

Memories of *Chunhyang*
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In July 1985, I flew from Tokyo to Pyongyang via Beijing and Shanghai as part of a delegation of half a dozen expatriate Koreans visiting family. I was thirteen and had never known deprivation; everyone else was over fifty and returning to a place that held vivid memories of violence and suffering. My father, who was born in Pyongyang in 1934, sent me with a 35 mm film camera to record memories.

At the airport, I met my interpreter and guide, a young woman who spoke excellent English. Our first stop was the folk museum in Mangyongdae, the birthplace of Kim Il-sung, who was then still in power. Orwell's *1984* had prepared me to recognize the apparatus of the state cult of personality: the careful presentation of the birth narrative, the omnipresent likeness of the "great leader" in public buildings, homes, cars, and lapels, and the recurring monuments and inscriptions to his *Juche* ideology. Staying in a downtown modern hotel, we were well-fed, three times a day, with a colorful bounty of *banchan* (side dishes) flanking the staples of rice and soup.

After a few days, I was able to visit my septuagenarian *chinhalmmoni* (paternal grandmother) at her spare two-room home with a small garden, where I was permitted to stay for a few nights, sleeping next to her under a mosquito netting in the humid summer air. Even now, I can picture her oval face, eyes closed, framed by short, silver hair, at rest in the moonlight. Even though we had just met, we loved one another, and I remember her to this day with great fondness.

A personal highlight was viewing filmmaker Shin Sang-ok's latest film *Sarang Sarang nae Sarang* ("Love, Love, My Love"), a musical setting of the traditional *Chunhyangjeon* ("Tale of Chunhyang") which, despite my lack of familiarity with the story and the incomprehension of the dialogue, made a very strong impression on me with its costumes, acting, singing, and dancing. It was my first experience of K-drama, ten years before 1995's phenomenal *Moraeshigae* ("Hourglass")!

In the middle of the visit, I spent several days at Mt. Geumgang on the eastern side of the country near the ocean. On the train ride there, I unexpectedly was able to drink a Coca-Cola (bottled in the Netherlands) at a rest stop, and also noticed propaganda banners hung over rice fields. At *Geumgangsán*, I hiked and saw famous rock and pool formations and waterfalls. In the dining room at the hotel, I befriended an eastern European family with a son about my age who were vacationing there. Even then, I think I began to realize the privilege and power I took for granted as a U.S. citizen.

Toward the end of my visit, I celebrated my fourteenth birthday at a restaurant with my family, where they served us the delicacy known as *dol bulgogi*, in which a superheated egg-shaped rock about the size of a fist was mounted on a metal tripod, and upon which thin slices of marinated beef were cooked. Looking back, I am sorry I turned down my older cousins' pleas to

share a beer with them that day—they insisted it would taste better if I drank it. At the restaurant, I met and got the autograph of the actor who played *Bangja* in Shin's film!

I returned home that summer with my heart and head full. Seven years later, in February 1992 as a college senior, I would travel again to visit my relatives, a story for another time.

I am now 46, the age my father was when he first returned to visit his mother and brother in 1980. My oldest daughter is 13, the age I was when I first visited in 1985. It is both hard and easy to imagine having the courage to send her to some remote part of the world to visit long-lost family. I am thankful for the faith and courage of my parents which in no small measure made it possible for me to have the experiences I did.

And I confess that I sometimes look up at the night sky and wonder how my cousins, nephews and nieces, and their families north of the 38th parallel are faring. Separated by human barriers erected by history and perpetuated by politics, we might as well be living on separate planets, the occasional voyages to them as improbable as moon landings. And yet, by faith, I trust that they are beloved of the God who created them also in God's own image.

The day after I first set foot on northern Korean soil in 1985, I was shown a newspaper article that said I was the first grandchild to visit in search of a grandparent since the war. My story serves as a reminder that the apparently impossible can and does happen. So by faith, I dream of the reunification of Korea, hoping against hope that it might begin in the lifetime of my parents and their generation. O that faith would become sight!

NOTE: Shin Sang-ok's *Sarang Sarang Nae Sarang* (1985) is available to view on YouTube (<http://bitly.com/sarang1985>) and *The Lovers and the Despot*, a 2016 documentary about Shin Sang-ok and his one-time wife Choi Eun-hee, is currently available to stream on Netflix (<https://www.netflix.com/title/80097376>).