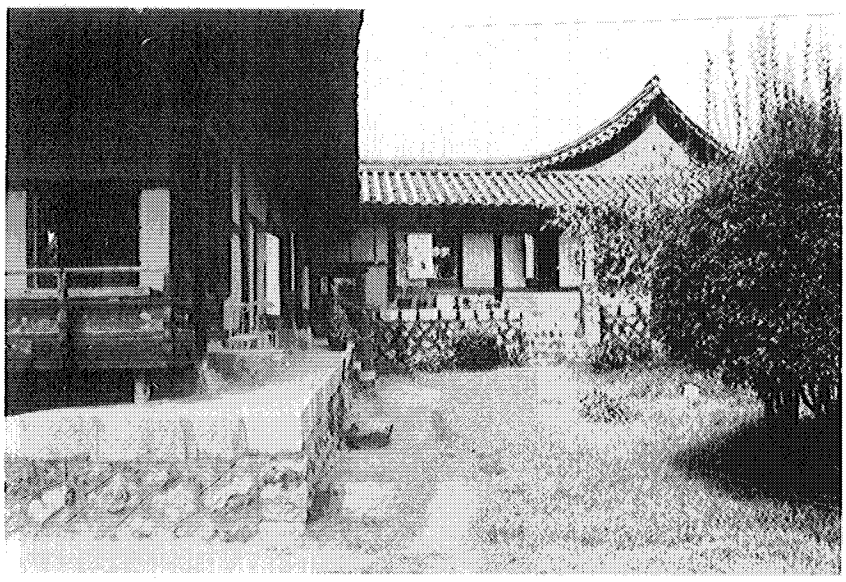
The transition is not yet complete, and that is what makes Hahoe interesting. Korea does have a "Folk Village," where farm houses from all around the nation were collected, and where tourists pay money to see staff clad in traditional clothes perform traditional arts and crafts. (The "Folk Village" is also interesting, despite it artificiality, because the Koreans did an excellent job of putting it together.)

Hahoe is still the real thing. The austere architectural lines of the houses are broken up by electic wires tacked to uncovered beams. Antenae protrude above the tile or thatch, connecting below to color televisions. Refrigerators grace most kitchens and courtyards are cluttered with farm tools and chickens running about.

Foreigners who visited the village several years ago said the natives stared back at them with curiousity. Most villagers have grown bored by now, and it is not easy to strike up a conversation with some of them. One old man, wearing traditional dress of pastel silk bloomers and straw hat, hid from our cameras, muttering something to the effect that you couldn't walk out of your house anymore without getting your photo taken. Still most villagers keep their doors open to visitors.

We did find a talkative storekeeper in the middle of the village who, fortunately for us, spoke Korean with something that approached a standard Seoul accent. While we sat in front of his shop drinking cold soda, Mr. Yu put on an old pair of twisted tortoise-shell glasses and brought out the family geneology. Pointing his finger down the charts in the book, he traced his ancestors back 27 generations to the founder of the village.

Hahoe's Aristocratic Homes



The Yu lineage dominates the village, which boasts some illustrious ancestors, including a prime minister, Yu Song-yong, who served during the Hideyoshi invasions in the 1590s. A small museum next to his enormous house contains personal papers and government documents of the era.

Mr. Yu, the storekeeper, told us that the provincial government had begun supplying money to restore some of the houses in 1980, but that the money was insufficient. Last year the Ministry of Culture and Information took direct administrative control, and hopes were high for more support.

Across from the Andong railway station, a large sign now points in the direction of "Hahoe Folk Village," although it was the only English sign I saw on the twisted route to the village. A new bus line now runs from the heart of the city to Hahoe, along a rough dirt road that is being smoothed and widened in preparation for paving. Film companies now come to Hahoe to make movies about traditional Korea.

Mr. Yu says that every weekend the dirt parking lot at the entrance to the village fills with tour buses. In mid-week, in late August, Rose and I shared the village with half a dozen camera-toting Japanese.

The physical structures of Hahoe will clearly be preserved, but driving away from the village, I wondered how much else would be.

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The city of Andong, of which Hahoe is a satellite, is reputed to be a center of conservative Korean tradition. The city is home of the one of the main Kim lineages. During the Yi Dynasty (1392-1910) the Kim's maintained political influence by providing a string of daughters to marry into the royal family.

The city itself today is unremarkable, if not dreary--a sprawling expanse of rickety post-Korean War structures slowly being replaced and surrounded by more attractive tile-faced concrete buildings. But every few miles of driving in and around the city is rewarded by something preserved from the past--a pagoda, a temple, a large rock carving, a beautiful aristocratic home.

Korea is a small country compared to its neighbors. Perhaps reflecting its size, it lacks the grand architectural traditions of China. The charm of much Korean folk art is its humbleness--a characteristic sometimes feigned with the utmost pomp. Unfortunatly President Park lost much of that folksiness in his grand restorations.

Twenty-eight miles north of Andong the late-President "Parked" the Confucian Academy of one of Korea's great Confucian scholars, Yi Whang (1501-1570), whose pen name was Toegye. (A major downtown street in Seoul, Toegye Ro, is named after the great scholar, and Toegye's picture and a rendition of his academy appear on the ubiquitous 1,000 won bill, about equivalent to a one-dollar bill.)

The Academy's parking lot, which overlooks a large reservoir, could probably accommodate a hundred buses, and might well do so on Sundays. The Academy itself, called Tosan Seowon in Korean, has been restored and rebuilt with German precision--with a fresh coat of bright paint, green lawns around the buildings, and well-trimmed shrubbery. The effect is altogether too modern and tidy. Yet I

Yi Hwang's Academy

Overlooking a Road near Andong--The Chebiwon Amit'aba Buddha

could not help thinking that an authentic restoration and display of Toegye's study may in truth be unimportant for Korea as a nation. The restoration makes tangible evidence of Toegye's historic role presentable to the thousands of Koreans who each day visit the Academy in packaged tours, and it has preserved what was there.

President Park understood clearly that every nation needs heros, Korea perhaps more than most. After the humiliations of Japanese colonial rule, and Japan's willful efforts to destroy the Korean tradition, restoring a sense of historical pride among Koreans has not been easy.

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Kyongju is one of the strangest places I have visited in Korea. Kyongju was the ancient capital of the Shilla Dynasty (57-935) and is unparalleled in Korea for its concentration of artistic and archeological treasures. The city itself is filled with large funerary mounds, only a few of which have been excavated. The mounds have been well-maintained in part because the families who live in the city trace their ancestry back over a thousand years to the Shilla Dynasty. They have looked after the graves.

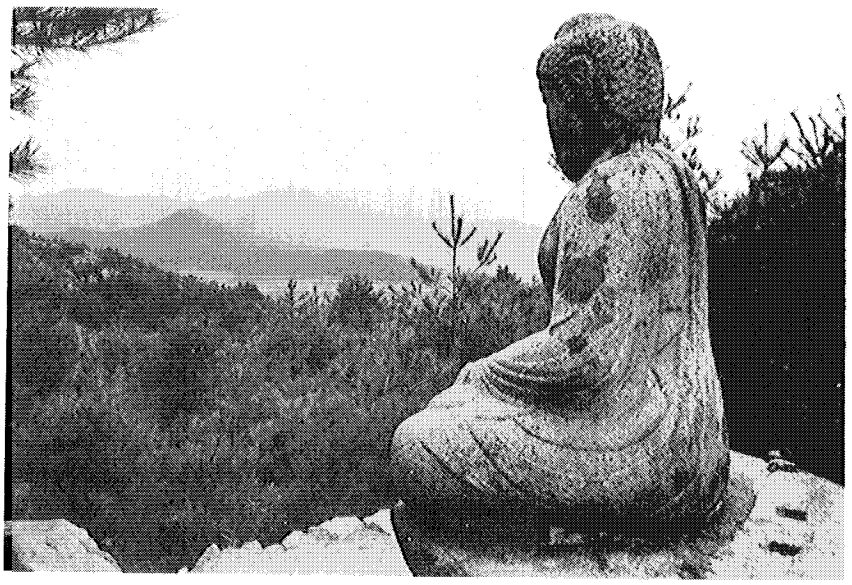
The funerary mounds of famous kings of the period stretch for miles outside of the city, sometimes surrounded by stunning stone sculptures. Archaeologists have uncovered the foundations of famous palaces and pleasure houses, and much still lies beneath the earth, with sites marked off and preserved.

On a mountain top near the city lies one of Asia's greatest Bhuddist stone carvings, the Sokkuram grotto, and beneath it the fortress-like Bulkuk Sa temple (another grand Park restoration). This was not our first visit to Kyongju, so Rose and I skipped some of the main sites and spent several days hiking up and down Namsan, or South Mountain. Namsan once played host to over 50 Buddhist temples. Few of those temples remain today, but left behind is an incredible legacy of homages to the Buddha in the form relief and free-standing stone carvings strewn across the slopes of the mountain.

The strangeness of Kyongju struck me after having spent more than a week wandering through more remote parts of Korea. Kyongju is Korea's most elaborate and extensive effort to create an international tourist site. Kyongju, now a sleepy provincial town, is the only place in Korea where miles of country roads have sidewalks, many festooned with white stone lanterns and miniature pagodas (which is strange by itself since pagodas were religious objects that supposedly housed parts of the Buddha's body). Of course, almost no one walks on the sidewalks, and apparently were never expected to. Guy wires angle out from small trees planted by the roadside, across the sidewalks to stakes, effectively preventing anyone from walking by in some places. Weeds have sprouted up between the red tiles that make up the walks.

The city wrote architectural codes that required houses to have Shilla-style roofs and cream-colored walls, although, according to my art-historian wife, no one knows for certain what a Shilla roof looked like. Even Kyongju's gas stations have imitation ancient roofs. Still, they are undoubtedly more attractive than the corrugated fiberboard that most of the rest of the nation is stuck with.

The View from Namsan Mountain



Shilla Dynasty Gas Station

I wouldn't want to say the effect is entirely unpleasant, just sterile. During the World Bank-IMF conference, held in Seoul in early October, the government ferried a bus full of visiting journalists around the country and took them to a "typical" peasant village in Kyongju. The journalists were not amused.

The building of Kyongju into a tourist resort reminds me of the Indonesian cargo cults, in which aboriginal tribes built ritual landing strips in hopes that passing aircraft would land and bring treasures. Like the cargo cults, Korean developers failed to attract their target, foreign tourists, at least in sufficient numbers to make the resort a financial success.

The foreign tourists were all expected to stay in an isolated resort, the Bomun Lake Resort, that has a large reservoir and several first class hotels. There are paddle boats, golf courses, tennis courts, and an amusement park with ferris wheel and roller coaster--the perfect compliment to a hard day of visiting ancient sites.

Tourists, especially Japanese, do stay in the hotels, but only the Koreans ever fill them up during their four week vacation season from mid-July to mid-August. The rest of the year, the hotels have a wonderful habit of steeply discounting their rooms for anyone (like me) who asks.

I would like to think that Kyongju is just ahead of its time, but I suspect many years of benign neglect will pass before Kyongju begins to lose the unmistakable look of having sprung from the dull imagination of an official in the Ministry of Culture and Information (a la my last report).

Maybe by then more tourists will start to come to Korea. Sandwiched between Japan and China, Korea has never had much pull as a tourist attraction. Tourism specialists say the problem is that Korea has a poor image. The climate is uninviting. People remember Korea for wars, student riots and military coups. The Korea National Tourism Board is convinced that the popular T.V. series, M*A*S*H, was the culprit that poisoned the image of Korea. The Board is counting on the 1988 Seoul Olympics finally to establish Korea as an attractive tourist destination.

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I would be unfair to finish a report about the look of Korea without mentioning the transformation that is affecting ordinary places throughout the nation. The Saemaul Movement in the countryside has grown moribund. The government is trying to use the movement, now in cities too, as a means of political indoctrination. There are still Saemaul model houses to choose from, but the pressure to reform the look of the countryside has largely subsided. The transformation, too, has slowed as farmers face a variety of economic difficulties, and an out-migration from villages has reduced the need for new housing construction.

Despite all of this, I found it hard not to feel inspired driving down the coast and through inland areas of North Kyongsang Province. Perhaps the slower pace of development, and the lower price of land, has given more time and space to plan for the look of new communities. These are not new communities really, but they have been transformed from poor rural administrative and market centers to modern towns.

## Visiting the Sights

Chongsong, in the Mountains of North Kyongsang Province

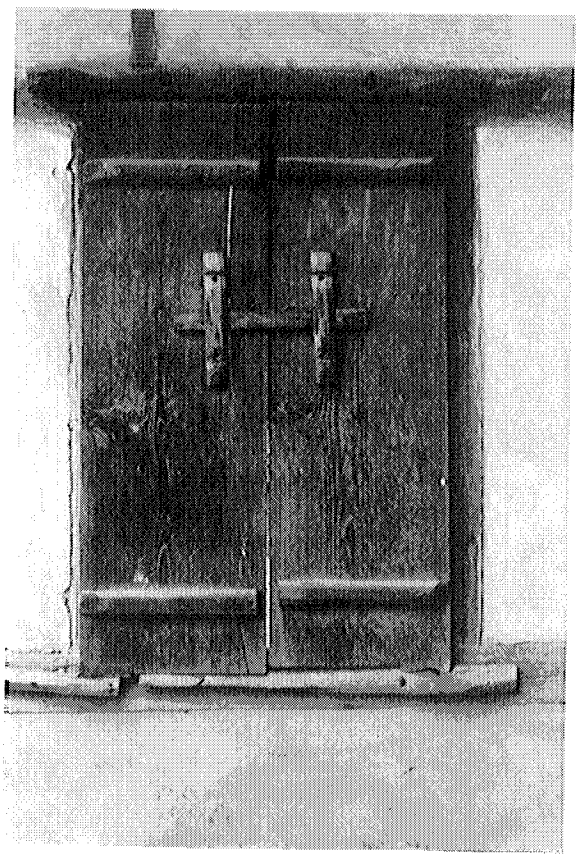
Rose and I stayed overnight in the town of Uljin, which was the most attractive place I have seen anywhere in Korea. A fresh crop of newly-built stores and inns line the main street. Around the rebuilt center of the town is a ring of tidy, well-maintained older houses. In the evening, from our third-floor inn room, we could see families sitting out on wooden porches watching television together. In the morning, one by one, they emerged into the lanes wearing work clothes, western suits, or colorful dresses. At the outskirts of town were newer houses of concrete.

It was a sight we saw again and again on our trip. When we drove off paved roads, through the mountains, towns and villages immediately acquired an older look. Still we found no poverty.

Having lived in a Chinese village, I am not one to romanticize the virtues of traditional rural life. Yet after two years of living in Seoul, I find it a relief to know that the conveniences of modern living can come without a total break in continuity with the past.

Best,

Steven B. Butler



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