

## **SEOUL** magazine

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### **Wither the Korean Market?**

**This article first appeared in the February 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine.**

There is a delicate balance between old and new, traditional and modern, in Korea. Some fear that traditions are being lost; others worry that Korea isn't modern enough yet to compete on a global level. One of the most obvious examples of this conflict can be seen in the markets.

There are supermarkets throughout Seoul: Nonghyup, Grand Mart, Hyundai, Lotte, and hypermarkets: EMart, Costco, Carrefour, just to name a few of each. Whether department store, large discount chain, or supermarket, modern markets abound and offer the latest items as well as many foreign ones. Convenience stores are on every corner and represent a smaller version of modern market. Traditional markets, such as those near Sindang, Yeongdeung, Sangildong, Moran, Garakdong, Nonhyeon, Cheongdam, Yeoksam, or Bupyeong, can easily be found as well, are typically out-of-doors, and offer an array of everything from food to clothes to household goods and sometimes even livestock; the largest of these is Namdaemun. Some of these conventional markets are open 365 days a year, while others only open on the first and third Sunday, or every fifth day (an especially traditional market practice, usually agricultural), or in some seemingly haphazard fashion.

There are numerous specialty markets both traditional and modern, such as Noryangjin for fish, Dongdaemun for discount apparel and Myeongdong or Apgujeong for high fashion, the Art Freemarket of Hongdae, Gyeongdong for herbal medicine, Yongsan for electronics, Yejidong for jewelry, Jangnpyeong for antiques, Yangjae for flowers, Chungmuro for livestock and pets,

and even Insadong for cultural artifacts and souvenirs. And there are ethnic markets or even regions, areas that serve the small Filipino, Russian, Japanese, Chinese, French, Mongolian, and other minorities of Seoul, in various corners of the city—which don't even factor into the traditional-versus-modern equation but stand outside of it.

Traditional markets give the appearance of a bazaar in the Middle East—or a flea market in the West. Many, often hundreds and sometimes even thousands of vendors (such as in Namdaemun, Noryangjin, or Gyeongdong) take part in the market. The booths, tables, or tiny shops are crowded together, a microcosm of many Asian cities, and the sounds, sights, and scents mix to become a tapestry that swirls around the shoppers, placing each of them well within the story that tapestry has to tell. It is an immersion experience and one of the best ways for a foreigner to get a sense of Korean culture. It can also be heady and overwhelming, so it's often good advice not to take in too many such markets in one day.

The Seoul Municipal Government reports 312 traditional markets, including 112 that aren't officially registered and simply spring up from time to time in various locations. Seoul Development Institute classifies them as small neighborhood, medium and specialized, and large-scale markets; more than 50% are over 20 years old. Foreign distributors have been permitted since 1996, and since then, the battle between modern and conventional has heated up exponentially. Another competitor of the traditional market is online or television-based shopping, both of which are swiftly gaining in popularity. Attempts by traditional markets to modernize, such as an Internet site representing Namdaemun vendors, have been largely unsuccessful; only one-tenth of the vendors at Namdaemun participate in the online site, for example. Many would argue that attempts to modernize traditional markets will change their nature forever, making them into something that they're not—a hybrid of old and new that's reflected in so many other attempts at cultural preservation. Others rightly stress that modernization at this point is a matter of survival, as the number of buyers at the conventional markets continues to decline.

Much discussion is occurring at present, as observed in various newspapers, magazine articles, and Internet sites, over the future of the traditional markets in Seoul. As Seoulites become increasingly modern and globally connected, they reject the traditional markets more and more; there is also a generational factor, in that the youth typically embrace all things modern while their elders attempt to hold onto tradition. The future of conventional markets, while trends

can be identified, is far from certain as Korea tries to protect its traditions and its culture from further erosion. Never is the struggle between modernity and tradition more apparent than in the marketplace of Seoul.

## **Yongo Ajuma**

**This article first appeared in the March 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine.**

Korea has one of the few remaining intact cultures in the developed world: 99% ethnic Korean, and a mere 1% foreigners, many of whom are Asian. While a number of native English speakers come here to teach, and the majority is centered in Seoul, they still represent a miniscule percentage of the overall population. Once one travels outside of the greater Seoul area, those foreigners who look distinctly different from Koreans are a true novelty.

When my 11-year old nephew came to visit last year, he was delighted with all the attention he received. "I'm a celebrity!" he exclaimed, as one Korean after another fawned over him. I told him that, as they didn't even know his name, he was not after all a celebrity but merely a curiosity. In fact, those who paid such tribute to him, saying he was beautiful or touching his head, were simply complimenting me -- his presumed mother -- which is customary in Korea.

The impact of being a member of a tiny minority in such an intact culture can be quite forceful when first living in Korea. Seoul initially seemed to me in many ways like New York, my home -- crowded sidewalks and streets and subways, a myriad of sights and sounds, the adrenaline rush that comes with such constant activity and late night culture. It didn't take long, however, before I became supremely aware of just how often I was the only non-Korean in any given circumstance. Not knowing the language accentuated such differences, though the visual impact was perhaps the greatest acknowledgement of my Otherness.

Dr. Rhi Bou Yong, formerly of Seoul National University and currently the director of the CG Jung Institute of Korea, told me early on that, having lived in Europe for a number of years, he had concluded that there are four phases to experiencing another culture. "First, you notice how very different the new culture is to the one you've left behind," he said, "and then you begin to notice all the similarities. Finally, you reach a point where you can comfortably experience both similarities and differences between your culture of origin and the new one in which you're living. But I believe that it's only when you go away and come back again," he concluded, "that you can even begin to truly understand this culture that is not your own."

Which is to say, perspective is key.

I come from one of the most culturally diverse cities on the planet today: New York. My city was founded by immigrants a few centuries ago and has never looked back. While this

microcosm is surely not without its cultural clashes, it has had enough experience by now to allow representatives from all 192 countries and the dozens of territories and colonies that make up the global community to live in relative harmony with one another. I had had a great deal of interaction with Koreans and other Asians prior to coming here, and the intact nature of Korean culture is one of the primary reasons that I did; however, I was perhaps less prepared for a monoculture than those who come from less diverse backgrounds.

One of the most obvious barometers for me is the reactions I get from young children, those who are two to four years in age by western calculation. One tiny boy, still preverbal, burst into tears and flatly refused to sit next to me on the subway, despite his mother's urging and murmuring of soothing words. A little girl, perhaps a year older, sought me out in a restaurant in order to snuggle up next to me, practically climbing into my lap. In a museum in Damyang, I heard a father's low chuckles and turned to find his small son following me throughout the museum. Many children point and stare, usually attempting to get a parent or older sibling's attention so that they might identify the stranger in their midst.

I recently got into an elevator with a little boy who was perhaps four years of age. He was with two women who appeared to be his mother and grandmother. When he looked up -- and up, and up -- to my face, he spontaneously said, "*Yongo ajuma*," looking then to his family for confirmation. When they repeated his words, nodding their heads, he beamed up at me and dubbed me "*Yongo Ajuma*" with certainty. I like this reaction best so far of all those I've received. To be called an "English Auntie" by a tiny Korean boy is to be accepted into the society by one of its most innocent members.

## **Mad About English**

**This article first appeared in the April 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine.**

"I'm just an English-aholic, I guess," my clever student sighed.

A university student, she majored in the language by day and took private classes at an academy by night. She wasn't certain what she wanted to do with her degree, exactly; teaching was an obvious option, but she had begun to think outside of the box.

"I really love learning English," she dreamily continued. "I feel like English can take me around the world." Her use of metaphor was apt. She allowed that it was not always easy "to express my true feelings" in her adopted language, and as a result she still preferred *hangeul* in most instances but expected her English skill to open doors for her.

Many Koreans, while acknowledging the usefulness of English for international business and travel in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, remain unconvinced regarding the wisdom of this trend. I, a native

speaker benefiting from Korean interest in my language, am compelled nevertheless to ask similar questions. When did English reach a status of international language, and why? Is it necessarily the best choice, at its origin a compilation of eight European languages and since that time borrowing from countless others? A language in which every rule seems to have a myriad of exceptions? A language in which *enough, though, through, plough, dough, and cough* can peacefully coexist?

Seoulites, ever pragmatic, are up at dawn in order to attend the academy for English classes before going to the office, take lessons on their lunch breaks, participate in conversation groups late at night. Books related to the study of the language are available in every bookstore, no matter how small. Proficiency in English does open doors as my student ascertained, doors through which the modern inhabitants of this city in a country with an unprecedented rate of development are eager, it would seem, to leap.

The latest trend in this rush to communicate with the world is the immersion method. Going on holiday to a country in which English is the native language is the most obvious and natural such immersion, though of course also the most expensive and often least practical approach. Cultivating an English-speaking friend with whom to spend hours in conversation might be related, and participation in a club for which language and cultural exchange is the goal affords a short-term immersion experience.

Immersion method of language instruction is one in which only that language and no other is spoken, heard, read, and written. Many language programs around the world use such an approach. Korean public schools have been employing this method to varying degrees since 1995, when Young Hoon Elementary in northern Seoul began its groundbreaking program.

English camps, during summer and winter school breaks, have become increasingly popular. And English villages, set up either as a comprehensive school system with mock facilities of daily life -- a clinic, post office, hotel desk, police station -- or as a fully functioning community, are springing up across Korea. An English village in Seoul has been open for one year, to which schools take field trips and ultra-modern Seoulites send their children for holidays. Another in Ansan opened in August 2004 as the first of its kind. Seongnam opened its English village last December, Incheon on 20 February of this year. Jejudo's English village, undoubtedly with the most exotic location, has an exchange program with its sister school in New Zealand.

Unique, however, is the English village opening in Paju on 01 April, a mock British hamlet of 70 acres. It will serve as an intentional community for 100 foreign teachers and entertainers living onsite, 500 students boarding each week, and 50 Korean teachers joining their colleagues daily. In addition, the "edutainment theme park" will throw open its doors each day to thousands of visitors, with displays by UNICEF and various embassies of English-speaking nations enhancing its programs and facilities.

Korea is mad about English, and Seoul is in the center of the frenzy. Will this in some way compromise Korean culture, or enhance its global opportunities? While clearly the latter there

is an element of the former, which is what makes many Koreans take a circumspect view of this madness. Nevertheless, it would appear that English, at least as an international tool, is here to stay. And the passion of my young English-aholic student may serve her well indeed.

## **A Modern-Day Shaman**

**This article first appeared in the April 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine.**

Brenda Paik Sunoo is a grief counselor, award-winning journalist, and recent photojournalist. She lost her teenaged son Tommy to congestive heart failure in 1994, and only after processing her own grief over several years as well as assisting others in theirs could she then begin to write her story. *Seaweed and Shamans: Inheriting the Gifts of Grief*, published last month, is a series of essays that not only honor Tommy and his family's loss but also depict the various gifts that the process of grieving can bring to the bereaved. The book itself becomes one such gift, and its author, in the ancient tradition of Hermes as well as that of her own ethnic heritage, acts as psychopomp in guiding others to the Underworld—and back again to the sunlight. In this way, Ms. Sunoo is a modern-day Shaman.

*Interviewer:* What compelled you to write this book?

*Sunoo:* Losing my son Tommy was of course profoundly difficult. When I found a bereavement group called *Compassionate Friends*, I began to realize that others not only had similar losses but were experiencing their grief in related ways. I became a counselor, and also began to realize that grieving is not only a negative experience; it can offer gifts. I wanted to share that experience with others in hope that it may help.

*Interviewer:* Did you begin writing your book at the time of your son's death?

*Sunoo:* I couldn't even think of writing when I was in the throes of my grief. So many people do, and it's a cathartic process for them. But I needed to experience and work through my grief, and gain some distance from it, before I could write; I wanted to get beyond the level of journal and to write on the basis of my craft while from a position of emotional honesty. I began writing in 1998, finished my MFA [in Creative Writing] at Antioch University in 1999, and put the book aside in 2002 when my husband and I moved to Viet Nam. Recently, all elements came together to publish the book. It's been a long pregnancy – but I believe that every book must find the right home.

*Interviewer:* Why Viet Nam? And how has your work manifested there?

*Sunoo:* My husband Jan, whose background is in clinical psychology, is a dispute mediation specialist and his work has taken us to various places around the world, most recently Hanoi. I have discovered a special affinity for the Vietnamese culture and it has inspired me to explore photojournalism, building upon my background as a journalist. I believe one must live in another culture for awhile to begin to understand the people, and to gain trust, and so after more than three years there, I am now beginning a grief support group. I am also a *reiki* healer and have been sharing that with people in Hanoi, both Vietnamese and expats.

*Interviewer:* What has been most surprising to you, living in Viet Nam?

*Sunoo:* Living abroad has opened me to new aspects of myself. It is a catalyst for change. I began exploring photojournalism, and after a long career as a writer, it was quite a surprise to me to discover just how visually oriented I am. Also, the people of Viet Nam live with grief every day, which is both a new and familiar experience to me. I know what it's like to live with grief. But I hadn't known the experience of multiple losses and long-term grieving within a culture. And some of their rituals resonate with me, especially that of inviting the return of ancestors on the first day of the [lunar] new year, and honoring the dead on their death day – what is perceived to be the first day of their new life.

*Interviewer:* Your writing of late has focused on multicultural themes, has it not?

*Sunoo:* Culture shapes individual belief in terms of the meaning of death and how we die, and mourn. I believe that cultural sensitivity concerning bereavement, and a multicultural awareness of the rituals of death and dying, are critically important. There is no right or wrong way to grieve, only human ways. But culture serves to define the experience.

*Interviewer:* What is your connection to Korea, and its culture?

*Sunoo:* I am third-generation Korean-American, and grew up in Los Angeles. While I identify as American, I am ethnic Korean, and it struck me when I came into the *Compassionate Friends* bereavement group that my husband and I were the only Asians present. I have visited Korea many times, and have cousins who emigrated from the US to Korea – a reversal, or coming full circle, of our grandparents' journey. My husband and I have contemplated doing the same.

*Interviewer:* And the title of your book?

*Sunoo:* *Seaweed and Shamans* doesn't have much to do with Shamanism, or even Korean culture, except for one essay, though it does center upon the Korean-American experience. The essay by the same title focuses on the gift of compassion. A Mrs. Kim gave me *miyok-kuk*, a seaweed soup fabled to provide strength, when I gave birth in New Jersey to my first son; another Mrs. Kim, twenty years and thousands of miles apart, gave me the same soup of strength when my younger son died. I was struck then and still am now by the connection between birth and death as shown to me by these two women, and by their compassion. In fact, I would say that my book has a focus of comfort, compassion, and communion.

*Interviewer:* Does your book tell Tommy's story?

*Sunoo:* One of the most freeing things that one of my graduate professors said to me was, "This isn't Tommy's story; that's his to tell. This is *your* story, which honors Tommy." That gave me the freedom I needed to write about my experience of having lost a son, and of finding unexpected gifts in the process of grieving. Tommy shines through, but I can't speak for him – only for myself.

*Interviewer:* How does this apply to your life today?

*Sunoo:* My life's work can be summed up by the word "compassion". I believe that there is too little of it in the world, and too much fear and judgment – and barriers as a result. I want to do my part to help create a more compassionate world.

*Interviewer:* What's the most important aspect of your life's work?

*Sunoo:* Empowering others. Understanding their pain as well as their hopes, and supporting them in the realization of their goals. I like offering guidance to late adolescents and young adults, those who are at a transitional time in their lives. And of course, I am compelled to work with those who are grieving. This work is expressed in my counseling, writing, and photography. I have also become an online counselor, and in the past several years, have counseled more than seventy people in this way.

*Interviewer:* What are your hopes for this book?

*Sunoo:* That it is well-received, of course – by men as well as women, and not only by Asians but the larger community. I hope that it encourages more openness, especially in Asia, regarding the discussion of such issues as death and dying and bereavement versus the preservation of self-dignity. And I hope that it gives non-Asians a greater understanding of the cultural themes of grief. Ultimately, I hope that it contributes to the way that the reader views grief – that it doesn't have to be entirely negative.

*Interviewer:* What final words do you have for our readers?

*Sunoo:* What has become my daily mantra: "Be open to that which comes to me, especially that which I do not expect."

## **The Happiest Man on Earth**

**This article first appeared in the May 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine.**

Isaac Durst is a well-known radio and television personality who has often been compared with Jim Carrey for his physical comedy and vocal inflection, though he maintains that when he first saw Carrey's performance he found it hauntingly familiar. Durst describes himself as "a pioneer of edutainment in Korea". He is described by others, including those at Arirang radio station where he DJs a popular show, as "the happiest man in the world".

*Interviewer:* What first brought you to Korea?

*Durst:* I was an English Literature major at Berkeley and came here in 1987 for a one-year exchange program at Yonsei to fulfill my language requirement. I returned to Yonsei for a master's degree in East Asian Studies, left for the states with my wife and worked in New York for a few years where the first two of our four children were born, then returned here in 1997.

*Interviewer:* What brought you back to Korea this time?

*Durst:* My life is filled with moments of meeting the right people. In New York I met the daughter of a Korean university owner who offered me a job as an English instructor at his university. My wife is from Daegu, our children share those roots, and I grew up with a Korean stepmom and grandmother, so it felt right to return.

*Interviewer:* But how did you get from university instruction to edutainment?

*Durst:* I was always using physical English and slapstick techniques, even when I was a kid. In the classroom I used edutainment principles. But there's a big difference between holding an entertaining class for 40 minutes in front of 200 students and doing the same thing on television or radio which reaches so many, and is preserved. In 2000, I was in a musical group performing *The Fantasticks* in Daehangno, and as the only non-Korean cast member, I was somewhat unique. Lee Bo-Yung interviewed me on *The Morning Special* of EBS; not long after, there was an opening and I was asked to audition, and I worked on that show for five years. Recently, I moved to another morning program called *EZ English*. I've also been involved with *English Café*, which has filmed more than 1000 episodes and uses a lot of clowning and chanting to help people relax about speaking English.

*Interviewer:* What made *The Morning Special* so – well, special?

*Durst:* I'm a professional teacher, so I prepared as if for classes. We were able interview well-known people who were visiting Seoul, making the program interesting to its listeners. And I've always made a point to work with top professionals – like Lee Bo-Yung – which makes me stretch to reach the bar that they set. In working with great and famous people, some of it's bound to rub off.

*Interviewer:* I understand that you also speak in Korean much of the time on your shows. You are known for speaking the language fluently. How is it that you speak it so well?

*Durst:* To communicate – that’s the goal. I believe in diving into the pool, in immersion. Here I am in Korea, and I studied for that year at Yonsei, and since then I just speak it as much as possible. The great thing about Korea is that they’re so forgiving. If I spoke incorrect English in New York, I’d hear, ‘Hey, man, where are you from?’ But here, even if all I say is *kamsa hamnida*, Koreans give me praise for trying to speak their language. And so I can learn every day, because I’m willing to make mistakes and sound stupid if that’s what it takes.

*Interviewer:* In addition to the television programs, you DJ a radio program for Arirang?

*Durst:* Yes, a two-hour program called ‘Golden Goodies’. The people at Arirang are great.

*Interviewer:* And you’ve written a few books?

*Durst:* Yes, several, and co-authored quite a few more. On my own, I’ve written *365*, a pattern book originally called *Isaac’s English Conversation Calendar*; there was also *0380*, a play on a Korean phrase, ‘from 3 to 80,’ or from cradle to grave. And *119* -- situations in both formal and informal dialogue, as well as *120 Themes*, a series of essays with questions for discussion. Now I’m working on another pattern book called *U-turn English*, to encourage speaking of the language by the use of 60 recorded online lectures.

*Interviewer:* Do you have a website?

*Durst:* Not my own, though I’ve often considered it. There is a sort of fan club at Daum Café which apparently has about 8500 members. I’ve made an effort to respond regularly to their postings.

*Interviewer:* As a final note, how have you come to be known as ‘Happy Isaac’, or ‘The Happiest Man in the World’?

*Durst:* Just because we don’t work in the embassy doesn’t mean we aren’t ambassadors. I think of myself as a bridge between cultures, and want to counteract the negativity sometimes displayed by foreigners as much as I can. And I am very blessed.

## **Spring Blessings**

**This article first appeared in the June 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine.**

Spring has come, and with it the annual blessing of the fleets in Incheon Harbor by the shamans (*manshin*, or *mudang*) who work to preserve the rituals of their heritage from the Hwanghae-

do region of North Korea. Leading the ritual is the beautiful and powerful Kim Keum Hwa, by many accounts the most well-known *mudang* of all.

Kim Keum Hwa, now 75, first received her calling at age 11 and by 19 was able to lead full-scale rituals, or *kuts*. While her early years were ones of hardship and challenge, she has now enjoyed more than 30 years of increasing recognition and influence. She won a national performance award in 1974, had an initiation rite broadcast on national television in 1981, toured the US in 1982, and was appointed a “living cultural treasure” in 1984. As recently as 2002, she performed in Paris. Many such accomplishments later, including an honorary doctorate, she now has a counseling center in Seoul and a training center on Ganghwado.

Joining her in this series of rituals known as the *Baeyeonshin-Kut* are several other *mudang* of some renown, including another Human Cultural Treasure, Kim Hye Kyoung. Also present: Kim Nae Mul, Kim Kung Hwa, Lee Ok Ja, Kim Ka Keum, and Lee Sun-e, among others. Many acolytes participate by chanting, rubbing of hands in prayer, assisting the mudangs, and playing musical instruments.

Rituals typically begin with the purification of the ritual space and participants, followed by an invocation of spirit. Kim Keum Hwa leads this initial phase while on land, acknowledging participants – including scholars. (“Study hard,” another shaman says to me, “and help Korea.”) Once the gods arrive, to include General Im Kyung-up, General Choiyoung, and Sunwang (the fisherman’s god), Manshin Kim leads the procession, deities and humans alike, to the boat for the majority of the rituals. Setting off shortly after 9:00am, icons and prayer flags and decorations all flowing in the breeze, the next set of purification rituals has begun—this time of the boat. *Gosa*, in honor of the ancestors, is led by Lee Ok Ja; minor deities are appeased by Lee Sun-e, and hungry ghosts are offered food that they might not interfere with the rituals. Kim Keum Hwa returns, this time to sing to Sanshin (the mountain spirit), Yongwang (the dragon king and deity of the waters), and Saheyongwang (the four oceans or directions of the dragon king).

Musical performances and comedic skits are interspersed among the rituals, as are blessings offered to the crowd by several of the *mudang* and one *paeksu*, or male shaman, with several opportunities to approach the altar. Lee Sun-e performs a rite for the gods of vegetation, after which Kim Hye Kyoung facilitates the *seonsu gyeori*, to call other deities. Divination and oracles abound, as do the classic knife and fans, percussionists and dancing. One *mudang* in trance speaks of “too much pollution of humans and sea” while another, possibly the eldest, breaks into sobs when an ancestor unexpectedly appears to her. Kim Nae Mul, in performing the *taegam nori kut*, proclaims, “People have changed much, but the old deities and the ocean have never changed.”

Indeed. And *kuts*, according to friend and fellow scholar and attendee Dr. Koh Heakyong, are messy things.

Mid-ritual, cellphones ring in the audience – and are answered, by those crying or swaying moments before. Shamans are smoking between *kut*, male observers are getting quite drunk, and a renowned shaman begins mocking the acolytes and the offerings of *makkeoli*. There is an almost desperate grabbing for the proffered ritual foods as they are alternately handed and thrown into the audience. And of course, the percussion beats a loud and increasing rhythm to speed the heartbeats, the colors are riotous, and the shamans go in and out of trance repeatedly. It is the antithesis of Confucianism, one of the reasons for its longstanding popularity among the people. And yet: the careful and beautiful stacking of foods for the altar mirrors the stacking of rocks into cone-shaped shrines found in the mountainsides. And the stacking itself is an act of prayer, and order.

Near the end of the eight-hour, fifteen-*kut* day, a mask dance is performed, with Kim Keum Hwa in the lead role. She moves in and out of character as needed, just as she has moved in and out of trance throughout the day, now acting, now singing, now directing what's taking place in the wings or backstage, now rejoining the show, on to whatever is needed. She is completely in command as she offers herself to the service of the gods – and the people. And she is never more beautiful.

### **Feminism and Art Collaborate: Park Young Sook**

**This article first appeared in the July 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine. It appeared again in the Summer 2007 issue of *Korean Quarterly* [US].**

“I do not like art when it is hanging on a wall. I think that the making of art is the raising of questions and the sharing of answers to those questions.” Those were the words of photographer and feminist Park Young Sook in a 2004 Japan symposium that highlighted the Mad Women series for which she is markedly well known. It was this series that first drew me to her work at Sungkok Museum’s feminist exhibition last year. The 2-m tall framed photographs of women on the edge – of insanity, of awakening, of self-discovery, of empowerment – struck me deeply. “I think you understand my work,” she told me through an interpreter, upon observing my reactions.

Park Young Sook is not a dewy-eyed, impressionable youth adopting trendy western values. She is a 63-year old wife and mother of grown children who has been a successful artist for forty years. While her early art focused on beauty and traditional views of femininity, it was a near-death encounter with breast cancer twenty-three years ago that brought about her own awakening. She became a feminist and sought to reveal those principles in her work. She also returned to school for a graduate degree in women’s studies. In these past two decades, she has become one of the more well-known feminists in Korea, and a prominent member of such organizations as Alternative Culture and Feminist Artist Network. “We women have suppressed ourselves. A culture, institution, and ethic have forced us to modify our identities. This is our

‘good girl complex’. But there is a whisper coming from women’s depth that says, ‘this is not me’.”

Perhaps one of the most driving forces behind her work is the feminist ideal of collaboration, as she says that conveying a message through art in this way is more important to her than fame. She collaborates with accomplished friends and with students alike. The Mad Women Project began in 1999 as a performance piece with six other feminist artists and an art critic who, after consulting with a psychiatrist for artistic insight, revealed their “madness” at the Women’s Art Festival in Seoul. A more recent work which emerged from an art class taught by Park Young Sook resulted in a just-published book in which each student wrote a chapter about her experience of self-discovery.

The process of her art is also critical to its understanding, and a form of healing, or art therapy. She spends hours in conversation with her models, “over wine until daybreak,” about women’s oppression in a deliberate attempt to raise their consciousness, and only then does she photograph them. As she works also with feminist groups in Japan, I asked her if she sees her work as a bridge between these two nations. “Women can cure the misunderstandings of border,” she responded, “because we don’t recognize them. We can hold each other and cross the border, heal the rift.” She pointed out that German reunification began with women in a small village.

When asked if Korean artists are taking risks or bowing to commercialism, she educated me about the Minjung movement of the 1980s and 90s, the “people’s art”. Because of the colonial period, modernism came to Korea’s art scene only in form but not in spirit; the response was Minjung, a politically progressive reclamation of unique Korean art forms. Art in Korea became a force for social change, a means of communication to identify societal problems and to offer an alternative. While Park Young Sook doesn’t align her work with this movement aesthetically, she nevertheless resonates with its objectives.

Her art is now moving in a direction of ecofeminism and of the balance of *umyang*, the guiding forces of the natural world. In highlighting the masculine and feminine principle that exists within each individual regardless of gender, she emphasizes that the overarching goal of feminism ought to be this balance. While her next work has not yet made its specifics clear to her, she is waiting patiently for it to emerge. She acknowledges that some of her earlier work was guided by her own masculine principle in the form of anger, and that now she wants to return full circle to her original premise of beauty – but through the filter of her fully aware feminine principle. To her students, she advises, “Be patient and don’t fear pain; growth comes through pain, and through the difficulties of relationships. Be creative and you will be happy; study art and it will benefit your own life.”

The *Young mae*, or Friends of Young [Sook], group of feminist artists and scholars is in Nepal as I write. Park Young Sook believes in continually challenging herself for her ongoing personal growth. In February she was in India, where she viewed the burning of a corpse to overcome her own fear of death; in Nepal, she will climb the high mountains to confront her fear of the

spirit world. Her sisters, social and collegial, are there to offer her their love and support, proud to be members of this group.

“Creating and healing trauma is a cycle. It’s often said that men create it, and women must heal it. But each of us has masculine and feminine within. We need to revive *this* feminine, to bring both into balance. Only then can we heal.”

## **A Love Affair with Korea**

**This article first appeared in the July 2006 issue of *Seoul* magazine.**

Dr. Donald Clark recently visited Korea, though surely not for the first time. In fact, his grandparents came to Korea one hundred years ago; his parents were born and raised in Pyongyang, where his grandfathers were professors and each for a time the president of then-Presbyterian Theological Seminary. His three elder siblings were born here, though his parents left in the early 1940s as required by the Japanese government, and he was born in South America. They were eventually able to return to Korea, and he graduated from Seoul Foreign School.

After going to university in the US, he returned with his wife to Korea for two years via the Peace Corps, then went back to the US for graduate school at Harvard with a major in East Asian Studies. He is a professor of history and director of an international studies program at Trinity University in the US, and has returned to Korea many times as a Fulbright scholar, a visiting professor, and a researcher. His two daughters have attended Seoul Foreign School as well during two periods in their childhood, and Dr. Clark expresses pleasure in sharing with them the deep connection to this land that he loves.

It was a particular teacher at Seoul Foreign School who, through her own deep appreciation for Korean people and culture, reinforced his love for this country originally instilled in him by his parents. This high school teacher, the wife of a US Aid official, taught a two-year course on “Far Eastern History” to which Dr. Clark credits his career choice. He spoke of foreigners being “hermetically sealed in compounds in those days,” associating primarily with other foreigners in a closed community, out of which this teacher took her students on field studies around Korea. “She exposed us to the true Korea,” he said, “and I gained a new respect for this country, no longer seeing it simply as a place in need of aid.”

Dr. Clark has written, edited, and co-authored several books and numerous articles on East Asia, with a particular focus on Korea, and has presented numerous times on the subject. His most recent book, *Living Dangerously in Korea: The Western Experience, 1900-1950*, focuses on the missionaries, speculators, diplomats, refugees, and other foreigners who were living and working here during the time of the Japanese occupation. It includes his family’s experience

and their long and deep connection to this country, and was written over a period of fourteen years. The book covers life in Seoul, Pyongyang and the gold mines north of that city, Hamgyong Province and the coastal community of Russian refugees, and includes Korean communities in southeastern Manchuria.

He also published *Culture and Customs of Korea* in 2000, contributed to *The Kwangju Uprising* published in 1988, and co-authored with Conrad Schirokauer the 2004 revised edition of a textbook called *Modern East Asia*. He has also written two books on the history of Seoul City. The work which brought Dr. Clark to Korea this time is a third book about Seoul, this one looking at the past several decades up to the present time and focusing on writers, music, the art scene, and the “scandals and criminals” – in other words, the details of life in Seoul and the interesting citizens who have helped to create its present identity. He would like to focus more on the current culture and trends, and their antecedents. He also expressed a desire to participate more in Korean life rather than viewing it from a distance as an expat, which seems peculiar coming from a man who for a foreigner has very deep roots in this country.

When asked about the unprecedented rate of development identified in Korea during the past 30 years, Dr. Clark spoke of an urge in the Korean psyche to move as far and as quickly as possible away from the pain and poverty brought on by the war and division of the peninsula, to the point at times of seeming to erase the past as traditions are abandoned and historic architecture demolished. He further spoke of the sacrifice of not one but two post-war generations in order to build Korea into the affluent nation that it is today, and a seeming lack of appreciation among today’s youth for their parents’ and grandparents’ sacrifice.

He views reunification as one of the most poignant influences on the modern Korean psyche, regrets his lack of access to North Korea, and identifies a generational change in politics with a maturing of the tendency to oscillate between conservative and liberal polarities. Gender issues are also of interest to Dr. Clark, such that he devoted a chapter to the topic in *Culture and Customs of Korea*. “There are powerful women in Korea,” he observed, “in command of organizations and the equivalent; there is now universality of education, dropping birth rates, and later marriage, all of which give women an advantage in this otherwise male-dominant society.” He agreed, however, that more progress was needed.

It is Dr. Clark’s ongoing respect, fascination, and love for Korea – its people, culture, and history – that continue to draw him here. He has a large pool of Korean friends, friendships nurtured through the years, and his interest has never waned. He is also influential in a movement to build “Korean Studies” as an academic field in the US. His connection with Korea is truly an affair of the heart.