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The Bridwell Quill. Issues 60-62: Land of Books & Oranges

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The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



August–October 2023

Issues 60–62: *Land of Books & Oranges*

Long flights are the joy of forgetful old men and SkyMall execs. The numbing fatigue of a fuel-guzzling Pratt & Whitney jet engine leaves the head so droned, it is no surprise one might forget the hours and repeat an action film or two and load up on a sleek black box of *Creed Aventus* cologne for \$430 a pop. I did not, but merely fell back on some Costco beef sticks and a disposable face napkin to refresh my weary self after 15 hours in the air. I landed in an overcast Incheon on a Sunday evening at the state-of-the-art airport and was promptly scanned like a human QR code with biometric lasers across my face and fingertips. Welcome to the digital state.

Exiting the international hub, one passes the entrance of the island airport guarded by two 30-foot statues of pixelated passengers looming in the haze (right) as you approach the 7th longest bridge in the world—22 km in length. The stark horizon of low-peaked but dramatic craggy-sided mountains embrace scores of newly built high-rises—some 40 stories tall, identical, and of curious green and sienna patterns. An hour later, I settled into a meal of bulgogi (grilled Korean beef) cooked on a portable butane-stove, a dozen side dishes of kimchis, dried octopus, and seaweeds, with a final wash down of steaming bone marrow broth that sent me to pleasant dreams in a nearby hotel that played *Squid Games* on a loop.



Korean culture in the 21st century is consumed by French baking and public reading: something I can easily get behind. Many mornings, I found myself stopping by any number of bakeries with names like *Paris Baguette*, *Tous Les Jours*, *Le Pain*, *Jean Boulangerie* and many, many more. Any assortment of refined French baking with a Korean twist (or not) will likely make you a convert—since everything from the classic almond croissant or Portuguese egg tart to the more edgy sweet and salty fermented pollock roe and cream cheese baguette or squid ink pastry will surprise and delight you, even if one is initially turned off by the unusual combinations. And books are everywhere—on the streets in kiosks, in the subways in lending booths with check-out scanners, and in the middle of the busiest thoroughfares and malls. People of all ages sit at tables, on benches, in trains, on the grass reading.

I visited the National Assembly Library—the equivalent of our Library of Congress—and was delighted by the design and layout of the complex. I also found that book sterilization stations were a fixture of most libraries in Korea, required before returning books to automated drop boxes. Across the city, where a cluster of colleges and student services were located, I explored Ewha Womans University. It was a remarkably well-designed campus where the administration, bookstore, and food court were built into a mountainside, and covered with a magnificent English-style

garden as its roof. Later that evening, I spent time climbing more steps on the hilly campus and attended a fine pipe organ concert performed by a music faculty member. Ten miles of walking through a crowded city, sleep deprivation, and a full-stomach of grilled hairtail fish had me dozing center-aisle by the time the Cesar Franck Opus 17 *Grand Piece Symphonique* was blasting through Centennial Hall. The Guilman Symphony woke me up, because it was rewritten for marimbas and organ and sounded like my iPhone's 5AM alarm.

Back to the bookishness of Seoul, the following day meant a trip to Starfield COEX, in the famed Gangnam District, which is the largest underground mall in Asia. Spread out like the roots or tendrils of a sweet pea plant, the corridors are full of brand-name stores and local cuisines. At its center is a massive reading room, with 30-foot baobab-curved bookshelves reaching up to a metal-framed glass ceiling. Hundreds of visitors cram the space and read the books, borrow them, sit around and talk, and enjoy an assortment of coffee and matcha drinks or red velvet cheese cakes. And everywhere is extraordinarily clean and orderly—in fact, on the busiest of subways I sat no more than 30-feet from a man who suddenly threw up on the train floor and within minutes, a custodian came out of nowhere to address the mess with an antique broom and mop. Back to business.

The following days were spent on an historical tour of old Korean lands and empires—notably the Silla and the ancient towns of Andong, Gyeongju-si (Seorabeol), and then to Busan. The luxury coach buses were only \$22 and reclined back to near horizontal. The highways into the southeastern valleys were modern and well-maintained and lavender wisteria were in full bloom for hundreds of feet up the steep and dense forests along the roads. Andong was an ancient place with rice fields and empty medieval Confucian schools now

turned into national heritage sites like the Beyongsanseowan academy and the Joseon Neo-Confucian scholar Toegye's [Yi Hwang] academy, the Folk village of Gyeongsangbuk-do and its haystack roof homes, or active Buddhist temples replete with gold statues, paper lanterns, and wax candles burning in metal boxes. A modest fee got a taxi driver to give a tour for six hours around the region—a man who worked for the local education ministry but retired to a life of driving people from the train station during the week.



Another bus ride south to Gyeongju found the ancient Silla capital aglow with nightlife, as I quickly settled into a traditional guesthouse, where mats were rolled out on the floor with barley-stuffed pillow sacks. I fell fast asleep but woke the next day in a backbreaking knot on that hard and heated floor. Apparently, when the nightlife ends the morning life doesn't begin much till 11am, because it was nigh impossible to find food, save for a modest convenience store selling packaged sweet-n-savory squid snacks. But as I wandered off toward the imposing grassy domes of the ancient kings scattered about town, a small shop with a glass window caught my eye: "Robot Coffee" (above). I slipped my credit card into a machine, and a giant mechanical arm grabbed a cup, brewed some fresh coffee, topped it with foamed milk, and placed it through a window for me to grab. No one was

awake in the digital state but the robots, apparently, in this oldest of cities.

I spent a full day hiring out another taxi that toured through a dozen temples and academies down to the Sea of Japan. First stop was the



Seokguram Grotto and Bulguksa Buddhist Temple—the head temple of Korean Buddhism’s Jogye Order—and notable location of what is believed to be the world’s oldest woodblock printed book, centuries older than Gutenberg’s. I visited the Gyeongju Gameunsa site, which warded off the Japanese with ceremonial pagodas, and the legendary underwater tomb of 7th century King Munmu in a volcanic outcrop. The highlight of the day was stopping in the seaside town of Bonggil-ri and hiking the path above the churning ocean tide, only to come upon an old seaweed seller. Spread out on sheets and metal screens a variety of dulse and wakame “weeds” were drying and the cheery and toothless grandmother selling the plants spoke in a distinct local dialect. A full bag of the salty *palmaria* (above) was about \$5—and I readily took it away, crunching on the oceanic delight. My taxi driver returned to Gyeongju, driving past a major nuclear facility, a random “Texas BBQ” restaurant, and later a final Buddhist shrine that had a stone inscription in front of the oldest local Ginkgo tree that was supposedly 440 years old. Local women at the Girimsa Shrine weeded by hand, in a nearly mantric trance.

Back to Gyeongju meant more walking around the city, more time to spend around the ancient Silla imperial burial mounds that stood out like earthen cysts with ancient oak trees blossoming in convoluted poses. Mixed between the ancient and the modern were traditional *hanok* houses (below) turned into coffee shops and Franco-Korean bakeries. I took a morning stroll by pruned ginkgoes, an S-Oil Station playing sappy Hallmark Christmas Special



piano music, and empty streets only smelling of fresh-baked bread. Curiously, a few urban observations: there are no official stop signs to speak of in Korea, only red-painted lanes when you near an intersection or roundabouts—to watch this intersecting dance of oncoming cars is tense (though there are red lights). The digital state’s grip on speed control has cameras every kilometer or so, along with built-in Korean-speaking GPS robots who warn you of speed traps, limits, and school zones. Transgressions or violations are immediately emailed or texted to you by the authorities, so I was told. And there are no crosswalk call buttons to stop traffic—instead, the buttons

you push merely inform you what the status of the light is and were designed for sight-impaired citizens, who follow thousands of kilometers of raised sidewalk guides, built especially for navigating the cities without sight. There are also almost no garbage cans anywhere, which may have to do with the cost of trash disposal; but there are public restrooms everywhere, thankfully! The caveat: they are designed without much care of who sees in or not, because urinals are in full public view on the street, in shopping centers, or food courts, as if they are just another fixture of the perfume counters or dumpling lines. Cleaning crews (nearly always women) would sweep or mop around the feet of men doing their business. To miss this is to miss a cultural moment.



I once read that the American sugar industry had manipulated the public and marketed cereals full of sugar a century ago to sell more sweets in vast quantities. This notion made me wonder about how we've been conditioned to label certain foods for certain meals in the US, especially when I continually saw Koreans eating the same meals at breakfast, lunch, and dinner—urban shops near train stations or the metro open early in the morning and serve up the same soup, noodle, or beef dishes you'd have with others for dinner. After a while, I got used to this too. A rare spot had a bulgogi, egg, and cheese on French toast to go. Not a McGriddle, but close.

Busan, the second largest city in South Korea (above), is a gorgeous seaside metropolis—a place of ancient and modern grabbing onto one another in vibrant intensity: a vast port with hundreds of ships waiting offshore, craggy cliffs with perilous-looking erector set

observation platforms and adjacent hiking trails, touristic see-through bottom cable cars, and imaginative architecture that melts across the rocky hillscape. At the Busan main train station, I'd never seen so many buses come and go so efficiently and orderly. Nearby, the city's Chinatown offered visitors a grand entrance with an ornamented gold and red gate, though right inside you'd immediately be confused by a smaller gate and sign that read "Texas Street," upon which you'd find a smattering of random

cowboy-themed signs, nightclubs, and a host of Russian and Central Asian restaurants: a cultural smorgasbord if I ever saw one! The evening after visiting the Busan markets on the other side of town and touring the Busan Diamond Tower, I soon retreated to Chinatown (and Texas Street) and bought

some of the tastiest Uzbek manta (dumplings) I'd ever had—of course, it was the scariest moment of the trip, when I entered the Moscow-themed venue, with electric house music, and a dozen middle-aged vodka-sucking men with droopy eyes, old nylon sweaters, and slurpy Golyanovish accents (being one of the roughest districts in the Russian capital). Across town, I visited the Haedong Yonggungsa Temple that was built right above the roaring sea on harsh and enduring cliffs—even on a rainy day, I trudged through the hills, up and down slippery wet stone steps with thousands of tourist-pilgrims, to view the complex and magnificent golden statues. The auspicious ancient symbol appropriated by the Nazis, later known as the swastika, decorated many temples in sizable form and was initially a jarring image to behold. Somehow, that newer meaning seems completely detached from the local realities. The final treat of the city was the Busan Book Market, founded

nearly 70 years ago by local refugees. It was a wonder to experience, though 99% of the books were either Korean, Japanese, or Chinese, a few English, French, and German options were to be had.

I left Busan for Jeju Island (right) early the next morning, flying out of the Busan airport. To my surprise, the local airport was full of teenagers—Jeju Island is Korea’s #1 domestic tourist destination, and the world’s busiest domestic flight route (specifically Seoul-Jeju City). The flight was



less than an hour and I got to the island on one of its clearest, most beautiful days. As I waited to get my rental car, turning over my freshly acquired International Driving Permit from AAA, I met a couple from Dallas—shockingly! That’s not what I’d expected at all, considering I had met so few foreigners and even fewer Americans. After pleasantries, it was off to a local Franco-Korean bakery for some mochi croissants and a cafe latte and then the Dongmun Market, where I tried the local specialty of black pork and bacon-wrapped seafood and radish rolls—kind of a piggy kimbap. It was spicy and filling and I didn’t need to eat for the rest of the day. Though, I did indulge in buying an array of Jeju’s best oranges—the Hallasan orange, which is a plump globe with a volcanic-looking crown and named after the island’s dormant center—and Korea’s tallest mountain, Hallasan. It was perhaps the most delicious orange I’ve ever eaten. Orange groves cover the island and are enriched by the volcanic soil.

I spent the next few days driving around the entire island, the size of Oahu—of which it is

often compared, though it is not nearly as lush as Hawai’i. On the days it is clear, it is magnificent; but on rainy days, it can be a torrential nightmare of fog and drenched cold. The first days were a delight, for sure. Quarter-century-new Thai-funded Buddhist temples

were extraordinary sights, adjacent to lovely touristic beaches with mesh-mats to make it easier to walk to the water; popular cafes and the finest seafood eateries are amply abundant; local museums were always a treat—to learn something new and under-

the-radar: like the historical Bukchon Neobeungsi 4-3 Memorial Site Museum, a commemorative learning center that spoke to the massacre of locals just prior to the Korean War. Interestingly, this would be a theme I

found again, later in the week at the “Anti-Mongolian Monument” on the west side of the island—where a 13th century political group on Jeju marked its autonomy from the mainland and resisted decisions



of outside rule, resulting in bloodshed. Just down the road from this 4-3 Museum was a rock garden museum of the Jeju stone statues known as Dol Hareubangs (above)—large basalt-volcanic rock fertility statues, usually in the shape of a phallus with faces and in different gesturing articulations. Though this statuary practice began only in the 1750s, it’s

become a wildly popular tourist attraction in more recent decades, and a variety of Hareubangs can be found all over the island (including lip balm sold in their shape!) It is no surprise then that this fertility statue has its modern successor among the scores of museums scattered across Jeju, especially the Sex and Health Museum, which on its front lawns has modern interpretations of the Hareubangs in wildly imaginative expressions. The rock garden museum I visited had hundreds of the traditional statues, along with a random assortment of Disneyesque characters and a small garden of statues with Charlie Chaplin near a trio of Jesus, the Buddha, and Mohammed holding hands. Not weird at all.



While being relegated to other indoor activities on the stormy days, including the Chocolate Museum, the Tea Museum, and countless other smaller museums, the most curious was the Jeju Museum of African Art in Seogwipo (above)—which was a smaller replica of the Great Mosque of Djenne, Mali—and holds an impressive array of African art. Originally founded by a scholar-businessman from Seoul, who had done graduate work at Columbia University in African Anthropology and lived in Nairobi for a few years, the museum expanded and moved to Jeju more than a decade ago. While it was impressive in many ways, the curatorial focus was broad, with many anthropological objects on display

having no descriptors or context and some dioramas harkening back to the days of Natural History museums of the 19th century. The top floor was most impressive, because it had contemporary pieces by many East African artists, which were often quite political and provocative. And like most of the museums I visited, during this monsoonish weather, the windows and roofs seemed to leak mercilessly. It may have been by accident, but the layout of the museum also seemed to echo a somewhat Confucian worldview, where some galleries were labeled “wood” and “earth” and “fire.” Among the seemingly scattered art scene on Jeju was an unusual theme park, which I’d first mistaken as the life’s project and work of the late Austrian visual artist and environmentalist Friedensreich Hundertwasser, who died in 2000. As it turned out, it was a newly constructed occidental-orientalist color-fantasy park (below) imagined by a local businessman, who thought Hundertwasser’s art matched Jeju’s promotional vision of color, environment, and organic architectures: the



comical blue and gold onion domed buildings and curving staircases lent the space an air of Dr. Seuss meets Aladdin. No art on display, from what I could tell, was original. And few visitors were present—entry ticket prices were a bit steep for local costs (~\$15). Only the Franco-Korean pastry shop was busy with dozens of delights and coffee options and had a Philip Johnsesque glass and white plastic interior that overlooked the turquoise sea.

One late evening, I'd also found an underground mall supposedly built by a Chinese investment firm but run by the Simon family, which owns nearly every mall in North America. It was three stories underground, just behind the Jeju Aerospace Museum, at a World Marriott Resort and boasted a crimson red casino with 50-foot ceilings; scores of name brand couture shops; and a food court full of American-style burger, Italian, and ice-cream kiosks squeezed between any number of katzu,



dumpling, and seafood restaurants—selling \$300 snow crabs and an assortment of clams and raw fish. I passed on the seafood, in part because I'd eaten so much already. The week had brought me octopus pancakes and fresh conch and abalone. On one of the clear days, I spent touring Udo island to the east, where the famed *haenyeo* (diving sea women, statue above) cook and sell their catch. The stunning and impressive history of the *haenyeo* was on full display, when I stopped at the sole public kitchen on the even smaller Udo Biyang-do (island), where a nearly 75-year-old sea woman prepared fresh cooked conch and sea snails

(below) that she'd baked on an open wood fire. As it turns out, she had gone diving for them



herself earlier that day! Many of these sea women—some well into their 80s—dive nearly 100 feet down without oxygen tanks into the adjacent depths off the volcanic shores, then do all the preparations and serve the food too. Remarkable and powerful human beings, whose livelihood is dwindling due in part to excessive tourism and climate issues affecting ocean temperatures.

My return to Seoul came quickly. I spent a few days exploring more museums and sites. I was underwhelmed by the “Blue House” (Korea’s version of the White House), which was expansive and crowded with tourists, but empty of objects. It turns out that both it and the adjacent presidential mansion had been so severely compromised by North Korean bugging, that each time a top-secret meeting was held there, within 24-hours, Pyongyang was discussing the contents of presidential conversations in their own communications. Yoon Suk Yeol, current South Korean President, relocated the presidential offices to a business park in the Yongsan District, where the Ministry of Defense operates. It was odd to tour these spaces absent of furniture or art work—save for one random blue and purple modern art painting of fishing boats that was on one wall in a back room. I felt like there was some metaphor here, but I never figured out what it was!

The final day was a 6-hour trip to the DMZ (center). Bright and early, the tour left by 6am and made it up to an amusement park near Paju-si, just a few kilometers from the border with North Korea. It was a curious place: a big amusement park with amphitheaters and parking for thousands. We were among the first groups to arrive and toured the space that had art galleries built into historic bunkers used during the Korean war. Now, you enter the spaces with military photos and paintings of maps and clear containers of spent ammunition and cross a threshold with a deactivated landmine on the floor—NO, I did NOT step on it! Statues of comfort women situated next to empty chairs, crying altars for families separated during the war and after, and memorials to uncountable atrocities of the 20th century were all part of this contrasting landscape. Even on the peace bridge (to nowhere) there were thousands of ribbons, signs, and flags tied...mostly fading and running with old ink. The tour guide told us that there was only one place you could buy North Korean currency, which was illegal to bring outside of North Korea, and it was at this one kiosk—*so who was breaking what law?* I indulged in only two small bills, one of which had the North Korean National Library on it. But other tourists—usually 20-something young men or teenagers—snatched up the full booklets of North Korean currency, worth only about \$8 for a whopping \$120 a pop. I did a rough calculation at the number of people per tour and the number of tour buses allowed in the DMZ each day and determined that more than \$5 million in business a year was conducted around North Korean currency at



this rate. At that point I realized there was some racket going on, as there was no way that you'd get millions of North Korean *won* over the border that easily.

The DMZ is a peculiar place with families, homes, and even many churches operating within its limits. And yet, it is also a thriving

tourist space. Borders are often places of focus, places of contest and competition, and also often porous. But this border was very much a space of touristic life and commerce—

perhaps, since other borders around the world thrive on being able to pass

through, a business had emerged at the DMZ that generates profits in the millions of dollars off of touristic wares—everything from t-shirts and caps to a wildly popular DMZ brand chocolate laced with white and black soybeans. Besides this unexpected display economy, there is a performative story that happens here that includes narratives around progressive slogans printed on giant road signs featured over tunnel entrances, all of which are loaded



with several tons of dynamite, in case North Korea invades and various counteroffensive moves can be enacted. Things like that make for both good storytelling and more tourism, but clearly made me less comfortable driving under signs. Furthermore, an economy of tourism has sprung up around tours of “infiltration tunnels,” holes burrowed more than 200-feet underground, and more than 1,000 feet long, which had been made by North Korea in the 1970s. When they were discovered, the South had made an adjacent access tunnel that tourists like me could hike down. I made it about 3/4 the way down and had to bend over too severely to continue, so I turned around. The idea that the tunnel had been blocked off to the North (again by the South) and those walls were loaded with several tons of dynamite also gave me little confidence in being 200-feet underground with live explosives nearby. No thanks.

Perhaps ending with the DMZ was a suitable departure point for this trip. I returned to Seoul for the evening and was invited to visit Incheon National University for their May Celebrations, which featured YB—Korea’s biggest 1990s band and their popular lead singer Yoon Do-Hyun. Though I’d never heard of them, my 40-something host (a biology professor) and 2,000 young Korean students jammed out to the band for an hour in plummeting temps. It was all worth the experience. One last Franco-Korean bakery and it was back stateside to a slow recovery of jetlag. The trip went like a flash—a flash like my penultimate evening in Seoul, where I stayed on the 29th floor of the hotel next to



where Japan’s president Fumio Kishida was staying that very evening, and where thousands of police and military personnel lined the streets with cameras and weapons; or of the 300 Fulan Dafa members (bottom right, p. 8) parading near the town hall in bright yellow shirts the morning before I left. Colors, lights, bright days, and stormy afternoons—it all went by so quickly. At least I remained healthy during my travels. And for a long time to come, I’ll be thinking of the contrasting images I saw and experiences I had. When the chaos of work pushes me, I’ll return to the Buddhist mountain grotto of Sanbonggalsa (left) in southern Jeju, where I hiked 600 feet up in

the rain to see a resplendent and solitary shrine full of candles, Buddha statues, and a natural spring and waterfall magically pouring from its cavernous ceiling, all overlooking the stormy East China Sea; but when I’m in the comforts of my own home, I won’t much miss the public toilets whose consistent design had urinals open for public viewing at every rest stop, mall, or food court, nor will I miss the massive crowds of overbooked flights out of Jeju Airport. Traveling is about paradox and confusion, as much as discovery and joy. Korea was no exception.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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