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Starship Kimchi

From Bi Bim Bop to a Huge Spa
This booklet is a collection of 62 articles selected by Korean Cultural Service New York from articles on Korean culture by The New York Times in 2008.
THE KOREAN WAVE

As Viewed Through the Pages of The New York Times in 2008
The 2008 Korean Wave: Wave or Particle?

By David R. McCann

The articles about Korea in the New York Times 2008 touch on a wide range of points, from cram schools to Dokdo (literally meaning Lone Island in Korean) in Korea, or from the New York Philharmonic’s concert in Pyongyang to Bi Bim Bop in Koreatown, New York City. There are many notable points in that broad spectrum of Korean popular culture and its presence in today’s world—what is called the Korean Wave.

In his Introduction to last year’s edition, Charles Armstrong noted that the term Korean Wave came from China in 1999, referring to the “explosive growth in popularity of Korean films, television programs, pop music, and fashions in that country.” While the term seems at first glance merely descriptive, it might lead us to wonder, at least a bit, about the energy sources that set it in motion, the media through which it moves and makes itself seen, heard, tasted, felt; and perhaps, I’d like to suggest, how it shares properties of both particle and wave.

What are some of the particulars of this current round of the dynamic Korean Wave? The various sections of the compilation have sorted them out into seven categories: Movies, Music & Dance, Fine Art, Food, Life Style, Sports and More. Films might show people and things being battered to bits; the international film festivals seem in turn to be the venues where they and other Korean productions have washed up, increasingly to great acclaim. In Music, where we read about a fine young Korean pianist who wore a gown made of recycled juice containers at her Zankel Hall recital, we can also find other forms of recycling in the articles about the New York Philharmonic orchestra’s journey to Pyongyang for a concert. At the end of a rehearsal, for example, orchestra members offered some of the visiting North Korean students musical gifts including “strings, orchestral music and cane to make reeds.”

For an encore at the concert, the orchestra offered the most Korean of all folk songs, Arirang. The audience “stood, cheered and even waved farewell,” and the players waved back.

The concert prompted a perhaps overly clever title for an editorial, “A Little Nuke Music,” pointing out North Korea’s delays in the denuclearization process. One might ask what, other than recycling the name, does the editorial on the North Korean nuclear program have to do with Stephen Sondheim’s 1973 musical A Little Night Music, or Mozart’s Eine kleine Nachtmusik? Yet if we throw into this mix the Philharmonic’s concert trip to the Soviet Union half a century ago, in 1959, and the Boston Symphony’s 1956 path-breaking journey to Leningrad, we may note the remarkable stand-off and then breakthrough between soft power musical diplomacy and the most hard-frozen displays of power. The editorial states that “President Bush wasted years refusing to deal with North Korea,” so there is a poignant irony to the comment by Condoleezza Rice, then Secretary of State, and an accomplished pianist: “I don’t think we should get carried away with what listening to Dvorak is going to do in North Korea.”
A rather different idea of performance is to be found in the *Sports* section. Should Korean and other “foreign” golfers be required to speak English? For a time the LPGA thought so, with its announcement of the requirement that after two years’ play, a golfer would have to be ready to reply to reporters’ questions in English. Although the requirement was dropped, it points to a curious blurring of the identities of sports figures and public “personalties.” It also suggested some rather conflicted ideas about parenting, as fathers hoped to maintain control over their young but excellent golfer daughters by supervising their interactions with the press and other media. Evidently the formula was to give a strong push to developing golfing skills while maintaining restrictions on communications outside the family, a challenging blend of traditional and contemporary hopes and values.

Two story lines under *Life Style* also take note of the complexity of contemporary life. Several articles describe the high-intensity cram schools in Korea, as well as the growing number of schoolchildren attending school in the U.S. or other English-language environments. Some of the cram schools are set up for secondary school students in Korea who may have initially failed to do well on the university entrance examinations and therefore not gained admission to one of the key universities, notably the SKY group: Seoul National University, Korea University, and Yonsei University. So they are enrolled in cram schools, studying fifteen or more hours each day, going to classes in rooms equipped with music stands for schools, and going to house-warming parties not long after I arrived, at which no one seemed to know the dance, didn’t know this song! *Aeguneun*! *Uh-oh* indeed! And then it was my turn, and I sang the only thing I could think of, *Maekjungsipnunmida—Beer is expensive*—followed by the chorus, and then *Maggollihan hapsida—So let’s just drink Maggolli.* I remember somebody shouted *Oshihganida!* *Great!* and the song and the dance continued, round and round. Some time later, after starting graduate studies in Korean literature and history, I discovered that the song was a regional favorite, possibly dating back to the Koryo Dynasty.

Through the course of the year 2008, we have watched the Korean Wave as it surged from pop music to complex international political issues, lifting an ever-widening array of commentators, performers, and travelers in its energy field. As I arrive here at the close of this Introduction, I realize in a way I have become part of the Wave. And I might add at the very end, So have you, Dear Reader, so have you!
It may seem an odd thing to say about a film in which a baseball bat as an instrument of assault and rape is a recurring theme, but what makes "A Bloody Aria" a darkly delightful surprise is its restraint.

The film, by the Korean director Won Shin-yun, is a sort of Asian "Deliverance." It escalates its ominousness perfectly, with director and actors knowing that the richest zone for shock value lies just short of over-the-top, not beyond it. And they handle the movie’s moments of humor just as deftly: They’re always deadpan and brief, and funnier because of it.

Lee Byoung-jun plays an arrogant, married music professor who as the movie begins is taking a young woman and former student (Cha Ye-ryun) on a not-so-innocent drive. He pulls off the road and under a bridge, where she fights off his attempt at rape. As she tries to flee, the professor finds that his car, a new Mercedes, is stuck in sand, and that some young thugs have surrounded it.

The roughnecks soon bring back the woman, and the unpleasant games begin: mind games mostly, though the film has its bloody moments. For added interest the thugs produce an unfortunate young man in a sack, whom they have apparently been harassing regularly over the years.

Just when you’re settling in for the obligatory bloodbath finish, the film throws in one nice twist, then concludes with another. It even serves up a little food for thought: Which is worse, uncivilized evil carrying a baseball bat, or civilized evil driving a fancy car?

A Bloody Aria
Opened in Manhattan on Friday.

Written (in Korean, with English subtitles) and directed by Won Shin-yun; director of photography, Kim Dong-eun; released by ImaginAsian Pictures and Prime Entertainment. At the ImaginAsian Theater, 239 East 59th Street, Manhattan. Running time: 1 hour 55 minutes. This film is not rated.

WITH: Lee Byoung-jun (Yeong-Sun), Cha Ye-ryun (In-jeong), Han Seok-gyu (Mann Jae), Lee Mun-shik (Bong-yeon) and Oh Dal-su (O-guen).
The Air I Breathe is an ingenious contraption that holds your attention for as long as it whirs and clicks like a mechanized Rubik’s Cube. After it’s over, however, you may find yourself scratching your head and wondering if there was any purpose to this sleek little gizmo.

The debut feature of Jeho Lee, a Korean–American director and screenwriter who, in the production notes, calls it a reflection of his “journey as an Asian–American” in a “bimodal world,” “The Air I Breathe” smoothes in its own pretensions. Among other things, Mr. Lee declares, it is a film noir variation of “The Wizard of Oz” and an exploration of the theme of character as destiny. Whew! That’s an awful lot of concepts for one movie to juggle.

A hard-boiled allegory that consists of four vignettes whose characters bleed from one episode into the next, the film was inspired by a Chinese proverb that divides life into four categories: happiness, sorrow, pleasure and love. Three of the four vignettes feature an unnamed character, portrayed by a star, who represents one of the basic feelings. (But what about anger, an emotion that is plentiful in a movie with very little pleasure and little or no genuine happiness?)

What unfolds is a flashy example of the everything-is-connected mode of filmmaking embodied by movies like “Short Cuts,” “Crash” and “Babel,” but the connections in “The Air I Breathe” are paradoxical philosophic abstractions lacking geographic and cultural resonance. In the first episode, “Happiness,” Forest Whitaker — playing against type as a cowering milquetoast with a low-level banking job — overhears his colleagues planning to bet on a rigged horse race. Impulsively betting his life savings, he runs afoul of the scheme’s mastermind, Fingers (Andy Garcia), a gangster who mutilates debtors’ hands; his only hope of avoiding that fate is to rob a bank.

In “Pleasure,” Fingers’s soft-spoken hit man (Brendan Fraser) is instructed to take his boss’s hotheaded young nephew Tony (Emile Hirsch) out on the town and show him the ropes. While night crawling, the henchman, whose talent for seeing into the future is prized by his employer, has ominous flashes of how the evening will end; unexpectedly, his visions don’t pan out. Rid of a gift that has also been a curse, he experiences the same giddy sense of liberation as Mr. Whitaker’s reckless gambler and bank robber.

In “Sorrow,” Sarah Michelle Gellar plays Trista, a.k.a. Sorrow, a terrorized pop star who becomes Fingers’s property after he buys her contract to settle a debt. Mr. Fraser’s character, a thug with a soft spot, impulsively hides her from Fingers and falls in love with her against his better judgment.

“Love,” the final episode, stars Kevin Bacon as a doctor who desperately tries to save the love of his life (Julie Delpy) — who happens to be his best friend’s wife — after she is bitten by a poisonous snake and requires a transfusion of a rare blood type. Circular in structure, the movie, to make its final connection, returns to Mr. Whitaker’s character in a delirious life-or-death moment.

The film’s most fully realized characters are Mr. Garcia’s cold-blooded killer (this is his strongest screen performance in years) and Mr. Hirsch’s gun- and girl-crazy nephew. Because Fingers pulls the plot strings in all four vignettes, “The Air I Breathe” ultimately registers as a gangster movie with delusions of grandeur.

“The Air I Breathe” is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes profanity, sexual situations and intense violence.

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Fans of the new wave of Korean art-house directors — cerebral genre-benders like Park Chan-wook, Kim Ki-duk, Bong Joon-ho and Hong Sang-soo — will want to check out the Film Society of Lincoln Center’s retrospective of the movies of KIM KI-YOUNG. Every notable Korean filmmaker gets compared at some point with Kim, a maverick producer-director of popular melodramas whose career stretched from just after the Korean War to his death in a house fire in 1998, and many of them cite him as a primary influence.

His 22 surviving films are rarely seen in the United States, and the Film Society says that the 12 it is showing represent the largest Kim retrospective ever mounted in New York. Two that were available for preview came from very different periods of his career: “Yangsan Province,” his second film, a black-and-white tale of doomed lovers in a rural village, was made in 1955, just two years after the Korean armistice; “Igeo Island,” a morbid, highly sexed story involving the female pearl divers of Cheju Island, dates from 1977. But the traits they share — an intense sexuality that is embodied in the dramatic Korean landscape, and an inventive deployment of cameras and actors within the vast mountain- and seascapes — can be traced in modern Korean films as different as the revenge melodramas of Mr. Park and “Nowhere to Hide,” the Lee Myung-se action classic. (Scenes in “Yangsan Province” of the outlaw lovers being chased up mountainsides by spiderlike groups of men prefigure the brilliant murder-on-the-steps sequence 44 years later in “Nowhere to Hide.”)

The Lincoln Center series includes Kim’s most famous film, the bizarre-love-triangle tale “The Housemaid” (1960), and his own remake of it, “The Woman of Fire ’82.”

Wednesday through March 18, Walter Reade Theater, 165 West 65th Street, (212) 875-5600, filmlinc.org, $11.

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Early in the documentary “Planet B-Boy,” an experienced street dancer asserts that breakdancing is “as legitimate as any dance that has ever existed.” This brash nonfiction feature directed by Benson Lee makes his case, showing international teams of break dancers — or b-boys — battling to win best-in-the-nation status in their home countries, then going on to compete in the 2005 world finals at the Volkswagenhalle in Braunschweig, Germany.

After a prologue sketching break dancing’s rise and fall in 1980s America and its subsequent international embrace, Mr. Lee tracks teams from several countries as they devise and perfect their routines. Certain nationalities are known for particular strengths: the French for their muscular expressiveness, the Japanese for their innovative choreography, the Koreans for their technical excellence and conceptual boldness. (One of the two Korean teams competing in the world finals retells the history of North and South Korea in dance.)

Nagging flaws keep this documentary from realizing its potential. Choppy editing prevents us from fully appreciating the dancers’ grace; a couple of parent-child reconciliation stories seem shoehorned in to add “heart.” Still, from moment to moment, “Planet B-Boy” is fun, sometimes thrilling and packed with illuminating details and striking personalities — like the Korean dancer, nicknamed Laser, who we’re told “has spent three or five years solely spinning on his head.”
A fearless performance by Vera Farmiga, and glowing cinematography that explores the subtlety shifting body language of strangers who are having sex but avoiding intimacy, partly camouflage the awkward storytelling of Gina Kim's marital melodrama "Never Forever.”

Throughout the film your gaze is riveted to Ms. Farmiga's striking eyes. Blindingly blue, expressing varying shades of panic, desire and refusal to feel, they signal the desperation of a woman who is driven to solve everyone's problems at the risk of personal catastrophe. You might describe her character, Sophie, as the square version of Irene, the drug addict Ms. Farmiga played in the 2004 movie "Down to the Bone." That film catapulted her into Martin Scorsese's "Departed," in which her talents were conspicuously wasted.

Sophie is the perfectly groomed suburban wife of Andrew (David McInnis), a hard–driving Korean–American lawyer from a devoutly Christian family. Deeply depressed after tests reveal his infertility, Andrew attempts suicide. Sophie responds by visiting a fertility clinic, hoping to be inseminated. While there she observes Jihah (Ha Jung–woo), a young Korean her husband's age, being turned away from donating sperm because he is not an American citizen.

Sophie impulsively stalks Jihah and confronts him with a proposition: $500 a session for sex, with a $30,000 cash payment if she becomes pregnant. He agrees, and they begin to have secret, joyless meetings in his decrepit tenement apartment. As the camera studies this couple struggling not to bond during their loveless encounters, you feel the pain and frustration of two sensitive people denying the intimacy of their acts.

Inevitably, however, signals are picked up and passed back and forth, information leaks out, and a relationship develops. So it is with most ongoing sexual relationships, commercial or otherwise. Sooner or later business becomes personal. On the recent Sundance Channel reality series "Pleasure for Sale," the relationships between prostitutes and their regular clients at the Chicken Ranch in Nevada were almost indistinguishable from longstanding friendships, but for the exchange of money.

Sophie's plan is successful. She becomes pregnant and allows Andrew and his family to believe it is a miracle. But it is not a happy ending. Neither Sophie nor Jihah is prepared to abandon a late–bloom–passion. Eventually Sophie’s two worlds collide, and the truth comes out.

The way they collide and the consequences are the stuff of the movie’s creepy plot mechanics. After reaching a cul–de–sac, the film tacks on a moony, feel–good coda that makes little sense and should have been eliminated. But while “Never Forever” lingers in the thick of sex, lies and anxiety, it is something to see.

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SHAKING UP THE CROWD AT CANNES

BY MANOHLA DARGIS

The apocalypse came early to the Cannes Film Festival this year, filling screening rooms with snarling dogs, bursting bombs, shouting men and screaming women. Midway through Day 2, on Thursday, characters had gone blind, gone to prison, gone to war. One had turned into a piece of furniture, and another had crawled out of a sewer, slimed in waste that the filmmaker threw at the audience with giggles, metaphorically speaking, of course.

Cannes has a tradition of shaking audiences up, sometimes all the way out the nearest exit. Last year on Day 1, the festival unveiled “4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days,” the Romanian film about illegal abortion during the Ceausescu era, which took home the Palme d’Or. This year that same competition slot was occupied by another powerhouse film, “Waltz With Bashir,” an animated documentary from Israel about the 1982 massacre at the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Written and directed by Ari Folman, who has made some half–dozen live action documentaries, and animated by the Bridgit Folman Film Gang, the movie is a soldiers’ story by one of their own: the haunted young man at its center is Mr. Folman himself.

He plunges us right into his nightmare with a harrowing vision of low–down and dark dogs running at the camera, teeth bared and eyes glowing bilious orange–yellow. The dogs run and they run, gathering in number as they cut a swath through everything and everyone — men, women, children — in their path.

Animation as a distancing tool, easing the viewer into real-life trauma.

Like Boaz, who is haunted by the war in Lebanon (or rather his absence of its memories), Ari is plagued by a past he can’t recall. And so he sets out to uncover history, to sift through the memories of other Israeli soldiers — all but two of the nine testimonials are firsthand accounts — and to make sense of the one image he does retain, that of three young soldiers rising naked out of the sea and somnolently drifting into the Beirut battlefield. As in “Maus,” Art Spiegelman’s two–volume graphic novel about the Holocaust, the animation in “Waltz With Bashir” initially works as something of a distancing device, giving you the space — intellectual, emotional — to process the story and its accumulating horrors.

Mr. Folman isn’t a revisionist: he points fingers at the followers of Bashir Gemayel, the charismatic Christian militia leader and Lebanon’s president–elect whose assassination preceded the mass murder at the camps, and saves hard words for Ariel Sharon, then the Israeli defense minister. Mr. Folman also doesn’t blink when it comes to what young soldiers do in wartime: at the sniper who lethally picks a man off a donkey, at the tank that crushes flowers and then cars under its wheels, taking down men drinking coffee and buildings alike. First pop songs fill the air and then yellow flares.
Brought to vital, plausible life in a combination of Flash, classic and 3-D animation, the characters look as if they stepped right out of a graphic novel. Their faces and bodies, for instance, are outlined in black, but their faces are so ductile and expressive that I was surprised that they hadn’t been rotoscoped (the animation technique in which live-action movement is traced over). The fluidity of the figures accentuates the air of surreality—one soldier compares war to an acid trip—which deepens as the story reaches its terrible end. That finale, which finds the animation violently giving way to live-action documentary footage, is stunning, at once a furious act of conscience and a lament.

“Waltz With Bashir,” which as of Thursday afternoon did not have American distribution, was a welcome tonic, given the cloying aftertaste left by the festival’s opening selection. Bad openers are another Cannes tradition, so it wasn’t much of a surprise that “Blindness” tracks the utopian ups and dreadful downs of various people—a strong Mark Ruffalo is the Doctor, and a nearly as good Julianne Moore plays the Doctor’s Wife—who are interned after a national outbreak of contagious blindness. One bad thing leads to another (it’s a Hobbesian world after all), including mass rape, exceptional production design (Toronto looks a mess) and a lot of acting from Danny Glover (the Man with the Black Eye Patch), Gael García Bernal (the King) and Maury Chaykin (the Accountant). Curiously, the film’s carefully calibrated racial and ethnic demographics echo those of the central castaways in “Lost,” though any given episode in that show’s best seasons is far better. Smarter too.

A maximalist who never made a shot he didn’t seem to want to tweak, Mr. Meirelles, with his heavy hand, is a poor fit for a story already heavily burdened by an allegory that’s at once obvious (we’re blind!) and elusive (because of ...?). It isn’t enough that people turn blind here without rhyme or reason, or that the blind are soon leading the blind with no end in sight, both literally and figuratively. Mr. Meirelles also has to flood the screen with a sizzling (blinding) white, which causes your pupils to constrict. That’s a cool enough trick the first five or six times, but it grows wearisome when you realize that Mr. Meirelles is capable only of bopping the audience on the head, not engaging what’s inside those heads. Far superior is the metaphorically inclined short “Shaking Tokyo,” a story about a shut-in from Bong Joon-ho, last in Cannes in 2006 with “The Host.” Mr. Bong’s short is the final chapter in the triptych “Tokyo,” which, as you might expect, mostly takes place in that city. The first, “Interior Design,” is a bit of predictable whimsy from Michel Gondry and involves a wallflower who metamorphoses into a chair; the second short, named for a French vulgarity, finds its director, Leos Carax, in an absurdist mood and throwing scat all over the screen. Too bad that the talented female prisoners in the Argentine drama “The Butcher” (Saturday) slyly manages to parody the Western hunger for Asian splatter films—it’s about a crazed excesses of Yoshihiro Nishimura’s “Tokyo Gore Police” (Friday’s midnight show) to the earnest national mythmaking of Charlie Nguyen’s Vietnamese epic, “One Dollar” (screening Friday). Definitely not for all stomachs, Kim Jin-woon’s film “Election,” here slips into a weightless, Cary Grant manner as the leader of a small band of Hong Kong pickpocketers—all brothers—where gallant attempts to liberate a young woman (Kelly Lin) from her older underworld protector leads him into a gloriously staged finale: a pocket-picking duel conducted in a rain-soaked street that leaves a henchman preoccupied with gory screams.

The most beautiful film in the festival has got to be “The Rebel” (screening Friday, Saturday and Thursday). Definitely not for all stomachs, Kim Jin-woon’s film “The Butcher” (Saturday) slyly manages to parody the Western hunger for Asian splatter films—it’s about a group of filmmakers who kidnap and torture innocent victims, then peddle the tapes to overseas buyers—at the same time that it more than fulfills genre expectations. A far more sober evocation of national traditions, “King Naresuan” (Sunday) is a six-hour, two-part epic about the warrior king who founded modern Thailand. Its director is Chatrichalerm Yukol, a member of the Thai royal family who studied filmmaking at the University of California, Los Angeles. The Korean director Lee Myung-se, a cult figure for his frenetic “Nowhere to Hide” (1999), will be present for Tuesday’s screening of “M,” a moody, slow-moving ghost story that represents a radical reversal of his aesthetic.

Back for its seventh year, the New York Asian Film Festival is known for its disdain of “art house” movies and its feverish support of Asian popular cinema, particularly in its more disreputable and blood-splattered variations. Now in its second week at the IFC Center (the festival moves uptown to Japan Society on Thursday), the festival offers a program that ranges from the cartoonishly crazed excesses of Yoshihiro Nishimura’s “Tokyo Gore Police” (Friday’s midnight show) to the earnest national mythmaking of Charlie Nguyen’s Vietnamese epic, “The Rebel” (screening Friday, Saturday and Thursday).
NO REGRET
BY NATHAN LEE

No Regret

Opener Friday in Manhattan
Directed by Leesung Hee-II
In Korean, with English subtitles
1 hour 51 minutes; not rated

The best thing in “No Regret” is the brothel. Down a dingy alleyway in Seoul, South Korea, the “foot bar,” as it is euphemistically known, is announced by a sign that suggestively promotes “X Large.” Inside, young men fresh from the provinces covert with their jaded city colleagues for the delight of an all-male clientele. There is karaoke, binge drinking, lap dancing and intimate entanglements in private rooms, along with fistfights, trash talking, broken hearts and bones.

Here, in the overlighted hallways and shady side rooms of X Large, the director, Leesung Hee-II, presents a remarkably frank portrait of low-rent South Korean homosexuality (the film was a succès de scandale at home), alert to the varieties of sexual identity colliding with economic need.

The movie shrinks, however, when it leaves X Large to focus on the sentimental education of Sumin (Lee Young-boo), a handsome, bright-eyed orphan newly arrived in the city. Leaning behind a beloved companion, Sumin makes his way through a series of busy jobs before gravitating to sex work, where he is pursued by a desperately smitten young businessman, Jaemin (Lee Hyn).

Mr. Leesung fails to extrapolate the insights of the brothel milieu into his larger agenda: a melodramatic love affair between Sumin and Jaemin so schematic it’s unintelligible. Randomly veering from indifference to passion, Sumin is frequently undressed but psychologically cloaked. It is perverse that a movie concerned with objectification would reduce its hero to an object.

NATHAN LEE

NEW YORK KOREAN FILM FESTIVAL

This 10–day festival, which begins Friday, features several hit movies and short films from Korea as well as a retrospective of the actor Ahn Sung-ki. Clockwise from left, Mr. Ahn in “Nowhere to Hide”; Yoo Yeon-mi, left, and Park Hyun-woo in “With a Girl of Black Soil”; Daniel Henney in “My Father”; and Son Ye-jin, left, and Kim Myung-min in “Open City.”
IN TORONTO, SAMPLING REALISM’S RESURGENCE

BY A. O. SCOTT

TORONTO

The annual parade of aspiring Oscar contenders that sucks up so much of the media oxygen at the Toronto International Film Festival has been a little thinner this year than in the past. Anxious studio specialty divisions are holding back some of their shiniest contenders amid gloomy talk of glut, retrenchment and collapse.

But nervousness on the business side does not necessarily translate into artisanic timidity. And for all the talk of crisis, there is still plenty of strong work to be found, both among the higher–end Hollywood art–house pictures and, especially, in the flourishing world of small–scale, local, truly independent filmmaking.

In an article this month my colleague Manohla Dargis took note of this development, citing Lance Hammer’s “Ballast” and Kelly Reichardt’s “Wendy and Lucy” as examples of the kind of socially engaged, unsentimental American realism that has crept into view, and into some measure of critical acceptance, in recent years. Ms. Reichardt’s film, which is making a stop in Toronto en route from Cannes to the New York Film Festival, is both exemplary and somewhat exceptional.

It is exemplary because of its strong sense of place and its commitment to exploring the hard facts of American life without sentimentality or message–mongering, in a way that is rare in American movies. But “Wendy and Lucy” stands a bit apart from other movies like it because of the participation of Michelle Williams. She can’t help being a movie star, even if her portrayal of a young woman adrift in the Pacific Northwest is marked by an authenticity that challenges conventional notions of film acting.

More commonly, like their counterparts elsewhere, the new American realists — or neo–neo–realists, or cosmopolitan regionalists, or whatever name we settle on once the wave has crested — employ nonprofessional actors. Hee Yeon Kim and Song Hee Kim, who play Jin and Bin, the main characters in So Yong Kim’s “Treeless Mountain,” are so young (one was 6, the other 5 when the movie was made) that “performance” seems like the wrong word to describe what they do on screen.

Since the film’s narrative is fictional, it is clear enough that the girls are pretending to be sisters abandoned by their mother to the care of a grumpy aunt. But since they did not read the script (or even know much about the story), what we see them doing is mostly just being children. Ms. Kim, her camera hovering gently and unobtrusively around the girls as they play, quarrel and daydream, turns their intimate moments into a quiet, poignant drama of abandonment and resilience.

“Treeless Mountain” was filmed in South Korea, and in Korean, so to describe it as an American movie may sound a little perverse, if not downright imperialistic. And the national label may not be so important. Ms. Kim, who was born in Korea and came to Los Angeles at 12, is part of a generation of youngish filmmakers (including Ms. Reichardt and Mr. Hammer) whose global frame of reference is as notable as their ground–level, place–specific approach to cinema.

The delicate naturalism of Ms. Kim’s style, the way her lens seems to be absorbing life rather than just recording it, gives away some of her influences. These are not the usual indie touchstones — we’ve already seen enough would–be Tarantinos, Altmans, Scorseses and Cassaveteses for one lifetime — but rather the new masters whose work seems to resonate everywhere except in American mainstream movie culture.

“Treeless Mountain” shows a clear thematic affinity with Hirokazu Kore–eda’s “Nobody Knows,” while in mood and tone it recalls some of the work of the Taiwanese filmmaker Hou Hsiao–hsien and the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami.

Mr. Kiarostami, who became a star of the festival circuit in the 1990s, has also clearly influenced Ramin Bahrani, whose third feature, “Goodbye Solo,” owes a clear debt to “A Taste of Cherry,” Mr. Kiarostami’s 1997 Palme d’Or winner. Mr. Bahrani’s film, which concerns the enigmatic friendship between a Senegalese taxi driver in Winston–Salem, N.C., and one of his customers, also translates a European interest in money, work and social class into an American context.

The point is not that Ms. Kim and Mr. Bahrani are being cleverly allusive or doggedly imitative. “Goodbye Solo” and “Treeless Mountain” are not movies about being cleverly allusive or doggedly imitative. “Goodbye Solo” and “Treeless Mountain” are not movies about crises, there is still plenty of strong work to be found, both among the higher–end Hollywood art–house pictures and, especially, in the flourishing world of small–scale, local, truly independent filmmaking.

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It should be noted that his technique is itself a sign of influence. That behind–the–ear tracking shot is a stylistic hallmark of Jean–Pierre and Luc Dardenne, the Belgian directors who are perhaps the most eminent practitioners of the new–realist aesthetic. (Their new film, “Lorna’s Silence,” is showing here too.)

“The Wrestler,” with studio marketing muscle behind it (and an Oscar campaign for Mr. Rourke in its future), is likely to make a bigger splash than films like “Goodbye Solo,” “Treeless Mountain” or the complete works of the Dardenne brothers. That’s show business. But its success, so far, with critics, audiences and the Venice jury is encouraging evidence of the power of the small movies from which it derives energy and inspiration. And it is the small movies that will keep this art form fresh, real and independent, no matter what happens on the road to the Oscars.

The new realism, as I’ve been suggesting, is a global phenomenon, less a style than an impulse that surfaces, with local variations, from Romania to Kazakhstan, from Argentina to Belgium. It even shows up, somewhat unexpectedly, in “The Wrestler,” the latest film from Darren Aronofsky, whose “Pi” established him as an indie wunderkind 10 years ago.

“The Wrestler,” which just won the top prize at the Venice Film Festival and was snatched up by Fox Searchlight, tells the story of an aging, down–on–his–luck professional wrestler played by Mickey Rourke. The plot leans a bit too heavily on some familiar, sentimental characters and situations (an estranged child, a stripper with a heart of gold, a predictable stumble on the way to redemption), but it is impossible to argue with Mr. Rourke’s performance. He doesn’t look like a movie star playing a battered world, but like the genuine article.

There is such subtlety and coherence in his performance that you never doubt it for a minute, even when the script invites you to. But the feeling of immediacy that is the best feature of “The Wrestler” doesn’t arise only from Mr. Rourke’s performance. The way Mr. Aronofsky frequently films the actor — in long tracking shots, with a handheld camera following behind him — also draws the viewer into the character’s world and his perception of it even as the character himself, his face27

Why do people attend dance samplers? Presenters want work to present, choreographers want to scout the competition, and critics want to find some trends, or at least some good ones. But what does the average dance fan hope to gain from such a chance endeavor? Probably something in which more than one of the five dances succeeds, but that is what this critic’s assessment of the Japan Society’s 11th annual Contemporary Dance Showcase.

This year, in a first, the showcase also included dancers from Korea and Taiwan, as well as Japan. It used to be that a person could go, take in a few new Japanese works and be only slightly sheepish about pronouncing on the state of that nation’s dance. Now all bets are off.

Japan and Its Neighbors
Scrutinized in Mirrors

BY CLAUDIA LAROCCH

JAPAN AND ITS NEIGHBORS
SCRUTINIZED IN MIRRORS

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Why do people attend dance samplers? Presenters want work to present, choreographers want to scout the competition, and critics want to find some trends, or at least some good ones. But what does the average dance fan — that mythical beast — hope to gain from such a chance endeavor? Probably a program in which more than one of the five dances succeeds, but that is what this critic’s assessment of the Japan Society’s 11th annual Contemporary Dance Showcase.

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Still, it remains safe to say that Japanese choreographers are not yet done milking the repressed–chaos theme. In “dulcinea,” by Yukio Suzuki of the Kingyo company, two men in motorcycle helmets and white–collar shirts flung themselves about while a woman did roughly the same. They came together for a brief, robotic dance to percussive music, but the overall effect was one of isolation and impotence. A moment when a man tried simultaneously to hold and walk up a board was particularly painful, as was the loud metallic screeching used as a score early on.

In “Pevelada,” Yun Myung Fee, of Korean heritage but born and raised in Tokyo, flitted between spotlights and emotional states in a filmy white dress, squatting, turning mad circles and stamping her delicate feet. She intrigued through her spooky presence but needed some serious editorial help.

The non–Japanese dances fared worse. The Korean choreographer Yong–In Lee’s moody solo, “Below the Surface,” was little more than a showcase for her picturesque extensions, while the Taiwanese choreographers Pi–Jung Wu and Hsia–Ping Chang of Sun–Shier Dance Theater offered a study on women and mirrors. Their “Inside Out” featured epic battles between dancers and their rebellious reflections, a trio of quirky creatures in reflective skirts and far too much posing.

Then there was Makotocluv’s “Nipponia Nippon,” by Makoto Enda. It will mean something when Japanese dance samplers stop featuring the manic–businessman motif. But this humorous critique of manners and protocol used swiftly shifting patterns, a sly score by Masayoshi Ogawa and a well–rendered slow–motion battle to drive its points home. The dancers’ culture may be Japanese, but they are wonderfully fluent in the language of the theater.

The most striking group at Globalfest 2008 — the five–hour, 12–band showcase of world music on Sunday night at Webster Hall — was the one that traveled lightest: Lo Còr de la Plana, from Marseilles, France. It was six male singers, four of whom also played hand drums and tambourine. They sang in a disappearing language, Occitan, and in an old style that once was church music. They performed traditional and traditionalist songs that took pride in what the group’s lead singer, Manu Theron, cheerfully called “filthy Marseilles.”

By Jon Pareles

A
nd with just those voices and percussion, they did remarkable things. They sang rich choral harmonies and joyfully ricocheting countermelodies. There were drones and dissonances akin to Eastern European music, sustained solo vocal lines related to Arabic music and Gregorian chant, and percussive call–and–response hinting at Africa — all the connections of a Mediterranean hub. The music was equally robust and intricate, a local sound ready for export.

That’s the undercurrent of Globalfest, which runs during the annual conference of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters and doubles as an audition. Globalfest reveals in the vague (or open–ended) term “world music” as it mixes local and national styles with international hybrids.

There was local pride from Puerto Plata, an 84–year–old Dominican guitarist turned singer. He holds on to vintage styles that were overpowered by modern merengue. Puerto Plata sang elegant Dominican sones and boleros in a temposhow in a timeworn but still courtly voice, while Pablo Rosario sent quick, staccato guitar lines darting around the melodies. When Puerto Plata wasn’t singing, he demonstrated some dance steps.

Chango Spasiuk — an Argentine who has dedicated himself to chamamé, a style from northeastern Argentina — had his guitarist, Sebastián Villalba, singing about “the pride of my region.” Mr. Spasiuk’s version of chamamé slightly dresses up the old rural dance tunes, with chamber–music–tinged arrangements that use sighing violin lines and delicate accordion voicings, along the lines of what the towering Argentine composer Astor Piazzolla did with tango. Mr. Spasiuk’s vocal style, which he described as “the pride of my region,” had its roots in the chamamé of northeastern Brazil, and it has a Brazilian singer, Liliiana Araújo. But the band also toes in New Orleans second–line rhythms and bluesy slide guitar.

The other American bands were less consistent. Crooked Still, a Boston band with mountains–music roots, a cellist and a breathy–voiced singer, was best when it stayed closest to eerie old fiddle tunes. Pistolera, from New York City, played accordion–pumped Mexican–style polkas and rancheras with a female perspective, but it needed more dance–driven drive. Accordon was the Hungarian element in Little Cow, a frisky band from Budapest whose songs suggest that Jamaica ska, or its new–wave revival, has just reached Eastern Europe.

Another local style — the Senegalese funk called mbalax — arrived with the singer Fallou Dieng, a protégé of the Senegalese superstar Youssou N’Dour. Mr. Dieng’s band, Le DLC, could rival his mentor’s band with its electric–guitar rock. Aminatou Goumar, who usually shares lead vocals, was unable to appear, leaving Mr. Ag Keyna to lead what sounded like a power trio plus a percussionist (playing hand drums and metal castanets).

The songs — about the rebels and expatriate sorrows — revolve around Mr. Ag Keyna’s high voice, starkly hypnotic riffs and snaky lead lines, working up to a trancelike momentum. They don’t need to be heard as world music. With the right bookings, Toumast could be a sensation on the stoner–rock circuit.
The traditional and modern were more seamlessly mixed in SuMee Yoon’s “No Man’s District,” a ritual, set to music by TaeWan Kim, for four handmaidens who looked angelic even when arching up on all fours or looking just as earthbound as Ms. Sutlar. The luminous Ms. Yoon led the angelic women, who seemed to become more exalted with her arrival. Here, as in “Slow Moon,” the choreography’s shapes and pathways were clearly defined and precisely danced.

Young Soon Kim and Pascal Benichou were urgently clinging lovers in a duet from Ms. Kim’s “SSoot,” with minuscule gestures signaling large and rather complex emotions. The lovers seemed much less confused in “The Farewell,” a sweet-natured folk duet choreographed by Mariah Steele and performed by Ms. Steele and Dusan Perovic. And Melanie Aceito did reach, as promised, in her “Reach,” a lyrical but slight solo performed to music by Mark Olivier.

Charly Wenzel was buffeted by society in his compelling performance of a solo by Darcy Naganuma but another excerpt from her “Unveil,” a churning group dance, was less successful. Welcoming though the White Wave space is, it is too shallow for group pieces like this and Elisha T. Clark’s “Frozen Angels,” presented by the ETC Dance Co., which also needed to be seen at a greater distance from the stage.


Bowing to the protocols of classical music, most female performers give a great deal of attention to selecting a recital dress. But the one the gifted young Korean pianist Soyeon Lee wore during the second half of her recital on Tuesday night at Zankel Hall was almost the center of attention.

The dress was made from recycled waste: 6,000 grape juice containers of the soft-pouch type. The dress was introduced at the concert, no less, by the film actress and eco-activist Daryl Hannah. The story of how Ms. Lee’s gown was created had long been part of the promotional campaign for this recital, presented by the Concert Artists Guild, the estimable organization that audits and supports emerging artists.

Last summer, a few days after attending a Live Earth concert at Giants Stadium, Ms. Lee walked through the Princeton University campus, where hundreds of schoolchildren were participating in summer camp programs. She noticed trash bins overflowing with juice pouches.
She contacted TerraCycle Inc., a company devoted to making consumer products out of garbage, and Honest Tea Inc., an organic bottled tea company that uses recyclable pouches and has worked closely with TerraCycle. Both companies joined Concert Artists Guild in presenting Ms. Lee’s recital.

A fashion designer, Nina Valenti, was commissioned to create a gown made from drink pouches collected by hundreds of American schoolchildren. To reinforce the concept of recycling in her program, Ms. Lee chose to play works in the second half that, in a sense, were recycled — for example, Busoni’s transcription for piano of Bach’s Chaconne in D minor from the Partita for Solo Violin No. 2.

So what did Ms. Lee’s dress look like? And, oh yes, how did she play? The sleek, striking strapless gown was fashioned of brownish–white material decorated with a matrix of triangle shapes. Several long trains in the back and on the sides looked a little stiff and made a crinkly sound as Ms. Lee settled onto the bench with some difficulty, offering self–effacing apologies to her audience.

A publicity stunt? Maybe. Still the cause is worthy, and Ms. Lee is a Juilliard–trained pianist with competition victories to her credit. She played with clarity, honesty and a supple yet full–bodied sound. She gave an articulate account of the Bach–Busoni and a rhapsodic performance of Ravel’s “Valse,” which could also be considered a recycled work: the composer adapted it for piano from his original version for orchestra.

There was also the premiere of Huang Ruo’s “Divergence: for Piano and Speaker,” recycled by the composer from his concerto for five players. This wildly colorful piano piece is a riot of oscillating repeated chords and outbursts of passagework until the tranquil final section, which includes a spoken text (a Chinese poem from the Song dynasty) intoned here by the composer.

In the first half Ms. Lee gave a sensuous performance of Albéniz’s “Iberia,” Book 1, and a fearless account of Prokofiev’s propulsive Sonata No. 7, neither of which could be considered recycled. Fittingly, she wore a traditional black concert gown.

**NORTH KOREANS WELCOME SYMPHONIC DIPLOMACY**

BY DANIEL J. WAKIN

As the New York Philharmonic played the opening notes of “Arirang,” a beloved Korean folk song, a murmur rippled through the audience. Many in the audience perched forward in their seats.

The piccolo played a long, plaintive melody. Cymbals crashed, harp runs flew up, the violins soared. And tears began forming in the eyes of the staid audience, row upon row of men in dark suits, women in colorful high–waisted dresses called hanbok and all of them wearing pins with the likeness of Kim Il–sung, the nation’s founder.

And right there, the Philharmonic had them. The full–throated performance of a piece deeply resonant for both North and South Koreans ended the historic concert in this isolated nation on Tuesday in triumph.

On Wednesday, North Korea’s main state–controlled daily newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, gave a brief account of the concert, with a picture of the orchestra, on an inside page. Of Lorin Maazel, the Philharmonic’s music director, it said, “His performance was very sophisticated and sensitive.”

The audience applauded for more than five minutes, and orchestra members, some of them crying, waved. People in the seats cheered and waved back, reluctant to let the visitors leave.

“Was that an emotional experience!” said Jon Deak, a bass player, backstage moments after the concert had ended. “It’s an incredible joy and sadness and connection like I’ve never seen. They really opened their hearts to us.”

The “Arirang” rendition also proved moving for the orchestra’s eight members of Korean origin. “It brought tears to my eyes,” said Michelle Kim, a violinist whose parents moved from the North to Seoul, South Korea, during the Korean War.

The piece was part of a program carefully constructed to showcase the orchestra and its tradition. A State Department official who accompanied Zarin Mehta, the orchestra’s president, on a planning trip to Pyongyang, the North’s capital, last year suggested that “Arirang” be played, Mr. Mehta said.
The emotional setting took a turn away from the political theme that had dominated the visit, which began on Monday and ends on Wednesday, when the orchestra flies to Seoul.

It was the first time an American cultural organization had appeared here, and the largest contingent of United States citizens to appear since the Korean War. The trip has been suffused with political importance since North Korea's invitation came to light last year. It was seen by some as an opening for warmer relations with the United States, which North Korea has long reviled.

The concert brought a “whole new dimension from what we expected,” Mr. Maazel told reporters afterward. “We just went out and did our thing, and we began to feel this warmth coming back.”

He suggested that there would be a bigger impact. “I think it’s going to do a great deal,” he said. “I was told 200 million people were watching. That’s important for the people who want relations to improve.” The concert was broadcast live in many nations, including in North Korea.

“If it does come to be seen in retrospect as a historical moment,” he added, “we will all be very proud.”

Still, there was little indication that the good will generated by the visit would affect a critical issue: North Korea’s nuclear program, and efforts to determine the extent of it. At a banquet following the concert, Song Sok-hwan, the vice-minister of culture, said: “All the members of the New York Philharmonic opened the hearts of the Korean people.” He called the concert “an important occasion to open a chapter of mutual understanding between the two countries.”

It did not appear that the country’s leader, Kim Jong-il, was present at the concert. High-ranking officials did attend, including the vice president of the Presidium of the Supreme People’s Assembly, the vice culture minister and the chairman of the Pyongyang People’s Committee, akin to mayor.

In Washington, on Tuesday, the White House played down the significance of the concert, while criticizing the North for failing to meet its commitments to disarm. Dana Perino, the White House press secretary, said the performance neither hurt nor helped American diplomatic efforts.

“At the end of the day, we consider this concert to be a concert,” Ms. Perino said, “and it’s not a diplomatic coup.”

For an encore, Mr. Maazel introduced the overture to “Candide” by Leonard Bernstein, which the orchestra played conductorless, in homage to Bernstein, a former Philharmonic music director.

The concert evoked other orchestra missions to repressive states, like the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s visit to the Soviet Union in 1956, followed soon after by a Philharmonic visit, and the Philadelphia Orchestra’s trip to China in 1973.

At a news conference earlier in the day, Mr. Maazel drew a distinction between Tuesday night’s concert and the Philharmonic’s visit to the Soviet Union.

“It showed Soviet citizens that they could have relations with foreign organizations and these organizations could come in the country freely,” he said. “But what the Soviets didn’t realize was this was a two-edged sword, because by doing so they allowed people from outside the country to interact with their own people, and to have an influence. It was so long lasting that eventually the people in power found themselves out of power in a country that was a ‘global threat.’ ”

“The Korean Peninsula is a very small area geographically,” Mr. Maazel said, “and has an entirely different role to play in the course of human events.” Drawing a parallel, he added, “would do a disservice to the people who live here and are trying to do their art and make a better world for themselves and all of us.”

For an encore, Mr. Maazel introduced the overture to “Candide” by Leonard Bernstein, which the orchestra played conductorless, in homage to Bernstein, a former Philharmonic music director.

The concert evoked other orchestra missions to repressive states, like the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s visit to the Soviet Union in 1956, followed soon after by a Philharmonic visit, and the Philadelphia Orchestra’s trip to China in 1973.

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Sheryl Gay Stolberg contributed reporting from Washington.
The New York Philharmonic’s concert in Pyongyang was a tantalizing taste of what might be in America’s relationship with North Korea. It was also a reminder of the missteps and dangerously wrongheaded judgments that have kept the two countries apart and at saber-point for more than a half century.

The Philharmonic drew sustained applause and even some tears, playing Gershwin, a beloved Korean folk song and the two countries’ national anthems. The concert would have had even more significance if it could have celebrated continuing progress toward shuttering North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. That effort unfortunately has stalled, and the fault—at least this time—is undeniably Pyongyang’s. It would take a serious diplomatic push by the Bush administration and the leaders of China, Russia, Japan and South Korea to ensure that it does not fall apart.

North Korea agreed last year to disable its Yongbyon nuclear reactor and produce a “complete and correct” accounting of all its nuclear activities, facilities and weapons–usable material by the end of last year. In exchange, it was to get 950,000 tons of heavy fuel oil and start down the road toward normalizing diplomatic and economic relations with the United States and others.

While North Korea is disabling the reactor, it has not turned over the promised list. That has revived serious doubts about whether it would ever abandon a program that has already tested a nuclear device and produced fuel for 10 or more weapons. Russia’s delay in delivering some of the promised fuel oil may be a factor, but there are more serious disputes as well.

North Korea has said it would produce the accounting, but first it wants Washington to remove it from the list of state sponsors of terrorism and lift certain sanctions. Washington says the sequencing can be worked out if Pyongyang is prepared for full disclosure.

The Bush administration has a long history of using any excuse to scuttle any diplomatic deal, but in this case it is right. Pyongyang clearly agreed to full disclosure and the deadline. Since then serious questions have also arisen about Pyongyang’s nuclear cooperation with Syria. That must also be disclosed.

President Bush wasted years refusing to deal with North Korea, and that expanded stockpile of weapons–grade plutonium is the result. Having belatedly embraced diplomacy, the president deserves credit for not overreacting — for continuing negotiations and fuel deliveries — despite fierce criticism from members of his party, including former members of his administration.

The United States and its partners should continue to explore creative solutions to the impasse and stand ready to lift sanctions and quickly take North Korea off the terrorism list if it fulfills its obligations. China, North Korea’s chief benefactor (and frequent enabler), must press Pyongyang to keep its commitments. Plans by South Korea’s new president to link economic integration to nuclear progress could be important leverage.

If the stalemate drags on, the United States and its partners may have to get tougher and implement United Nations sanctions that they are now choosing to ignore. North Korea needs to know that the international community has patience — but that such patience has limits.
Under Mr. Nagano, the fragments came across as a cogent and riveting entity. He has a way of coaxing a particular sound from almost any orchestra he conducts: resonant and penetrating without being forced or indulgently lush. The first movement, evoking a mood of saintly contemplation, begins with harmonically tart parallel chords in the woodwinds, which sounded here like some weirdly celestial chorale. The third movement, which portrays Sébastien's attempt to prove his sanctity by dancing on smoldering embers, was enthralling, all tremulous harmonies and wildly leaping lines.

Somehow, going from the Debussy to Tchaikovsky's popular Violin Concerto seemed right. The soloist, both at Carnegie Hall and for performances of this program last week in Montreal, was to have been Maxim Vengerov, but illness forced him to withdraw. He was replaced by James Ehnes in Montreal, and by Joshua Bell at Carnegie.

Mr. Bell is a known commodity in this staple, which is not to take his sumptuous, ardent and virtuosic playing for granted. Still, at heart he is an impetuous Romantic, while Mr. Nagano is cooler and more contemporary. At times, especially during the racing finale, the coordination between the orchestra and the supercharged soloist almost slipped apart. But the performance was certainly exciting, and the audience erupted in an ovation.

After intermission came “Rocana,” the American premiere of a new work by the South Korean–born composer Unsuk Chin. Mr. Nagano explained to the audience that Ms. Chin had tearfully called earlier to say that her plane was grounded by a blizzard in the Midwest. By intermission, alas, she had only just arrived at Kennedy Airport.

In this continuous 20–minute score, Mr. Nagano said, Ms. Chin tries to convey the sensation of light (“rocana” is Sanskrit for “room of light”). He compared the piece to viewing the northern lights, a phenomenon that appears to be motionless, but is a riot of cosmic energy.

The concept may seem trite, but the piece is a knockout. It begins with a gnarly, clattering, explosion; call it the Little Bang. Then comes a pattern of background harmonies, always simmering, eerily quiet and pervasive. But throughout the work, jolts of energy keep happening: leaping lines, ominous 12–tonish themes that pierce the tranquil background buzz, outbursts of wailing brasses and metallic strings that come at you like a musical flamethrower. The piece might be described as a response to Ives’s “Unanswered Question.”

Going from this to an incandescent, sensual yet deftly controlled account of Scriabin’s kaleidoscopic “Poem of Ecstasy” was another inspired programming choice. Things are good again at the Montreal Symphony.

No sooner had the British conductor Bramwell Tovey kicked off the New York Philharmonic’s annual tour of the city’s parks with a festive program in Central Park on Tuesday night than he led the players back to Avery Fisher Hall for the first of this year’s Summertime Classics concerts on Wednesday.

This is the fifth year of these postseason programs, intended as entertaining events with lighter musical fare. Mr. Tovey, who has delighted audiences with avuncular comments about music, the weather, life in New York or whatever crosses his mind, inaugurated the series and remains its conductor of choice.

He was typically amusing on Wednesday during an all–Russian program, “Moscow on the Hudson.” After conducting the opening work by Shostakovich, he welcomed the audience and asked everyone’s indulgence as “we get these people seated,” casting a cool glance at latecomers sidling into seats up front.
“Don’t feel self-conscious,” he added. “We just played Shostakovich’s ‘Festive Overture,’ ” he said cheerfully, then added, with stern looks toward more latecomers, “which most of you heard.”

Yet for all his talent as an entertainer, Mr. Tovey is an accomplished conductor. He is in his eighth season as music director of the Vancouver Symphony Orchestra and works regularly with the London Symphony, the London Philharmonic and other notable European orchestras.

For this program he conducted an earthy, vigorous account of excerpts from Prokofiev’s ballet score “Romeo and Juliet.” For all its alluring melodies and rapturous colorings, the music has percussive, raucous and astringent elements, not exactly what audiences might expect from a summertime program. Still, Mr. Tovey had listeners with him throughout his incisive and blazing account of the work.

After intermission he was joined by the pianist Joyce Yang in Rachmaninoff’s Second Piano Concerto. Born in Seoul, Ms. Yang won the silver medal at the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition in 2005, at 19. As her career flourishes, she continues her studies at the Juilliard School. She played here with impeccable articulation and admirable integrity. Her phrasing was supple yet never distorted. She blended Romantic flair with musically elegant, her virtuosity and command were never in doubt.

But Ms. Yang is a small–framed young woman, and her playing lacked the power this piece demands. There are balance problems built into the score. During extended passages Rachmaninoff gives the big tunes to the orchestra, which can easily smother the rippling figurations of the piano. Mr. Tovey could have worked harder to rein in the players. As Ms. Yang matures, she may well gain strength. All her performance needed was a little extra oomph.

She is a communicative artist, though, and the audience gave her a warm standing ovation. For an encore, a song by Chopin transcribed for solo piano by Liszt, she played with refinement and pristine tone.

This program is repeated on Friday, with the Rachmaninoff concerto replaced by Tchaikovsky’s Violin Concerto (James Ehnes, soloist). The Summertime Classics series continues through July 4 at Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center; (212) 721–6500, nyphil.org.

The 92nd Street Y’s chamber music series began as an East Side echo of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and it has long seemed a paler, or at least homier, version of Lincoln Center’s. But in important ways Chamber Music at the Y has maintained the Chamber Music Society’s original spirit better than the society has.

The society began as a recombinant troupe of “artist members” — the violinist Jaime Laredo, who now directs the Y series, was one — but these days its roster is regularly juggled and expanded, and it sometimes bypasses its members in favor of outside ensembles. At the Y Mr. Laredo quickly established the trio in which he performs, with the pianist Joseph Kalichstein and the cellist Sharon Robinson (to whom Mr. Laredo is married), as the core ensemble. Members of the trio perform at every concert, with guest players expanding the instrumental palette and keeping the repertory varied.

On Tuesday evening the adventurous young violinist Jennifer Koh and the pianist Benjamin Hochman joined Mr. Laredo and Ms. Robinson for a program that skirted the edges of the standard repertory while never quite leaving the Romantic (or in one case, neo–Romantic) mainstream. If there was one disappointment it was that Ms. Koh, an eloquent interpreter of contemporary music, had a narrower purview here.

She did, however, apply the vigor and freshness of her new–music side to the pieces at hand, most notably Martinu’s “Three Madrigals” (1947), an appealingly consonant, occasionally folksy set of duos for violin and viola, with Mr. Laredo playing viola. There isn’t much madrigal–like about these pieces, Martinu’s fascination with Renaissance music notwithstanding. The fast outer movements sound rooted in Czech dances and surround an Andante that begins with a brooding trill on both instruments and grows into a sweetly alluring dialogue.

Mr. Hochman collaborated with Ms. Robinson on Rachmaninoff’s Cello Sonata, a work that turns up infrequently in cello recitals, undoubtedly because Rachmaninoff gave all the best music to the pianist. The performers did not pretend otherwise: the piano lid was open, and although Ms. Robinson played the cello lines with a soulful expansiveness, it was impossible to keep the ear from wandering to Mr. Hochman’s driven, clear–textured account of the piano part.

All four musicians, with Mr. Laredo still playing viola, closed the program with an energetic, shapelread reading of Fauré’s Piano Quartet No. 2.
Pink is for ...

BY BONNIE YOCHelson


Pink Is for ...
The inspiration for JeongMee Yoon’s photographic project was her 5-year-old daughter, Seowoo, who loved things pink. As a setting for a portrait, Ms. Yoon assembled all of her daughter’s pink possessions — stuffed animals, dolls, plastic toys, books, clothes, jewelry, makeup and school supplies — into an orderly display. Seowoo’s bedroom was transformed into a pink kingdom for a child queen.

Ms. Yoon, a 38-year-old South Korean artist, began work on this project three years ago when she was studying at the School of Visual Arts (she returned to South Korea in late 2006). She subsequently expanded the original portrait into a larger undertaking called “The Pink Project” by asking other parents if she could photograph their daughters and the things they loved. She posted notices in her apartment building in Forest Hills, Queens, and at her child’s school. She also stopped people on the street, in the subway and at Target, where she was no doubt shopping for more pink things.

To “The Pink Project” was added a boys’ version, “The Blue Project.” Results of Ms. Yoon’s efforts, “The Pink and Blue Project,” will be on view from March 3 to April 26 at the Jenkins Johnson Gallery in Chelsea.

The themes of gender difference and compulsive shopping scream out from these portraits, but more subtle themes are also apparent. The children, both Asian and non-Asian, collect toys that are both Asian and non-Asian: “Hello Kitty” and anime action figures appear as often as Barbie and Superman. Mass-produced items sit beside family keepsakes — the traditional Korean dress called the hanbok or a hand-me-down, smocked party dress.

Children of all ages are hooked on pink and blue, a trend ensured by parents who begin collecting for sons and daughters when they are infants. The project touches raw cultural nerves while delighting the eye and coercing a smile.

Bonnie Yochelson is the author of “Berenice Abbott: Changing New York” and, with Daniel Czitrom, of “Rediscovering Jacob Riis: The Reformer, His Journalism and His Photographs,” published this month by New Press.

The Korean king Chongjo, who ruled during the last quarter of the 18th century, was an ardent bibliophile. He is known to have remarked, “Entering one’s study and touching the books can brighten one’s mood even if one is unable to read regularly.” The king surrounded himself with painted screens, or ch’aekkori (CHAK–oh–ree), that depicted piles of reading material with scholarly accessories and collectibles. By the early 20th century these screens had become a staple in the homes of wealthy Koreans.

Organized by Soyoung Lee, assistant curator of the department of Asian art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s tightly focused exhibition “Beauty and Learning: Korean Painted Screens” places four marvelous examples of ch’aekkori painting alongside related decorative objects from the permanent collection. The Met owns one of the screens; the others are on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and a private collector.

Ch’aekkori combine prosaic objects with rarities, and straightforward still lifes with spatial illusions. They are products of a culture that viewed books as a status symbol, placing them in the company of prized collectibles and treasures from the natural world.
The idea of a simulated bookcase may seem redundant to contemporary viewers accustomed to open storage, but Koreans historically stored their books in closed chests. The paintings of books, then, served to impress visitors with symbols of erudition and reinforce the owner’s sense of self-worth. Never mind that artists rarely bothered to depict specific titles; the idea of a book, and the image of an elaborately patterned cover, were enough.

“Beauty and Learning” includes a superb example from King Chongjo’s court. Its eight panels show ceramics, plants, fruits, brushes and scrolls arrayed in a trompe l’oeil bookcase with a striking, lapis-blue “interior.”

Many of these objects are clues to Korea’s cultural relationship with China, and with the West. The unidentified painter of the screen has depicted a Western-style clock, but the numbers on its face are an unreadable hybrid of Roman numerals and Korean characters. Just as puzzling are the numerous examples of Chinese vases in the colorful style of the Qing dynasty. These items were available to Korean collectors, but they were generally considered to be too flashy for display in the upscale home.

A pair of four-panel folding screens dating from the end of the 19th century or the beginning of the 20th have a less cluttered composition. Near stacks of books are interrupted by trompe l’oeil “drawers,” ceramics of varied shape and color and symbols of professional achievement (including coral branches and peacock feathers). The proportions of these screens indicate that they were probably placed at the end of a futon, close to ground level.

In the early 20th century ch’aekkori mutated from elite accessories into a form of Korean folk art. Designs became more playful, as the depictions of neat bookshelves gave way to renderings of books stacked together with other household objects on short-legged tables.

The 10 panels of an early-20th-century screen from the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s collection show gravity-defying heaps of reading material, fruit, flowers and exotica. Chinese-style pottery holds blooms, paintbrushes and scroll paintings; a partially skinned pomegranate, a giant watermelon and a game board are perched atop off-kilter piles of books.

The supports disappear entirely in the fourth and last screen, which shows books and a scholar’s possessions floating on a simple linen background. The painter has flattened many of these objects, but his work is complemented by a display of crackle-glazed Chinese vases, incense burners and other related articles from the Met’s collection.

Ms. Lee has included a large-scale collage by the contemporary Korean artist Shin Young-ok, “Space of Yin–Yang” (2002), which brings the ch’aekkori tradition into the present. Modular panels of handmade mulberry paper are configured to suggest a bookcase, with antique printers’ trays standing in for the books. Sinuous strands of linen fiber introduce a “female” element to a chamber — the study or library — historically reserved for men.

Ms. Shin’s work suggests that the subject of ch’aekkori would be well suited to a larger exhibition, one that rummages through the shelves of contemporary bibliophiles as well as 19th-century scholar-gentlemen.

“Beauty and Learning: Korean Painted Screens,” continues through June 1 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; (212) 535-7710, metmuseum.org.

Lee Bul
Lehmann Maupin
541 West 26th Street, Chelsea
Through June 14

The work of Lee Bul, one of South Korea’s most prominent contemporary artists, has evolved from statement-making installations involving cyberpunk, rotting fish and karaoke to retro-futuristic abstract sculptures. In this show, her first with the gallery, Ms. Lee unites disparate visions of modernity: utopian and dystopian, masculine and feminine.

In the first gallery, Ms. Lee has constructed sculptures of mechanical-looking pieces of steel in shallow, mirrored boxes. From certain angles, LED lights and two-way mirrors create the illusion of infinite space. These devices work well in a gridded floor sculpture, but several vertical variations lack mystery.

In a second gallery a hanging sculpture, “Untitled (After Bruno Taut series)” (2008), is paired with a black, cowhide structure, “Bunker — M. Baldin” (2007). (Their titles pay homage to the Russian philosopher Mikhail Baldin and the Weimar-era architect Bruno Taut.) Within the interior of “Bunker” is a pair of headphones, which emit a loud, screeching noise. The other sculpture, a glittering mass of crystals and chains on a wire armature, is as enticing as “Bunker” is forbidding.

In an earlier body of work, “Live Forever,” Ms. Lee encouraged viewers in individual karaoké pods. Here, she has created a sculptural environment that is just as visionary, but less hostile to social interaction.
As any globetrotting art collector knows, some of the hottest art markets these days are in Asia. But to be a part of this bubbling contemporary art scene, you often had to head to the auction houses Christie’s and Sotheby’s, where Asian works now command record prices.

This fall, however, there’s a fortuitous new way to discover the contemporary Asian art scene. A crop of international art biennials and triennials has sprouted across Asia in recent years, opening the door to untapped art markets as diverse as Yokohama and Nanjing. And this month, the stars have aligned, so that it’s possible to hop to nine major arts shows in five separate Asian countries.

“There is so much energy and production in Asia,” said Roxana Marcoci, the photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, who will be visiting arts fairs in Guangzhou, Shanghai and Nanjing in China and Yokohama, Japan, this month — all in the course of a week.

One of the oldest is the Gwangju Biennial (www.gwangju-biennale.org), held in the industrial city of Gwangju in South Korea. Founded in 1995, the fair now draws more than one–million visitors, including many of the same movers and shakers who flock to Art Basel and the Frieze Art Fair in London. Under the artistic direction of Okwui Enwezor, this year’s fair takes place Sept. 5 to Nov. 9 and will feature more than 100 artists, from the Korean video artist Donghee Koo to the German photographer Thomas Demand.

After Gwangju, contemporary–art buffs can extend the party to eight other art fairs in Asia, nearly all of them started since 2000. One of the newest is Media City Seoul (www.mediacityseoul.or.kr), a platform for digital art that takes place Sept. 12 to Nov. 5.

“Every major city wants to become a cultural hub in Asia,” said Melissa Chiu, director of the Asia Society Museum in New York, who is planning to attend the Singapore Biennial, which started in 2006 and has since spawned Showcase Singapore (www.showcasesingapore.com), a strictly commercial fair that runs from Sept. 9 to 12.

In this year’s follow–up, the Singapore Biennale (www.singaporebiennale.org), which takes place from Sept. 11 to Nov. 16, will feature 50 international artists, including Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, who live and work in Moscow and New York.

Like other shows, the Singapore biennial also showcases the local art scene and part of the exhibition will be held along the downtown waterfront, in a pavilion made of 150 shipping containers.

Moreover, many of the Asian art shows are being organized by local curators, including Mizusawa Tsutomu in Yokohama and Johnson Chang in Guangzhou — the better to offer an insider’s view of Asia’s emerging young artists.

“The best biennials give you access to the entire city,” said Ms. Chiu.
The two–story project gallery tacked onto the back of the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum is an awkward space. The walls are higher than they are wide, making even sizable paintings look a bit like postage stamps. Meanwhile, most sculpture just disappears. But finally the museum’s curators have found an artwork that seems perfectly at home there.

Sprouting from the center of the gallery is a 14–foot–high, approximately 650–pound object titled “Aggregation 08–AU022” (2008) by Kwang–Young Chun, a 64–year–old Korean artist who is well known in New York art circles. It is made from small triangular bricks of folded and tied mulberry paper wrapped around Styrofoam triangles and other geometric shapes glued to a wooden armature.

Part of the success of this sculpture is, I think, that it was conceived by the artist especially for the gallery here. The proportions are perfect, being not too big or too small, but just right. It also benefits from indirect light that angles in through the side window, giving the object a creepy, otherworldly aura. And then there’s the fact that it is, well, alluringly beautiful, crafty and even a little dazzling.

So who is Mr. Chun? Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Richard Klein, the museum’s exhibitions director, points out that for three decades he was known primarily as a painter. He began his first paper assemblages in 1994, creating compositions for floor– and wall–mounted works combining hundreds of similar yet distinct paper parts. Since that time his works have greatly evolved in complexity and scale.

“Aggregation 08–AU022” is the artist’s largest free–standing sculpture to date and took several months to complete. A photograph in the exhibition catalog shows the artist at his studio in Korea, diligently working on the basic form of the sculpture, which even then was too big to fit inside. He worked on it outdoors, using scaffolding to reach the upper areas.

The sculpture is installed in the center of the gallery without any sort of protective barrier, giving visitors a chance to get up close to it and walk around it. From a distance, your first impression is of an organic form, like a toadstool or a lichen–covered tree stump. But on closer inspection, the jumble of geometric shapes, irregular but flatter surface texture and the subtle, shifting tones of the mulberry paper bring to mind something very different: a dense metropolis.

The catalog tells of the artist’s childhood memories of seeing medicinal herbs being carefully wrapped using mulberry paper and tied in small packages. This memory became a formative influence on him, sparking a decision to shift from two–dimensional painting to three–dimensional sculptured paper assemblage. He prefers paper inscribed with Korean characters. This gesture partly toward the way in which his works are embedded in Korean history and cultural traditions, but also helps create variation in design and surface texture. The subtle tones of the paper are also sometimes augmented with tea and dyes.

But what of the meaning of this intriguing object? There is no single answer, but I think the work finds strength in a tension between nature and culture — meaning that it can take viewers a while to determine whether or not the object is organic or synthetic, animate or inanimate.

Mr. Klein compares the sculpture to a monument succumbing to the ravages of time in a lost jungle setting. In one sense he is right, for this work definitely evokes for the viewer the passage of time. It oozes decay, from the mottled surface texture to the surrounding debris pile of paper bricks.

Then there is the recycling of old mulberry paper from books and the handwritten words that seem to summon up the past. He does this not to tell a story but to bend and blend those words into a kind of archive that preserves forgotten voices. While it may not embody a clear meaning, “Aggregation 08–AU022” makes you sense something fundamental about great art that is too often forgotten or overlooked in today’s age of instant everything: true understanding comes with its own time, and it is hard won.

“Kwang–Young Chun: The Soul’s Journey to America,” Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, 258 Main Street, Ridgefield, through May 24. Information: (203) 438–4519 or aldrichart.org.
Some people collect stamps, others vintage bartender guides or mounted rare butterflies. I’m cultivating a prodigious collection of condiments that is slowly taking over the fridge, much to my husband’s dismay.

“Why do we need nine kinds of mustard and three types of prune spread?” he asked recently. “And when was the last time you used brine-packed green peppercorns?” I changed the subject. But while trying unsuccessfully to wedge a quart of milk in there, I had to admit he had a point.

Nonetheless, the idea of just throwing out a carefully built inventory (certain to keep us in jalapeño–kiwi jelly and salted sardines for the better part of a nuclear winter) was devastating.

For someone who cooks a lot, an arsenal of strongly flavored condiments is a powerful secret weapon. Even when there is nothing in the house to eat, I can whip up a meal from the contents of many jars mixed with pasta, or meat excavated from the freezer. Some of my best culinary feats have come out of such condiment alchemy.

“Fine, don’t throw anything out,” my husband said. “But how about using things up?”

It was during this campaign that I rediscovered the kimchi. It’s a potent, mouth-searing Korean condiment made from fermented cabbage, garlic and chilies that I originally bought to garnish grilled steaks. Grilling season is long over, and the kimchi had migrated to the back of the fridge, where it languished behind the lime pickle.

It was high time to put it back in our dinner rotation, but how?
At Korean restaurants, kimchi is most often served in little bowls to accompany a meal. But I wanted it to be integrated into the main dish, imbuing the whole thing with its peppery pungency, a little like spreading preserved black bean sauce on a piece of chicken before cooking it.

So what if I simply rubbed the kimchi all over the pork chops that were defrosting on the counter, then pan-fried them?

The idea of kimchi-slated pork sounded mighty appealing, so I gave it a go, chopping up the kimchi to release the maximum amount of flavor before coating the chops.

But the thing about kimchi, as opposed to a thicker and more clingy condiment like ketchup, is that after it has been patted onto a piece of meat, it can easily fall off. This meant that once I took my golden brown chops out of the skillet, most of the kimchi — along with its vibrant flavor — stayed behind.

I suppose I could have mounded it back on top of the pork for serving. But without any pan liquid, the kimchi would be a distinct accompaniment rather than suffusing every porky bite.

The easiest solution was to make a little kimchi pan sauce.

My preferred pan-sauce method is beyond minimal: just deglaze with wine and simmer until thick. But the wine we had already opened for dinner was red, and the notion of red wine and kimchi was not at all harmonious.

I did, however, have some dry vermouth on hand, and added a splash to the skillet. When it all but evaporated, I dipped in a spoon to taste. Somehow, the alcohol had intensified the kimchi, making it even more assertive and biting than before — maybe a little too biting, I thought as I squinted through the sourness.

In desperate need of a quick fix, I scavenged my condiment stash for some magical dash to make everything better. Umeboshi plum paste? Pomegranate molasses? Quince marmalade? I was about to give up when I spotted my teacup and the honey bear sitting next to it.

Indeed, a squirt of honey tamed the aggressive flavors, mellowing the harshness while allowing the racy, garlicky chili notes to enliven the richly fatty chop. Meaty, caramelized and tender, with its vibrant and buttery pan sauce, the pork was so good that my husband told me later he was ready to suggest we stock up on kimchi.

But when he tried to fit the leftovers into the fridge, he changed his mind.

It was two days after Fat Tuesday, and this city had begun the annual jag of repentance known as Lent. But Kim Sunée, a Korean-born writer, was experiencing powerful food lusts, as she often does. These cravings propelled her out of her hotel room and into Rio Mar, an unassuming fish house in the warehouse district that feels like some dim, delicious corner of Spain.

Ms. Sunée, 37, was back in the town where she was raised, on a whirlwind tour for her first book, a compelling, confessional memoir entitled “Trail of Crumbs: Hunger, Love and the Search for Home” (Grand Central). Wearing a fitted brown velvet coat with a confetti of appliqués, she looked more Paris than Big Easy. She settled into a dark corner, gracefully slipped off her very high heels and, as if it were nothing out of the ordinary, ordered roughly half the menu.

Boquerones, or grilled white anchovies in vinegar. Drum seviche with habanero peppers. The burnished half-moon of a tuna empanada in an almond-rich romesco sauce. Crispy rouget fillets crowned with caper-tomato-shallot confit. Enormous garlicky shrimp, octopus with paprika, a pair of nearly black blood sausages.

“You wouldn’t have any razor clams, would you?” she asked the waiter as he struggled to arrange the plates eclipsing the tabletop. He did and brought them. Then, as if this untouched feast were the Eiffel Tower or a friend’s face, she whipped out a camera and lovingly photographed it.
SOME people travel to see monuments, Ms. Sunée said. “I travel to eat.” She keeps a food blog and is also the food editor of Cottage Living, a magazine based in Birmingham, Ala., where she lives in an apartment with virtually nothing on the walls, one nine-foot-long table, one bed and many unpacked boxes of books.

Ms. Sunée’s memoir chronicles her life so far — its physical and emotional hunger and the rapturous meals she has eaten or cooked while searching the world for love, a convincing identity and a sense, still elusive, of being at home.

In 1973, when she was 3, her mother abandoned her in a crowded South Korean market swirling in gray mist and banana flowers. “Although memories are distort ed,” she writes, “there are true sensations one doesn’t forget, like fear and hunger, deep rumblings echoing in a cavernous heart and belly.” Three days later, police men found her clutching a fistful of crumbs and repeating her mother’s unkept promise to return.

Adopted by a middle-class family in New Orleans, Ms. Sunée grew up in comfortable circumstances but with a growing sense of dislocation and restlessness. (Her surname, pronounced soo-NAY, is based on the name of a younger sister, also adopted, and was given to them by their adoptive parents.) Her parents, especially her mother, seemed distracted and brittle to her. Since the book was published in January, Ms. Sunée said, she and her mother have not spoken.

Her earliest memories have always been of hunger and food, especially her beloved grandfather’s gumbo, millet casserole stuffed with lump crab meat, and spicy crayfish bisque floating with stuffed crayfish heads. “He wasn’t a fancy cook,” she said of her grandfather, who used to feed homeless people at his table and occasionally don her great-aunt’s wig to do Julia Child best of the locals, and she fed boisterous impromptu daube, soupe d’épeautre and apricot clafoutis like the chatelaine of his estate in Provence and his millet leches cake and cited the Édith Piaf song “Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien.”

“I don’t regret anything,” she said.

Before she left Europe and moved back to New Orleans and later Birmingham to write the book, she underwent psychoanalysis in France. It taught her to take everything in her life — all the pain and darkness — and transform it into something usable.

Lately she’s felt assaulted by the press attention her book has generated. Reviewers have harped on sensational aspects, underscoring the fact that she had abandoned a child can be an act of love, she said: “I survived. More than survived.”

Her appetite for experience, love and feasting remains strong. While in New Orleans, she stayed at the Windsor Court Hotel with a friend and spentordinate amounts of time with him in its fancy Polo Club Lounge, fascinated as a bartender named Roger theatrically concocted Sazeracs.

“I’m not a cocktail kind of girl,” she said. “But this bartender had so much passion. It’s almost like a relationship: the precise balance of the ingredients that go into it, especially the bitters, right? Then you drink it, and it becomes completely reckless.”

She and her friend smuggled their Sazeracs into the men’s steam room. “Oh no, I’m sure there’s some medical warning that you’re not supposed to drink a Sazerac in a steam room,” she said, laughing. “I’ll never be allowed in that hotel again.”

In a hibernating mood, she and her friend did not spend much time in restaurants. Instead she cooked gnocchi in their room, using lump crab meat, crème fraîche and Meyer lemon zest.

“There are so many clichés about love, food and cooking,” she said. “But cooking with your lover is a great way to see where your relationship is. I have been called an alpha cook, but when I am in love, the man can put as much salt, cream and butter into the dish as he wants. Even if it’s ruined, it’s still the best dish you’ve ever eaten.”

Someday unhappiness crept in. Dreams of her shadowny birth mother continued to haunt her, and the French scenario felt, in the end, like somebody else’s life. She felt insubstantial, especially compared with Mr. Baussan, so successful and “so rooted in Provence that he smelled like citrus and sandalwood.” After five years, she left him.

As if Ms. Sunée were some overly convincing soap opera star, readers regularly write to urge her to get back together with Mr. Baussan. She also receives copious e-mail from Korean orphans who identify with her lack of identity and seem to understand better why she left him.

“If you don’t have a sense of who you are, nobody can give you that, no matter how beautiful, wrapped up, perfect and idyllic,” she said. “For some people, the idyll would be enough. But not having any strong sense of self, I had no foundation to accept anything, especially such an abundance of love.”

As an older and wiser professional woman who is still single, is she sorry she walked out of paradise? “I’m not a cocktail kind of girl,” she said. “But this bartender had so much passion. It’s almost like a relationship: the precise balance of the ingredients that go into it, especially the bitters, right? Then you drink it, and it becomes completely reckless.”

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She has come to believe that abandoning a child can be an act of love, she said: “I survived. More than survived.”

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STARSHIP KIMCHI: A BOLD TASTE GOES WHERE IT HAS NEVER GONE BEFORE

BY CHOE SANG-HUN

SEOUl, South Korea

A
fter South Korea began sending soldiers to fight beside American forces in Vietnam, President Park Chung-hee made an unusual plea. He wrote to President Lyndon Johnson to say that his troops were miserable, desperate for kimchi, the fermented cabbage dish that Koreans savor with almost every meal.

Chung II-kwon, then the prime minister, delivered the letter to Washington. When he traveled overseas, he told Johnson, he longed for kimchi more than for his wife. The president acquiesced, financing the delivery of canned kimchi to the battlefield.

Kimchi has been a staple of Koreans’ diets for centuries. These days, South Koreans consume 1.6 million tons a year. Until recently, homemakers would prepare the dish by early winter, then bury the ingredients underground in huge clay pots. Now, many buy their kimchi at the store and keep it in special kimchi refrigerators, which help regulate the fermentation process.

It is hard to overstate kimchi’s importance to South Koreans, not just as a mainstay of their diet, but as a cultural touchstone. As with other peoples attached to their own national foods — Italians with their pasta, for example — South Koreans define themselves somewhat by the dish, which is most commonly made with cabbage and other vegetables and a variety of seasonings, including red chili peppers.

When South Korea’s first astronaut, Ko San, blasts off April 8 aboard a Russian spaceship bound for the International Space Station, the beloved national dish will be on board.

Three top government research institutes spent millions of dollars and several years perfecting a version of kimchi that would not turn dangerous when exposed to cosmic rays or other forms of radiation and would not put off non-Korean astronauts with its pungency. Their so-called space kimchi won approval this month from Russian authorities.

“This will greatly help my mission,” Mr. Ko, who is training in Russia, said in a statement transmitted through the Korea Aerospace Research Institute. “When you’re working in space-like conditions and aren’t feeling too well, you miss Korean food.”

Many South Koreans say their fast-paced lives, which helped build their country’s economy into one of the biggest in the world in a matter of decades, owe much to the invigorating qualities of kimchi. Some take a kind of macho pleasure watching novices’ eyes water when the red chili makes contact with their throats the first time. And when Korean photographers try to organize the people they wish to take pictures of, they yell, “Kimchiii.”

Mr. Ko’s trip will be an occasion for national celebrations. Since 1960, 34 countries, including Vietnam, Mongolia and Afghanistan, have sent more than 470 astronauts into space. Koreans found their absence among the countries that fielded space missions humiliating, given their country’s economic stature. The government finally decided in 2004 to finance sending one scientific researcher into space.

Mr. Ko, a 30-year-old computer science engineer, beat 36,000 contestants in a government competition to earn his spot on board the Russian-made Soyuz rocket. He will travel with two cosmonauts and will stay in the International Space Station for 10 days conducting experiments.

Space cuisine has come a long way since the early days of exploration, when most of the food was squeezed out of tubes before it was discovered that regular food could be consumed in conditions of weightlessness. Now, astronauts can order from a fairly wide variety of foods, from chicken teriyaki to shrimp cocktail, with some modifications. For instance, hamburger rolls produce crumbs that can float off and clog equipment, so other breads are used. But the food at least looks, smells and tastes familiar.

Still, guest astronauts may carry special cuisine. One, Charles Simonyi, who spent part of the fortune he made at Microsoft to travel as a “space tourist” last year, took along a six-course meal prepared by the French chef Alain Ducasse.

The South Koreans created versions of several other foods for Mr. Ko’s mission, including instant noodles, hot pepper paste, fermented soybean soup and sticky rice. But kimchi was the toughest to turn into space food.

The key was how to make a bacteria-free kimchi while retaining its unique taste, color and texture,” said Lee Ju-woon at the Korean Atomic Energy Research Institute, who began working on the project in 2003 with samples of kimchi provided by his mother.

Ordinary kimchi is teeming with microbes, like lactic acid bacteria, which help fermentation. On Earth they are harmless, but scientists feared they could turn dangerous in space if cosmic rays and other radiation cause them to mutate.

Another problem was that kimchi has a short shelf life, especially when temperatures fluctuate rapidly, as they sometimes do in space.

“Imagine if a bag of kimchi starts fermenting and bubbling out of control and bursts all over the sensitive equipment of the spaceship,” Mr. Lee said.

He said his team found a way to kill the bacteria with radiation while retaining most of the original taste. Kim Sung-soo, a Korea Food Research Institute scientist who also worked on “space kimchi,” said another challenge was reducing the strong smell, which can cause non-Koreans to blanch. He said researchers were able to reduce the smell by “one-third or by half,” according to tests conducted by local food companies.

Mr. Ko, the Korean astronaut, said he would use the kimchi to foster cultural exchange. He plans to prepare a Korean dinner in the space station on April 12 to celebrate the 47th anniversary of the day the Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin became the first human in space.

The developers of the “space kimchi,” meanwhile, say their research will continue to benefit South Korea in a practical way even after the country’s national pride is burnished by Mr. Ko’s historic mission.

They say kimchi’s short shelf life has made exporting it expensive because the need for refrigeration and rapid transport that has added to the cost in importing countries, limiting sales.

“During our research, we found a way to slow down the fermentation of kimchi for a month so that it can be shipped around the world at less cost,” Mr. Lee said. “This will help globalize kimchi.”
A ccording to Herodotus, even the mighty armies of the Greek and Persian empires took the winter off from warfare. But not the forces of frozen yogurt.

Since the Korean chain Red Mango opened a store directly across from California–based Pinkberry in Greenwich Village in December, New York has become the second major battleground for the restyled, fluffed up, fruit–topped new wave of frozen yogurt.

“I’d call it a quiet face–off on Bleecker Street,” said Dan Kim, Red Mango’s president for North America. Since 2006, Pinkberry has opened nine stores in New York, Red Mango has opened four, and competitors like Flurt, Berrywild and Yolato are scrambling to stay in the game.

California is already gripped by tribal conflicts among Pinkberry partisans, Red Mango loyalists, and the fans of Yogurt World, a San Diego emporium where multiple flavors of yogurt and hundreds of toppings are available via self–serve; patrons wander around with an empty bowl and a wad of cash. “God must have come down and created this place Himself,” wrote one feverish poster on yelp.com, the online city–guide site that has become an Internet hub for frozen–yogurt enthusiasts. (Yogurt World alone has about 200 reviews.)

Most of these new yogurt joints, whether on the West or East Coast, are based on a simple formula of fresh fruit toppings on a consciously tart, decidedly yogurt–flavor creamy swirl that drives certain people to distraction.

“At first I used to just crave it after Chinese food,” said Anthony Castellano, who was ordering at the new Yoggi Spot at Café Duke in Times Square, on a lunch break from supervising a nearby construction site. “And then I started thinking about how it would be good after pizza, and then after burritos. It’s really refreshing, but it’s still sweet.”

As the chains are trickling in, a few visionary New Yorkers have already struck out on their own, convinced that they can build a better yogurt. (Most of the chains use a dehydrated yogurt formula that is rehydrated and churned in the store.)
The most extremely artsy — even artisanal — rendition is েক,® appropriately located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where the yogurt is made from scratch. “We start with gallons of low-fat milk, we inoculate it with the live cultures, and we sweeten it with a little organic sugar,” said the owner, Neo Kim.

Mr. Kim also designed the cherry-red stencils that cover the space (“parlor” or “shop” being far too cozy to describe this echoing, Pop Art basement). Last weekend, a second েক outlet began dispensing yogurt in Manhattan, inside a Beard Papa’s cream puff shop at 740 Broadway, near Astor Place, making the storefront one of New York’s many centers of Asian—dessert—youth—pop—culture.

Helen Lee, a Brooklyn resident who graduated from the French Culinary Institute and cooked at Per Se and Jean Georges, is one of a group that opened েক in Park Slope last summer. Oko focuses on eco—friendliness, with cups made of corn and spoons of potato starch, as well as on flavor. “Of course, we tasted the competitors’ before developing our own recipe,” she said. “Our yogurt is all natural, with lingering flavors and a clean finish, and it’s even locally sourced.” The yogurt Oko freezes is made by a Greek family—owned creamery in Queens, she said.

Flurt, with outlets in Gramercy Park and Battery Park City, is New York’s first homegrown chain. Its nonfat frozen yogurt Oko freezes is made by a Greek family—owned and Jean Georges, is one of a group that opened Oko (Red Mango)." The newfangled yogurts also add citric acid for flavor, lending a bright lemony flavor that is very appealing on top of the sweetness, dairy and lactic tang. Pinkberry’s yogurt is certainly more sour than that of Red Mango, but beyond that the distinctions become arcane, and often bogged down in calorie—counting, the odd flavors of sugar substitutes, and obscure health claims. (Red Mango boasts that there are more than 400 million live cultures in each gram; Yogurberry claims. (Red Mango boasts that there are more than 400 million live cultures in each gram; Yogurberry claims.) Or it was bubbling up in the nascent youth—pop culture of Seoul, where the possibility of health benefits often fuels unstoppable food trends.

After the initial go—round, plain—flavor frozen yogurt was quickly eclipsed by new fakeries like Tofutti and Tasti D—Lite. But it never completely left the city. A small band of devotees would trade tips about the holdouts at Bloomingdale’s Forty Carrots, the cafe at Zabar’s, and a chain of suburban parlors called Last Licks.

Apparently frozen yogurt spent its decades in exile well, mutating and gathering strength. Depending on whom you believe, this transformation may have taken place in the timeless gelaterias of Bologna, where a lone genius named Luciano Rabboni perfected the formula for yogurt—flavor gelato. (This is the Pinkberry creation legend.) Or it was an accidental invention. At any rate, it’s been taken. Try again tomorrow, and the day after that. Promise the gods your chocolate Lab as well.

Drat! The gods must be lazy. It’s 10:00:09 and the computer is saying that every reservation has just been taken. Try again tomorrow, and the day after that. Promise the gods your chocolate Lab as well. Ko doesn’t come easy, and that’s a big part of why it is, and will no doubt remain, the most talked—about new restaurant this year.

But it’s noteworthy beyond its adding all—computer reservation system and the intense, revelatory pleasures of its partly Asian, partly French, wholly inventive food.

Under the direction of the young chef David Chang, who has been celebrated to the point of deflation, Ko boldly investigates how much — or rather how little — ceremony should attend the serious worship of serious cooking.
Although dinner at Ko is a two–hour, eight–course, full–throttle commitment, it’s also an experiment in subtraction, in calculating which niceties can go without the enjoyment ebbing as well. Proper plates and place settings? At Ko you belly up to a plain counter that wraps around a plain galley kitchen, and your chopsticks rest on a wine cork.

Lumbar support? At Ko you straddle a backless stool. Lovely scenery? There’s a plywood wall to your back, and, in front of you, cooks so close you can count their beads of sweat as they not only prepare and plate your food but also hand it to you. You can feel the heat from the stoves like a sunburn on your brow.

There’s no hard liquor, no tea, no regular coffee and above all no choice. You eat dishes of Ko’s choosing in the order it chooses, and most everybody around you is having roughly the same meal.

The omakase experience at sushi bars is one point of reference; another is the feng shui of the French chef Joël Robuchon’s counter–centric L’Atelier restaurants. But Ko makes the interface between you and the cooks more focused on food than on frippery, a scruffy setting, thorough way. It wagers that for a younger generation they will.

Deification may have come prematurely to Mr. Chang. But a low–key coronation makes sense. With Momofuku Noodle Bar and Momofuku Ssam Bar, both near Ko in the East Village, he has demonstrated a shrewd grasp of the culinary zeitgeist, bringing considerable skill and high standards to noodle soups, slider–size sandwiches, Asian burritos and chicken wings. He’s playful, never pompous, and despite the offal and other adventurous streaks on the menus at Noodle and Ssam, they resemble glossy snack bars, tantalizing and rollicking into the wee hours.

The last seating at Ko, which means “child of” in Japanese, is 9:30 p.m. This even–tempered child gives Mr. Chang and his cohorts, including Peter Serpico, a business partner who acts as the restaurant’s chef de cuisine, a smaller, more orderly sanctum in which to labor over a succinct lineup of dishes more classically artistic than the archetypal Momofuku pork bun, not to be found here.

It continues his exploration of his Korean heritage, adoration of pork belly and penchant for pickling. Pickled carrots and pickled mustard seeds surround the short rib, offsetting its heaviness with tart, acidic elements.

He’s also a fiend for smokiness, achieved with abandon in dishes like the Sriracha that you wonder about the bastard pedigree of all prior peas in your life and almost fail to notice the more focused chawan mushi, the Bailey’s and the delicate crawfish in the soup. I said almost. Cruetseans rarely get past me.

And then there’s that arresting foie gras, a torchon of which is frozen so it can be shaved into a loosely packed snowball. This preserves the liver’s creaminess while tempering its uncouthness, and it’s rounded out with a bottle of cashews or pine nuts, a gelée of rieling or Sauternes, and litchi or pickled grapes. Ko rearranges the pieces from night to night.

Its sense of mischief is underscored by the “wine pairing” for a course of soft–shell crab: a glass of chilly Sriracha was a tamer presence, and the Sriracha in a wash of buttermilk, yuzu and Sriracha that soaked with whipped pork fat. It showcases uncooked fluke in a wash of bartermilk, yuzu and Sriracha that struck a thrilling balance of round and sharp notes, silky and spiky effects, coolness and heat. On top of this mix were enough toasted poppy seeds to give it a pleasant grittiness and a pointillist skin.

But the next time I had this dish, with scallop filling in for fluke, the Sriracha was a tamer presence, and the sauce was slightly watery.

One of the final savory courses, slices of short rib that are cooked sous vide for 48 hours before being deep–fried, was a miracle of tender–crisp contrast one night and a ledeown of leathery–crisp redundency on another.

Lately he has replaced this dish with a less successful eggy meditation: a version of chawan mushi, the Japanese custard, with caviar, asparagus, argan oil and cashews, which don’t register forcefully or give the dish much textural contrast.

There’s lasagna, but it’s a dissident lasagna, the noodles entwined with snails, porcini, spring asparagus, a ricotta foam of sorts and — the genius touch — a Lilliputian bouquet of dehydrated broccoli rabe flowers. They’re crunchy, a smart hedge against any lasagna soupiness. And they’re adorable, like miniaturized marigolds.

There’s a Georgia pea soup with such resonant pea flavor that you wonder about the bastard pedigree of all prior peas in your life and almost fail to notice the modeling and the delicate crawfish in the soup. I said almost. Cruetseans rarely get past me.

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Its sense of mischief is underscored by the “wine pairing” for a course of soft–shell crab: a glass of chilly Budweiser, bringing to mind a day at the beach. Mischievous, too, is the pastry chef Christina Tosi’s apple pie. It’s sculptured into individual–size wedges and deep–fried, as if it came straight from McDonald’s, only McDonald’s wouldn’t accessorize it with sour cream ice cream and a swish of sweet, salty toasted mioso.

You’ll love it, provided you ever get access to it. The unpredictability of accomplishing that — I entered into groveling, Ko–dependent arrangements with tireless friends and readers — has soured some would–be patrons, but Ko can’t be faulted for generating a demand in excess of the supply. And Mr. Chang to his credit doesn’t seem to be holding any seats in reserve for V.I.P.’s.

Judging from the diners around me whenever I visited, the 10 a.m. reservations lottery favors people under 40, who are perhaps wiser in the ways of technology and more zealous and dexterous in their clicking. That’s probably as it should be. Ko looks to the future, ignoring the old rules and beckoning epurics open to new ones.
KOREAN RESTAURANT WEEK
BY FLORENCE FABRICATION

The New York Times, Wednesday, October 1, 2008

KOReAN RESTAURANT WEEK
BY FLORENCE FABRICATION

COUNTL

Korean Restaurant Week

Through Saturday, nearly 20 Korean restaurants are featuring prix fixe bibimbap lunches and dinners, including appetizer and dessert, for $15 as part of Taste of Korea, the first Korean restaurant week. Bibimbap alone, $7, is available at lunch only. On Saturday at 2 p.m., bibimbap, a dish of rice and vegetables, will be served free from a giant pot holding 500 portions at 22nd Street and Broadway. Information about the participating restaurants is at koreanculture.org.

BCD TOFU HOUSE
BY OLIVER SCHWANER-ALBRIGHT

DINING BRIEFS

ATMOSPHERIC Spicy crab at BCD Tofu House, left

House in New York City opened in September, to a much more stylish effect: one wall is decorated with branches rendered in gold leaf, and at night it glimmers in the flattering light. It's easy to forget it's on the ground floor of a La Quinta Inn, also Manhattan's first. The block of 32nd Street between Broadway and Fifth Avenue, long one of the city's most exciting eating streets, has slipped lately, and BCD Tofu House is a welcome addition. Not that it's breaking new culinary ground. The menu is familiar, grilled meats and bibimbap, short rib stew and pajun (seafood and scallion pancake).

But the food is unusually bright and lively. Gibls, marinaded short rib ($15.95), is sliced thin right through the bone, tender and flavorful even when charred. The hot seafood tofu soup ($13.95) isn't just spicy; it's brought to the table bubbling at a furious pace. (It took a good five minutes for it to cool to an edible temperature, which gave me plenty of chances to make eye contact with the head-on shrimp bubbling on top.)

The soup is just as hot at lunch but costs $2 less, and can be ordered as a combination with dishes like spicy pickled crab ($14.95 for the combo). It's not for the faint of stomach: six small raw crabs are halved and lacquered with a sweet and fiery paste. It's a delicious mess that entails crunching through the shell, slurping the meat and dabbing your face with the extra napkins provided. Unfortunately, crab isn't on the dinner menu, but if you ask they'll serve it as a side, which might be just the thing to eat at 4 a.m.

OLIVER SCHWANER-ALBRIGHT

RECENTLY OPENED

BCD TOFU HOUSE
17 West 32nd Street, (212) 967-1906, bctofu.com

The BCD Tofu House chain of Korean restaurants started in Los Angeles, where it's regarded as something like Denby's with kimchi — dependable, tasty, and, at the 24-hour branches, one of the city's better 4 a.m. meals. After the chain expanded to Seattle, Tokyo, and some South Korean cities, the first BCD Tofu...
As extravagant real-estate costs and gentrification do away with most of Manhattan’s ethnic neighborhoods outside Chinatown, the valuable commercial strip of West 32nd Street between Fifth Avenue and Broadway remains firmly, surprisingly, overwhelmingly Korean. It is here that many New Yorkers and visitors first taste kimchi (spicy fermented vegetables), bulgogi (thinnily sliced marinated beef) and bi bim bop (Google it), and here that Koreans and Korean-Americans gather for parties and social events.

Many will say you haven’t experienced Korean New York without a trip to Flushing, Queens, but you can easily fill a weekend without leaving Manhattan. Among the culinary choices on and near West 32nd Street, Kunjip is your standard Koreatown restaurant, offering generous portions of do-it-yourself barbecue, other traditional Korean dishes and several brands of soju, the clear Korean liquor. Across the street, Woorijip is an informal, by-the-pound Korean buffet that also stocks Korean snacks like spicy shrimp crackers and sweet rice drinks, good for a quick lunch or bargain dinner; Korean-style fried chicken — with a full bar — is available at the largely hidden, chic gathering place Bon Chon chicken.

At the upscale vegetarian spot HanGawi, which back in the day got two stars from Ruth Reichl when she was restaurant critic for The Times, you remove your shoes as you would in a Korean home; it features rice bowls and hot pots with a stress on ingredients like mushrooms and tofu, and reasonably priced prix fixe menus take the stress out of choosing. (There are plenty of other upscale Korean spots elsewhere, such as Woo Lee Oak in SoHo.)

Also on West 32nd is one of the worst-advertised museums of all time: the Lee Young Hee Museum of Korean Culture, founded in 2004 and hidden ever since on the third floor of an anonymous office building, though there is a banner out there if you crane your neck and look hard enough. The museum was founded by Ms. Lee, a well-known Korean designer, to showcase traditional Korean costumes. Inside are modern-day replicas of ceremonial robes, antique hairpins known as pinyos, and elaborate tassels known as norigaes, some over a century old.

There is plenty more Korean art scattered around the city. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a modest Arts of Korea room, and the Brooklyn Museum’s Asian art collection has 400 pieces (23 currently on show), including a rare 12th-century celadon ewer. And the New Museum for Contemporary Art, which just opened in December, also has a few surprising Korean components, including “Black on White, Gray Ascending,” by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, a two-artist collective from Seoul. Installed beyond the first-floor gift shop and cafe, seven huge screens play sequences of text, which the museum’s Web site explains is “a chilling story of abduction and assassination from seven separate points of view.” (You have to be very patient to figure it out for yourself.)
There are also Korean galleries, including KooNewYork, which sells everything from Korean antiques to contemporary art, and the Kang Collection of traditional Korean art. Both are open by appointment only. On the lighter side, "Toy Stories: Souvenirs from Korean Childhood" opens this Thursday at the Korea Society (weekdays only, alas) featuring made-and-used-in-Korea action figures, robots, dolls and more from the 1970s and 1980s. If you have time to make it out to Queens, you'll find more Korea than you could ever hope for. So many Koreans live in Flushing that the neighborhood supports three Han Ah Reum supermarkets—a k a H Marts—the locally based Korean chain where an eight-pound bucket of tofu goes for $4.99 (that's either the best or worst buy in town, depending on how quickly you go through eight pounds of tofu). You'll have no trouble finding places to eat and shop just wandering around: head toward Union Street near the 7 train's Flushing stop.

There is a place beyond walking distance that you might otherwise miss: Inspa World, a crazy, flashy, 60,000-square-foot monster spa that opened last year in the College Point neighborhood next to Flushing. There, tackiness and technology become one in a fantasyland of wacky saunas and bubbling hot pools of all shapes and sizes. Thirty dollars gets you in for the day with your watch-like electronic gizmo that opens your two lockers (one for shoes, one for everything else), and allows you to pay for anything extra, like a massage or an $8 piña colada at the Caribbean-style in-pool bar. Everyone—Korean families and a sizable number of outsiders—prances around in Inspa uniforms, orange for women and blue-gray for men, sort of like an ultralow-security prison. It has nothing in common with the bustle of West 32nd Street, except that it's really fun, full of surprises and 100 percent Korean.

KOREATOWN AND BEYOND

Kunjip
9 West 32nd Street; (212) 216–9487; www.kunjip.net
Woorijip
12 West 32nd Street; (212) 244–1115
HanGawi
12 East 32nd Street; (212) 213–0077; www.hangawi.com
Woo Lae Oak
48 Mercer Street; (212) 925–8200; www.woolaeoaksoho.com
Lee Young Hee Museum of Korean Culture
2 West 32nd Street, Suite 301; (212) 560–0722; www.lyhm.org
New Museum of Contemporary Art
235 Bowery; (212) 219–1222; www.newmuseum.org
KooNewYork
126 East 64th Street, second floor; (646) 918–7030; www.koonewyork.com
Kang Collection
8 East 82nd Street; (212) 734–1940; www.kangcollection.com
Korea Society
950 Third Avenue, eighth floor; (212) 759–7525; www.koreasociety.org
Han Ah Reum (H Mart)
29–02 Union Street, Flushing, Queens (and other locations); (718) 445–5656; www.hmart.com
Inspa World
11–11 131st Street, College Point, Queens; (718) 939–6300; www.inspaworld.com

KOREATOWN AND BEYOND

Kunjip
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Woorijip
12 West 32nd Street; (212) 244–1115
HanGawi
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WEEKEND IN NEW YORK THE KOREAN EXPERIENCE

From Bi Bin Bop to a Huge Spa

By SETH KUGEL

A extravagan real-estate entrepreneur aims to do away with most of Murray Hill’s ethnic neighborhoods outside Chinatown, the valuable commercial strip of West 32nd Street between Fifth Avenue and Broadway remains firmly, suspiciously, everything Korean. It is home to many New Yorkers and visitors who come to admire the excellent restaurants, bakeries, coffee shops and grocery stores. But the best are those who take a ride on the 7 train, the subway stop that will get you to Flushing, home of the KooNewYork, which sells everything from Korean antiques to contemporary art, and the Kang Collection of traditional Korean art. Both are open by appointment only. On the lighter side, “Toy Stories: Souvenirs from Korean Childhood” opens this Thursday at the Korea Society (weekdays only, alas) featuring made-and-used-in-Korea action figures, robots, dolls and more from the 1970s and 1980s. If you have time to make it out to Queens, you’ll find more Korea than you could ever hope for. So many Koreans live in Flushing that the neighborhood supports three Han Ah Reum supermarkets—a k a H Marts—the locally based Korean chain where an eight-pound bucket of tofu goes for $4.99 (that’s either the best or worst buy in town, depending on how quickly you go through eight pounds of tofu). You’ll have no trouble finding places to eat and shop just wandering around: head toward Union Street near the 7 train’s Flushing stop.

There is a place beyond walking distance that you might otherwise miss: Inspa World, a crazy, flashy, 60,000-square-foot monster spa that opened last year in the College Point neighborhood next to Flushing. There, tackiness and technology become one in a fantasyland of wacky saunas and bubbling hot pools of all shapes and sizes. Thirty dollars gets you in for the day with your watch-like electronic gizmo that opens your two lockers (one for shoes, one for everything else), and allows you to pay for anything extra, like a massage or an $8 piña colada at the Caribbean-style in-pool bar. Everyone—Korean families and a sizable number of outsiders—prances around in Inspa uniforms, orange for women and blue-gray for men, sort of like an ultralow-security prison. It has nothing in common with the bustle of West 32nd Street, except that it’s really fun, full of surprises and 100 percent Korean.
THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 2008

A6, A10

WED TO STRANGERS, VIETNAMESE WIVES BUILD KOREAN LIVES

BY NORMITSU ONISHI

THESE WIVES, who married Korean men, are stranded in a country that defines itself as ethnically homogeneous, but who are being treated as if they were not.

The two couples’ baby girls were born last month only two days apart, the younger one on the morning of the Lunar New Year. Each girl, everyone later agreed, had her Korean father’s forehead and her Vietnamese mother’s nose.

It was one year ago that the girls’ fathers had gone to Vietnam and, in the first two hours of a five–day marriage tour, plucked their mothers out of two dozen prospective brides at the Lucky Star karaoke bar in Hanoi.

Bound by fate and the rhythms of immigration bureaus, the brides, Bui Thi Thuy and To Thi Vien, had landed together in South Korea wondering what kind of place this would be and how their husbands would treat them.

“I feel we share a special bond because we were married on the same date and we both married Korean men,” Ms. Vien said. “We’re the same age and we became mothers almost at the same time.”

And so both new mothers now follow Korean custom by eating seaweed soup to recover their strength. Here in Kwangmyong, a city outside Seoul with a concentration of foreign workers and foreign women married to Korean men, Ms. Vien, 23, lives at the family home of her husband, Kim Wan–su, 40, a factory worker. Ms. Thuy, 23, settled with her husband, Kim Tae–goo, 56, in Yongju, a rural town southeast of Seoul where they grow apples.

The two couples, whose five–day courtship, wedding and honeymoon in Vietnam were described a year ago in an article in The New York Times, are part of a social phenomenon in South Korea. A combination of factors—including the rising social status of Korean women and a surplus of bachelors resulting from a traditional preference for sons—is forcing many Korean men to seek brides in Southeast and Central Asia and China.

In a country that defines itself as ethnically homogeneous, marriages to foreigners accounted for one of eight marriages in 2006, more than triple the rate in 2000. In working–class areas southwest of Seoul, like Kwangmyong, community centers now offer services for foreign wives: Korean language classes, assistance with childbirth and for victims of domestic violence, advice on living in South Korea and with the in–laws. But cultural gaps sometimes make it difficult to reach out to such wives.

“Chinese wives have their own outside network, so they tend to be assertive, and women from the Philippines speak English, so they are confident, but other women, like the Vietnamese, are shy about seeking advice and expressing their problems,” said Kim Myung–soon, a social worker at the Yeongdeungpo Social Welfare Center near here. “They tend to be submissive and smile at their in–laws even if there are problems. And one day they’re gone.”

Han Kuk–yoon, president of the Korea Women Migrants Human Rights Center, a private organization, said the government had not done enough to secure the rights of foreign wives or protect them from abuse.

Some men believe they are permitted to mistreat the women because they paid for the marriage tours and the weddings, and tend to look down on women from poorer countries, Ms. Han said. And the booming international marriage industry has drawn increasingly poor and vulnerable women here.

“Until about three years ago, more educated women tended to come to Korea, but as there are more international marriages, less educated and poorer women are coming to Korea,” Ms. Han said. “And the booming international marriage industry has drawn increasingly poor and vulnerable women here.”

Kwangmyong, South Korea

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“Until about three years ago, more educated women tended to come to Korea, but as there are more international marriages, less educated and poorer women are coming to Korea,” Ms. Han said. “And they seem to have a harder time adapting to life in Korea, learning the language and so on.”
Divorce has risen among Korean men married to foreigners, according to government statistics. But it is too early to draw meaningful comparisons with the divorce rate of marriages between Koreans, which has also risen sharply in recent years.

Given the way they meet, both Korean husbands and their foreign wives have anxieties that the women married them merely to qualify for work here and to send money to their parents. When Ms. Vien’s parents in Vietnam heard that a Vietnamese bride in Korea had killed herself, they called in a panic. And Mr. Kim fretted after hearing that three brides who had come to South Korea through his wife’s agency had left their husbands shortly after arriving.

“I was worried that my wife would run away, too, but I’m not worried anymore,” Mr. Kim said. “We have a child, and we are a family. My wife didn’t come here to make money.”

While foreign wives worry about how their husbands will treat them, Korean men harbor suspicions that the women married them merely to qualify for work here and to send money to their own parents. When Ms. Vien’s parents in Vietnam heard that a Vietnamese bride in Korea had killed herself, they called in a panic. And Mr. Kim fretted after hearing that three brides who had come to South Korea through his wife’s agency had left their husbands shortly after arriving.

Ms. Vien said that was not the case. “I’m your wife, and I don’t like it when you come home so late; nobody in the family likes that,” she said. “I get frustrated and worried. If I were Korean, I’d be less worried, because I’d understand exactly where you were. But I don’t.”

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While Mr. Kim was at work, Ms. Vien was taking care of their newborn at home. With the birth of their daughter, Dan–bi, Ms. Vien had stopped going twice a week to the local community center where she had befriended a woman from her home, Van Don Island, in Vietnam’s northeast. Ms. Vien had dropped out of high school at the age of 15 to make money.

“I’m a working man, and she doesn’t understand that going out drinking with your co–workers is a necessity in Korean culture,” Mr. Kim said. “I feel that Vien thinks I didn’t keep my promise because she’s from a foreign country and I look down on her.”

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“I miss my mother a lot, especially these days,” Ms. Vien said. “I’m Vietnamese and everyone around me is Korean, so I feel a lot more ease talking to my mother. We can be on the phone for hours.”

On a recent Sunday afternoon, with the baby sleeping peacefully, Ms. Vien seemed in better spirits. She and her husband sat on the living room couch, often holding hands and showing the kind of affection they had displayed during the first week of their meeting.

Both said they were more committed than ever to building a life together, though they acknowledged gaps in culture and language. Their biggest arguments have occurred after he has gone drinking with co–workers and broken a promise to come home at a certain hour.

Ms. Vien guessed what was happening and she started crying, the sister–in–law said. “She tells me not to like the child because it’s not a boy.”

Complicating matters, doctors recently diagnosed a hole in the baby’s heart and are not sure whether it will close on its own.

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It is 10:30 p.m. and students at the elite Daewon prep school here are cramming in a study hall that ends a 15-hour school day. A window is propped open so the evening chill can keep them awake. One teenager studies standing upright at his desk to keep from dozing.

Kim Hyun-kyung, who has accumulated nearly perfect scores on her SATs, is multitasking to prepare for physics, chemistry and history exams.

“I can’t let myself waste even a second,” said Ms. Kim, who dreams of attending Harvard, Yale or another brand-name American college. And she has a good shot. This spring, as in previous years, all but a few of the 133 graduates from Daewon Foreign Language High School who applied to selective American universities won admission.

It is a success rate that American parents may well envy, especially now, as many students are swallowing rejection from favorite universities at the close of an insanely selective college application season.

“Going to U.S. universities has become like a huge fad in Korean society, and the Ivy League names — Harvard, Yale, Princeton — have really struck a nerve,” said Victoria Kim, who attended Daewon and graduated from Harvard last June.

Daewon has one major Korean rival, the Minjok Leadership Academy, three hours’ drive east of Seoul, which also has a spectacular record of admission to Ivy League colleges.

How do they do it? Their formula is relatively simple. They take South Korea’s top-scoring middle school students, put those who aspire to an American university in English-language classes, taught by Korean and highly paid American and other foreign teachers, emphasize composition and other skills crucial to success on the SATs and college admissions essays, and — especially this — urge them on to unceasing study.

Both schools seem to be rethinking their grueling regimen, at least a bit. Minjok, a boarding school, has turned off dormitory surveillance cameras previously used to ensure that students did not doze in late-night study sessions. Daewon is ending its school day earlier for freshmen. Its founder, Lee Won-hee, worried in an interview that while Daewon was turning out high-scoring students, it might be falling short in educating them as responsible citizens.

“American schools may do a better job at that,” Dr. Lee said.

Still, the schools are highly rigorous. Both supplement South Korea’s required, lecture-based national curriculum with Western-style discussion classes. Their academic year is more than a month longer than at American high schools. Daewon, which costs about $5,000 per year to attend, requires two foreign languages besides English. Minjok, where tuition, board and other expenses top $15,000, offers Advanced Placement courses and research projects.

And, oh yes. Both schools suppress teenage romance as a waste of time.

“What are you doing holding hands?” a Daewon administrator scolded an adolescent couple recently, according to his aides. “You should be studying!”

Students do not seem to complain. Park Yeshong, one of Kim Hyun-kyung’s classmates, said attractions tended to fade during hundreds of hours of close-quarters study. “We know each other too well to fall in love,” he said. Many American educators would kill to have such disciplined pupils.
Both schools reserve admission for highly motivated students; the application process resembles that at many American colleges, where students are judged on their grade-point averages, as well as their performance on special tests and in interviews.

“Even my worst students are great,” said Joseph Foster, a Williams College graduate who teaches writing at Daewon. “They’re professionals; if I teach them, they’ll learn it. I get e-mails at 2 a.m. I’ll respond and go to bed. When I get up, I’ll find a follow-up question mailed at 5 a.m.”

South Korea is not the only country sending more students to the United States, but it seems to be a special case. Some 103,000 Korean students study at American schools of all levels, more than from any other country, according to American government statistics. In higher education, only India and China, with populations more than 20 times that of South Korea’s, send more students.

“Preparing to get to the best American universities has become something of a national obsession in Korea,” said Alexander Vershbow, the American ambassador to South Korea.

Korean applications to Harvard alone have tripled, to 213 this spring, up from 66 in 2003, said William R. Fitzsimmons, Harvard’s dean of admissions. Harvard has 37 Korean undergraduates, more than from any foreign country except Canada and Britain. Harvard, Yale and Princeton have a total of 103 Korean undergraduates; 34 graduated from Daewon or Minjok.

This year, Daewon and Minjok graduates are heading to universities like Stanford, Chicago, Duke and seven of the eight Ivy League universities — but not to Harvard. Instead, Harvard accepted four Korean students from three other prep schools.

“That was certainly not any statement” about the Daewon and Minjok schools, Mr. Fitzsimmons said. “We’re alert to getting kids from schools where we haven’t had them before, but we’d never reject an applicant simply because he or she came from a school with a history of sending students to Harvard.”

South Korea’s academic year starts in March, so the 2008 class of Daewon’s Global Leadership Program, which prepares students for study at foreign universities, graduated in February.

One graduate was Kim Soo–yeon, 19, who was accepted by Princeton this month. Daewon parents tend to be wealthy doctors, lawyers or university professors. Ms. Kim’s father is a top official in the Korean Olympic Committee.

Ms. Kim developed fierce study habits early, watching her mother scold her older sister for receiving any score less than 100 on tests. Even a 98 or a 99 brought a tongue-lashing.

“Most Korean mothers want their children to get 100 on all the tests in all the subjects,” Ms. Kim’s mother said.

Ms. Kim’s highest aspiration was to attend a top Korean university, until she read a book by a Korean student at Harvard about American universities. Immediately she put up a sign in her bedroom: “I’m going to an Ivy League!”

Even while at Daewon, Ms. Kim, like thousands of Korean students, took weekend classes in English, physics and other subjects at private academies, raising her SAT scores by hundreds of points. “I just love to do well on the tests,” she said.

As bright as she is, she was just one great student among many, said Eric Cho, Daewon’s college counselor. Sitting at his computer terminal at the school, perched on a craggy eastern hilltop overlooking the Seoul skyline, Mr. Cho scrolled through the class of 2008’s academic records.

Their average combined SAT score was 2203 out of 2400. By comparison, the average combined score at Phillips Exeter, the New Hampshire boarding school, is 2085. Sixty–seven Daewon graduates had perfect 800 math scores.

Kim Hyeon–kyung, 17, scored perfect 800s on the SAT verbal and math tests, and 790 in writing. She is scheduled to take nine Advanced Placement tests next month, in calculus, physics, chemistry, European history and five other subjects. One challenge: she has taken none of these courses. Instead, she is teaching herself in between classes at Daewon, buying and devouring textbooks.

So she is busy. She rises at 6 a.m. and heads for her school bus at 6:50. Arriving at Daewon, she grabs a broom to help classmates clean her classroom. Between 8 and noon, she hears Korean instructors teach supply and demand in economics, Korean soils in geography and classical poets in Korean literature.

At lunch she joins other raucous students, all, like her, wearing blue blazers, in a chow line serving beans and rice, fried dumpling and pickled turnip, which she eats with girlfriends. Boys, who sit elsewhere, wolf their food and race to a dirt lot for a 10–minute pickup soccer game before afternoon classes.

Kim Hyeon–kyung joins other girls at a hallway sink to brush her teeth before reporting to French literature, French culture and English grammar classes, taught by Korean instructors. At 3:20, her English language classes begin. This day, they include English literature, taught by Mani Tadayon, a polyglot graduate of the University of California at Berkeley who was born in Iran, and government and politics, taught by Hugh Quigley, a former Wall Street lawyer.

Evening study hall begins at 7:45. She piles up textbooks on an adjoining desk, where they glare at her like a to–do list. Classmates sling backpacks over seats, prop a window open and start cramming. Three hours later, the floor is littered with empty juice cartons and water bottles. One girl has nodded out, head on desk. At 10:50 a tone sounds, and Ms. Kim heads for a bus that will send its way through Seoul’s towering high-rise canyons to her home, south of the Han River.

“I feel proud that I’ve endured another day,” she said.

The schedule at the Minjok academy, on a rural campus of tile–roofed buildings in forested hills, appears even more daunting. Students rise at 6 for martial arts, and thereafter, wearing full–sleeved, gray–and–black robes, plunge into a day of relentless study that ends just before midnight, when they may sleep.

But most keep cramming until 2 a.m., when dorm lights are switched off, said Gang Min–ho, a senior. Even then some students turn on lanterns and keep going, Mr. Gang said. “Basically we lead very tired lives,” he said.

Students sometimes report for classes so exhausted that Alexander Gane, a German who teaches European history, said he asked, “Did you go to bed at all last night?”

“But we’re not only nerds!” interrupted Choi Jung–yun, who grew up in San Diego. Minjok students play sports, take part in many clubs and even have a rock band, she said. Ambassador Vershbow, who plays the drums, confirmed that with photographs that showed him jamming with Minjok’s rockers during a visit to the school last year.

There are other hints of slackening. A banner once hung on a Minjok building. “This school is a paradise for those who want to study and a hell for those who do not,” it read. But it was taken down after faculty members deemed it too harsh, said Son Eun–ju, director of counseling.
A FUNHOUSE FLOATING IN A KOREAN SPA

BY DONALD G. MCNEIL JR.

“T

his is the best night of my life!” burbled Rory as he was swashed in an inner tube around the whirlpool section of the outdoor hot pools at Inspa World.

I have heard this before. And besides, how great could the greatest night of a life only six-and-three-quarters-years long be?

Still, it was pretty cool: my stepson, Rory, and his buddies whirling endlessly around as I let the bubble jets pound my kidneys and tickle my feet, lolling back to watch the steam rising into the night and the jet planes drifting down into La Guardia, every once in a while lazily checking to make sure no one had drowned.

This was the capper to a weirdly sybaritic evening: plunge pools, saunas lined in gold, jade and salt; massage chairs; spare ribs with kimchi, Korean soap operas and a lot of viewing other people's tattoos.

Inspa World, a five-story 60,000-square-foot funhouse, bills itself as a “spa and water park.” But that doesn’t quite capture it. At a mere $30 to get in, and kids scrambling around, it’s no Canyon Ranch. And without water slides or wave machines, it’s no Typhoon Lagoon, either. The closest relative may be the “mustard-off pools” in Dr. Seuss’s “Happy Birthday to You!” Call it an aquarium for humans. You end up feeling like someone’s well-fed goldfish, darting around in the bubbles, wondering what is behind the next gilded rock.

Inspa is an elaborate local copy of a jimjilbang, a traditional Korean 24-hour bathhouse where families soak, steam and eat together, and sometimes even sleep over.

The setting is also unexpected: it is in College Point, Queens, just north of the “valley of ashes” in “The Great Gatsby,” and hard by an industrial park.

Once you’ve fought your way off the bridge ramps (be smarter than me — avoid rush hour), you can hand your keys to a valet.

From the building’s top balcony you can gaze over the auto-parts warehouse next door and see the lights of the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge twinkling on Long Island Sound. Inspa World (which will change its name in a few months because, it turns out, a West Coast day-spa chain has the same name and threatened to sue) opened last May.

The owner, Steve Chon, a Queens architect and developer, said he spent $25 million building it and hopes to open 19 more, the next in Dallas. There are other jimjilbangs in the United States, Mr. Chon said, but none as large with big outdoor pools like his.

Mr. Chon said he first advertised to Korean-Americans, “but I was always targeting mainstream Americans.”

The first “mainstream Americans” to become regulars were Russians and Hasidic men from Brooklyn, said Yong Seok Choi, Inspa’s vice president. Now there is an eclectic mix.

On the Friday night spent with Rory, his pals Oliver and Eleanor, ages 7 and 5, and their parents, about 70 percent of the clientele was Asian. As we entered, a group of women who appeared to be West Indian were leading in a friend.

“Why is she blindfolded?” I asked, naively.

“Bachelorette party!” they explained.

Paying the entry fee gets one a jazzy blue or pink electronic bracelet and a bow toward the glass men’s and women’s doors. The bracelet is both locker key and charge card for food, massages and tube rentals at the pools.

First, your shoes get their own locker; the floor is spotless blond wood. Then, once you strip down to just your bracelet (and assuming you do not join the man squatting naked on a table clipping his toenails into a tray), you enter a vast room with dark stone walls, saunas, and many pools: lukewarm, hot, hotter, bubble-jet, cold and frigid. As a child, I paged through pictures of a Roman bath, wishing I’d been born then; finally, I can live it.

There are no strigils, but there are little wooden buckets and stools on which to perch, Asian style, while showering and shaving, as well as regular showers. Toothbrushes are on offer, along with squirts from a big tube of Colgate on a string. Push a button on the wall and a jackhammer of cold water pounds down to massage your scalp.

The atmosphere was relaxed; no one seemed bothered by Rory leaping from pool to pool like some crazed faun.
He ladies bath, my wife said, had scenes both sweet and mystifying: little girls scrubbing their mothers’ backs, and women squatting over heated pots. The pots, I learned later, were herbal steamers, supposedly very soothing after giving birth.

Exfoliating rubs were given by muscular women in traditional jjimjilbang work wear: bras and panties. Travel writers describing Korean baths always say the same thing: the mists are so rough that your skin rolls off in little gray worms.

Next, all clients don the house’s short cotton pajamas — gray for men, orange for women — and troop upstairs to the sauna floor, the spa’s social center. There was something perky and democratic in the air, all of us multiculturally together, scrubbed and uniformed like cheerful first graders. Or maybe it was the air; the spa bubbles in extra oxygen.

Half the floor is a food court: juice bar, pizza or sushi, Starbucks or Haagen-Dasz. Wall-mounted televisions silently play shows with English and Korean subtitles. The other half is a kitsch paradise: a green stone meadow coursed by a running stream and dotted with igloo-shaped saunas.

The word “sauna,” a puzzling sign explains, is “from the Finnish words ‘sow’ (an admiration of ‘wow’) and ‘nai.’” The sign’s medical advice is just as strange. Heated gold supposedly releases infrared rays that suck out bad energy. Jade fights high blood pressure, paralysis of the limbs. “Use their whips, some kind of tree” — presumably a reference to a nice thrashing with birch branches that some feel is the perfect lagniappe to a good steam.

Getting a permit was a yearlong struggle because of neighborhood opposition. Offering massages “made people think we were opening a whorehouse,” Mr. Chon said later. “Now they’ve changed their mind,” he said. “They come here, they say, ‘Whoa, this is nice.’” Driven by a shared dissatisfaction with South Korea’s rigid educational system, parents in rapidly expanding numbers are seeking to give their children an edge by helping them become fluent in English while sparing them, and themselves, the stress of South Korea’s notorious academic pressure cooker.

More than 40,000 South Korean schoolchildren are believed to be living outside South Korea, many with their mothers in what experts say is an outgrowth of a new era of globalized education.

AUCKLAND, New Zealand

On a sunny afternoon recently, half a dozen South Korean mothers came to pick up their children at the Remuera Primary School here, greeting one another warmly in a schoolyard filled with New Zealanders.

The mothers, members of the largest group of foreigners at the public school, were part of what are known in South Korea as “wild geese,” families living separately, sometimes for years, to school their children in English-speaking countries like New Zealand and the United States. The mothers and children live overseas while the fathers live and work in South Korea, flying over to visit a couple of times a year.

Driven by a shared dissatisfaction with South Korea’s rigid educational system, parents are seeking to give their children an edge by helping them become fluent in English while sparing them, and themselves, the stress of South Korea’s notorious academic pressure cooker.

More than 40,000 South Korean schoolchildren are believed to be living outside South Korea, many with their mothers in what experts say is an outgrowth of a new era of globalized education.
T he phenomenon is the first time that South Korean parents’ famous focus on education has split wives from husbands and children from fathers. It has also upended traditional migration patterns by which men went overseas temporarily while their wives and children stayed home, straining marriages and the Confucian ideal of the traditional Korean family. The cost of maintaining two households has stretched family budgets since most wives cannot work outside South Korea because of visa restrictions.

In 2006, 29,511 children from elementary through high school level left South Korea, nearly double the number in 2004 and almost seven times the figure in 2000, according to the Korean Educational Development Institute, a research group that tracks the figures for the Ministry of Education. The figures, the latest available, did not include children accompanying parents who left South Korea to work or emigrate, and who could also be partly motivated by educational goals.

South Koreans now make up the largest group of foreign students in the United States (more than 103,000) and the second largest in New Zealand after Chinese students, according to American and New Zealand government statistics. Yet, unlike other foreign students, South Koreans tend to go overseas starting in elementary school — in the belief that they will absorb English more easily at that age.

In New Zealand, there were 6,579 South Koreans in the country’s elementary and secondary schools in 2007, accounting for 38 percent of all foreign students.

“We talked about coming here for two years before we finally did it,” said Kim Soo-in, 39, who landed here 16 months ago with her two sons. “It was never a question of whether to do it, but when. We knew we had to finally do it,” said Kim Soo-in, 39, who landed here 16 months ago with her two sons. “It was never a question of whether to do it, but when. We knew we had to finally do it,” said Kim Soo-in, 39, who landed here 16 months ago with her two sons. “It was never a question of whether to do it, but when. We knew we had to finally do it.”

Wild geese fathers were initially relatively wealthy and tended to send their families to the United States. But in the last few years, more middle-class families have been heading to less expensive destinations like Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Now, there are also “eagle-fathers,” who visit their families several times a year because they have the time and money. Those with neither, who are stuck in South Korea, are known as “penguin fathers.”

The national experience is considered enough of a social problem that an aide to South Korea’s president recently singled out the plight of the penguin fathers.

President Lee Myung-bak said he would start to address the problem by hiring 10,000 English teachers. “This is unprecedented,” he said. “Korea is actually the only country in the world undertaking such a phenomenon, which is very unfortunate.”

South Korean students routinely score at the top in international academic tests. But unhappiness over education’s financial and psychological costs is so widespread that it is often cited as a reason for the country’s low birthrate, which, at 1.26 in 2007, was one of the world’s lowest.

South Korean parents say that the schools are failing to teach not only English but also other skills crucial in an era of globalization, like creative thinking. That resonates among South Koreans, whose economy has slowed after decades of high growth and who believe they are increasingly being squeezed between the larger economies of Japan and China.

It could take years to see how well this wave of children will fare back in South Korea, especially since they are now going overseas at the elementary level. But earlier this decade, when the wild geese children tended to be high school students, many succeeded in plying their improved English scores to get into colleges in the United States or other English-speaking countries, education experts said. For others, their years overseas was a roundabout way to get into top South Korean colleges, like Yonsei University in Seoul, which increasingly offer courses or entire programs in English.

For New Zealand’s public schools, which charge foreign students annual tuition fees of $5,700, South Koreans provide an important source of revenue. The economic benefits have helped offset resentment toward an Asian influx that has remade many schools in Auckland, the country’s largest city, lending an Asian character to the business district and raising home prices in the wealthier suburbs.

At Remuera Primary, Ms. Kim said she believed that English fluency would increase her son’s chances of gaining admission to selective secondary schools in South Korea and ultimately to a leading university in Seoul. Her husband, Park Il-ryang, 43, graduated from a little-known Korean university, and he said that the resulting lack of connections had hampered his own career.

Before coming here, the parents had sent one son, Jun-sung, now 10, to evening cram schools and their other son, Jun-woo, now 8, to an English preschool. Parents in their apartment building talked incessantly about their children’s education.

Even so, the sons were not making sufficient progress in English, the parents said. They hired a private English tutor to supplement the supplementary cram schools. “We didn’t think the cram schools were doing any good, but we were too insecure to stop sending them, because the other parents were sending their children,” Ms. Kim said.

At their house recently, the sons peeked through the living-room blinds to see whether their neighbor, Charles Price, was free to play. In no time, the boys were coming and going, barefoot, between the houses, carrying “Bionicle” action figures.

The parents were pleased that their sons had integrated well into the neighborhood and school, and were now even speaking English to each other. But Ms. Kim was worried that her younger son was making shockingly simple mistakes in his spoken Korean and might not form a solid “Korean identity.”

Striking the right balance would be critical to the brothers’ re-entry into South Korea, with its fierce competition to get into the best schools.

South Korean women’s rising social status and growing economic power have fueled the wild geese migration, according to education experts like Oh Ook-whan, a professor at Ehwa Womans University who has studied the separated families. Conservatives have criticized the wild geese mothers for being obsessed about their children’s education at the risk of destroying their marriages. The women’s real intention, they say, is to get as far away as possible from their mothers-in-law.

The mothers say they are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors to the wild geese mothers. They are the modern-day successors, to one of the most famous mothers in East Asia: the mother of Mencius, the fourth-century Chinese Confucian philosopher. In a story known in South Korea, as well as China and Japan, Mencius’s mother moved to three neighborhoods before finding the environment most favorable to her son’s education.

“I don’t know why Mencius’s mother is so revered and why we wild geese mothers are so criticized,” said Chang Soo-jin, 37, who moved here with her two children nearly two years ago. “Our coming out here is exactly the same as what she did.”

Here, the English skills of her 6-year-old daughter, Amy, have improved so much that she now has the reading abilities of an 8-year-old, said her teacher at Sunderland, a small private school where all 16 foreign students come from South Korea.

Yet Amy’s father, Kevin Park, 41, was not totally convinced that the benefits had been worth splitting up the family. He had reluctantly agreed with his wife’s decision to come here with the children and then extend their stay, twice.

After his family left Seoul, Mr. Park, an engineer, moved into what South Koreans call an “officetel,” a building with small units that can be used as apartments or offices. Hearing about wild geese fathers becoming dissolve living by themselves, he stopped drinking at home.

“I’m alone, I miss my family,” Mr. Park said grimly in an interview in Seoul. “Families should live together.”

Living apart for years strains marriages and undermines the role of a father, traditionally the center of the family in South Korea’s Confucian culture, education experts and psychologists said. Some spouses have affairs; some marriages end in divorce.

“Even if there are problems, some couples choose to ignore them for the sake of their children’s education,” said Choi Yang- suk, a psychologist at Yonsei who has studied wild geese families in the United States and Canada.

Here, Park Jeong-woo, 40, and her husband, Kim Yoon-seok, 45, an ophthalmologist who was here on a visit, said their marriage had grown stronger despite living apart for four and a half years. Every reunion, they said, was like a honeymoon.

But while Ms. Park said she talked to her husband a couple of hours daily by phone, her son and daughter never asked to talk to their father. He, in turn, never asked to talk to his children, the couple said.

“We may be a strange family,” Ms. Park said.

Dr. Kim said his own father had always been too busy with work to spend much time with the family, and on weekends woke up at 4 a.m. to play golf.

“Maybe that’s why, now that I’m a father, I have a similar relationship with my son,” he said.

Asked whether she missed her father, Ellin, 11, said: “I don’t miss him that much. I see him every year.”

“Do you think that’s enough?” her mother asked, a little surprised.

Ellin corrected herself and said she saw him twice a year.
WHERE THE GROWTH OF LUSH FAIRWAYS HAS NO BOUNDS

BY CHOE SANG-HUN

SEOUL, South Korea

As dusk fell, a restaurant-lined lane in Seoul’s Mapo district filled with customers. While many loosened their ties and bought a round, at Kwon Sung-woon’s place men took off their ties and prepared to play a round — of golf.

Swinging real clubs, they took on Pebble Beach in California, St. Andrews in Scotland and other famed courses around the world. Of course, it was all computer-simulated: they hit their balls into 4-by-3-yard plastic screens showing projections of fairways.

Simulated golf has been around in Europe and the United States for years, mainly as a teaching aid at golf clinics or on cruise ships where passengers are no longer allowed to hit balls into the ocean. But in South Korea, where golf courses are expensive and overbooked, virtual-reality golf has become a fast-growing pastime, almost as commonplace in bars as pool tables and dart boards.

Simulator makers even organize virtual-reality tournaments, with money, cars or a ticket to play in a real golf tournament as prizes. Thousands participate, and cable channels show the final matches.

“One day, we want to host a global simulated golf championship,” said Lim Won-june, marketing manager at Golfzon, South Korea’s leading maker of golf simulators.

“In our country, there are too many golfers for too few golf courses,” said Kim Young-woo, 46, who recently played an 18-hole round with two friends at Mr. Kwon’s establishment, Pastel Screen Golf. “This is a cheap and time-saving alternative for people like us, who can’t play real golf often enough.”

Mr. Kwon, 43, a former computer engineer, opened his golf cafe three months ago, shelling out $138,000 to install four golf simulators. Since then, six competitors have moved into his neighborhood alone. Still, Mr. Kwon has no trouble filling his four rooms with customers, seven days a week, from 9 a.m. until well past midnight.

“Six p.m. to midnight is the peak,” Mr. Kwon said. “But some patrons play until 5 a.m. This is quite addictive.”

Apparently. The number of golf cafes in South Korea, which tend to have 3 to 10 simulation rooms, reached 2,500 last year, up from 300 in 2003. Seven out of every 10 golf simulators sold in the world are installed in South Korea, according to industry officials here.

Each day, an estimated 200,000 people play virtual-reality golf in South Korea, six times as many as play at real courses, the officials say. In this highly wired country, where professional leagues of online video games attract throngs of teenage fans, middle-aged people compete in simulated golf championships, thanks to the online network connecting the golf cafes.

“It’s picture-perfect, down to every tree,” Kim Ae-hee, 42, a homemaker, said of the 50 simulated courses she could choose from with a few mouse clicks.

On the screen, clouds roll by in high definition. Tree branches sway in a virtual breeze. Birds twitter. The ball drops into a water hazard and creates virtual ripples, swishes through tree leaves or rolls into the hole with a satisfying rattle while spectators cheer.
On a recent Sunday at Kasco Golf Club, a six-screen golf cafe in western Seoul, Ms. Kim and her husband selected their favorite course — Sun Hill Country Club, north of Seoul — and set the weather and wind conditions for an 18-hole game.

Ms. Kim placed a ball on a tee and hit it with her driver. Her husband, Choi Hong-ick, who sat on a sofa holding a fried chicken leg and a beer, shouted, “Nice shot!”

The screen recalibrated to show Ms. Kim the view from her ball’s new position to the flag. As she prepared her next shot, the computer tilted the swing mat to replicate the incline and advised which club to use. Later it also helped her visualize her putt; virtual drops of water crawled across the screen to indicate how the green sloped.

“It helps you play a better game on the actual course,” Mr. Choi said. “We come here once a week.”

In the next room, cheers went up. Lee Jong-hwa, a 45-year-old garment importer who began playing golf only six months ago, had just scored his first hole in one. His prize: a coupon allowing him to use the cafe five times free of charge.

“Before screen golf, we used to go out drinking in the evening,” he said.

“This is a much healthier way of socializing,” said Mr. Lee’s colleague Kim Sung-ho. “On real courses, I average 12 over par. On the screen, I am much better at 2 to 3 over par. But my score varies widely depending on which version of simulator I play.”

Golf has a mixed reputation in South Korea, seen by some as a rich man’s sport that provides venues for corrupt deals between politicians and businessmen. The government levies steep taxes on golf and once banned public servants from the fairways. In 2006, Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan was forced to resign when it was discovered that he played golf with businessmen while the government was struggling with a railroad strike.

Still, the introduction of a five-day work week in 2004 has spurred the sport to even greater popularity. Some 3.5 million players jostle for tee times at the country’s 260 courses, despite the average of $295 it costs to play.

Paying greens fees is a favorite bribe in South Korea, as is booking a round at a top country club on weekends. Golf buffs soothe their frustration at indoor driving ranges or take overseas golf vacations.

Against this backdrop, golf cafes, which charge only $20 to $35 a person for 18 holes, fill a crucial need. Mr. Choi’s colleague Kang Sun-mi of VR Field, another leading simulator manufacturer.

“Screen golf has become a kind of arcade game for Korean adults,” she said.

Mr. Kwon, the golf cafe owner, doubts simulated golf will ever replace the real thing. Many of his patrons are seeking a virtual-reality practice session on the course they plan to play the next day. “There’s no substitute for real grass and fresh outdoor air,” he said.

But virtual golf has its merits. “You can’t cheat on your score because you can’t cheat the computer,” Mr. Kwon said. “And you don’t have to go looking for your ball.”
F or working stiffs, the fun in the sun ended on Monday. After two days of toying with the stifling weather in shorts and T-shirts, they found the most mundane chores a challenge during record-high temperatures in the New York region.

The early-season swelter created an array of problems from power failures to delays on several subway lines. Schools sent students home early, and officials at Yankee Stadium handed out bottles of water to fans during an afternoon game against the Kansas City Royals.

The technicatles of a high pressure center over Bermuda that funneled hot air from the south was lost on many New Yorkers who were still fishing their short-sleeve shirts and khakis out of the closet.

"Basically, it’s an early-season heat wave typical for later in the summer," said Matt Sardi, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service on Long Island.

The temperature hit 99 degrees at La Guardia Airport, 4 degrees higher than the previous high set on June 9, 1984; it was 99 degrees at Newark Liberty Airport, tying a record set in 1933. In Central Park, the high temperature was 96, one degree shy of the record. Temperatures in Islip, on Long Island, and Bridgeport in Connecticut, easily broke previous records.

Tuesday was not likely to offer any respite from the 90-degree heat, according to the National Weather Service, adding that temperatures would drop back into the 80s by Wednesday.

Like many power companies in the area, Consolidated Edison played whack-a-mole to keep up with power failures, though it said it had plenty of slack capacity.

Electrical failures halted trains in Brooklyn. The company urged customers in Yorkville and East Harlem to conserve power after 4 of the 29 circuits that feed the area went out. The company said that it hoped to have all of them working by Tuesday morning.

In Westchester, about 1,400 customers in Rye and Port Chester were without power at dinner time Monday. And in northern New Jersey, a failed breaker left nearly 75,000 customers of PublicService Electric and Gas without power much of the afternoon and into the evening.

People did what they could to escape the heat, going to the movies or to centers set up by the city’s Office of Emergency Management. But most of them simply had to deal.

Not Too Cool for School
At Central Park East High School, at Madison Avenue at 106th Street, Isaac Paniagua, 15, a freshman, said he feared for his grade on an English test.

“I had to read a simple story five times because the heat was too much,” he said. “The heat makes people behave not normal.”

Robert Carson, a junior, said the sweating got so bad during gym class that “I think I lost a lot of weight.” To make matters worse, it was not just students who suffered as the temperatures climbed. As Robert put it: “All the teachers are drenched.”

While public schools built in the last 20 years have central air conditioning, many classrooms in older buildings do not even have air conditioner units, leaving less fortunate students and teachers to debating what felt worse, being inside or out.

“The D.O.E. recognizes that today’s unseasonable weather creates uncomfortable conditions in our schools and we commend our principals for taking appropriate steps to ensure the safety of our students and teachers,” Debra Wexler, a spokeswoman for the city’s Education Department, said in a statement.

Still, Ms. Wexler said that the city had “not traditionally closed schools or dismissed students early” because of hot weather, and was “not planning to do so” on Tuesday.

But as temperatures climbed on Monday, a number of schools districts in Connecticut and New Jersey thought otherwise. Tom Murphy, a spokesman for the Connecticut Education Department, said that about half of the state’s 166 districts had dismissed their students early and would probably do so again if the heat persisted.

In New York City, some principals have opted for new air conditioners, and the electrical wiring to operate them, over other expenditures.

Felix Gil, the principal at P.S. 20 on the Lower East Side, said that the school had spent close to $60,000 on air conditioners and wiring in the past two years. Mr. Gil called the money “well spent,” particularly on a day like Monday, when recess was held in a cool cafeteria.

At P.S. 29 in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, the classrooms are air-conditioned, but the auditorium is not. And that is where children usually spend recess when the weather is bad. So on Monday, as public officials urged New Yorkers to take refuge indoors, P.S. 29’s children spent recess outside, where they sat in the shade sipping cups of water provided by school administrators.

Hot, but Not Bombay Hot
There is hot and then there are the narrow kiosks in New York’s subway stations.

For the people who sell newspapers and candy underground, the punishing heat made their sometimes uncomfortable jobs unbearable. Air conditioners are rare, so many workers get by with fans that do little more than circulate the steamy station air.

“Something is better than nothing,” said Praful Dholakia, 60, who stood next to a small, grime-filled fan in his kiosk at the 49th Street Station on the R line. “I’m Indian, so I can handle it. Bombay is much hotter.”

At least by the standards of the New York City subway system, where it is typically five degrees warmer than the outdoors on hot days, Mr. Dholakia was pretty comfortable. His kiosk was set back from the platform, and wisps of the air conditioning from the Lehman Brothers building above could be felt downstairs.

But the extension cord Mr. Dholakia was using to power the fan was a no-no, said Doobiram Nohar, who works for Greystone Corporate Realty Services, which manages the kiosks for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

“He can trip, so an extension cord is no good,” said Mr. Nohar, who happened to stop on his regular rounds.

Mr. Nohar is a reluctant enforcer, particularly when it comes to fans on a hot day. In fact, he gets on well with the kiosk workers, who shake his hand, exchange pleasantries and take suggestions.

But his main job is to ensure that the kiosks conform to the rules of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

“A fan can blow in the kiosk on the 7 line platform at Grand Central Terminal was working O.K., but it was no match for the trains, whose air conditioning units belch out waves of heat.

“When there are two trains in the station, it gets hot,” said Mohammed M. Khan, 52, who appeared more concerned with finding a spot for the 16 cases of soda, water and snacks that had just been delivered.

ELISSA GOOTMAN

Costly Power Failures

Scores of Con Edison workers in thick blue jumpers, hard hats and assorted gear worked furiously on Smith Street in Brooklyn to restore power to a section of Carroll Gardens after it went dark about 9 p.m. Sunday night.

Workers climbed in and out of manholes from Baltic to Dean Streets, drinking water by the gallon and trading precious spots under scaffolding, trees — anything that would provide relief.

By noon on Monday, many of the clothing stores, restaurants, pizzerias and bars had provisional power, but lights were still dim and air conditioning was scarce.

The air along Smith Street, already hard to breathe because of the fleet of Con Edison trucks, worsened with the smell of rotting food that had been piling on the sidewalk all morning.

“You want to see spoilage? Here, I’ll show you,” said Spero Katehis, 52, who with Evan Stogianos, 24, owns the Carroll Garden’s Classic Diner on Smith Street.

JOSHUA ROBINSON

Baking in the Bronx

At Yankee Stadium, the temperature rose steadily from 94 degrees at the time of the first pitch to 98 at the last out as the Yankees took on the Royals. Huge banks of seats in the upper deck and the field level boxes remained empty as the sun beat down on them without reprieve.

The Yankees’ starting pitcher, Mike Mussina, could not even remain in the dugout between innings. As soon as he retired the last batter in each of his eight innings, he would run back to the clubhouse to cool off.

The fans, who roared in the sun for 2 hours 47 minutes, did not have that option. In the exposed bleachers, they sat on metal benches that spent all day absorbing the heat.

The Yankees set up stations throughout the concourses, offering free water, and fans crowded around them asking for ice and moistening towels. At $5 a glass, the lemonade also flowed freely.

“When we planned our trip, we thought New York would be in the high 70s, low 80s maybe,” said Melissa Prince, a tourist from Charlotte, N.C., sitting under her umbrella in the right-field bleachers. “But today it feels like we’re right back in Charlotte.”

KEN BELSON
He opened the sidewalk bulkhead to the restaurant’s basement, where trash bags were piled nearly to the top of the stairs. “That goes all the way back,” he said.

Inside, workers were cleaning out refrigerators and setting up the restaurant for the first moment that full power would be restored. But Mr. Katehis estimated that the power failure had already cost his business $20,000.

“I kept everyone here last night,” he said.

“You’re talking about payroll, you’re talking about food. I’ve got steaks, I’ve got fish, I’ve got pasta, I’ve got salads. Hopefully we can go after Con Edison for something.”

As he looked over his staff, Mr. Katehis joked with a waiter who had put on his tie, normally a part of the uniform. “Daniel, I see you putting that tie on and it makes me more hot,” he said. “Please, no tie. Today is a special day.”

DAVID GIAMBUSSO

Steamy Enough?

While the rest of the city was seeking relief, clients of a large Korean spa in Queens had other ideas.

“I know we’re in a heat wave, but somehow, this isn’t hot for me,” said Lyn Canuto, of Bayside, who was stretched out on a straw mat at Sauna Valley at Spa Castle in College Point, where the saunas look like big pizza ovens and feel almost as hot.

Ms. Canuto, who runs an accounting service, spent 20 minutes in the sauna, an ornate tile-covered affair with a stream running through it. A digital thermometer above the door read 192.

The coolest of the saunas is 135 degrees, but the temperatures of the others quickly go up from there.

Jennifer Chon, who handles media relations for the spa, which is owned by her father, the hot weather had done little to discourage customers from paying $30 to work up a good sweat.

“It’s a different kind of heat inside them because the air is pure and clean,” Ms. Chon said.

Ms. Canuto laughed when asked if stepping back outside to temperatures in the 90s was a snap after lounging in the 190s.

“I come to these saunas for heat,” she said. “When I leave, I’m home sitting in my air conditioning like everyone else.”

COREY KILGANNON

A Taste of Failure Fuels an Appetite for Success at South Korea’s Cram Schools

BY CHOE SANG-HUN

A taste of failure fuels an appetite for success at South Korea’s cram schools. For decades, South Korea has prided itself on the results it has produced at the top of the academic system — but not without a price. For many students, the journey to the top is a grueling one.


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As the sun was dipping behind the pine hills surrounding this rural campus one recent Monday, Chung Il-wook and his wife drove up with Min-ju, their 18-year-old daughter. They gave her a quick hug and she hurried into the school building, dragging a suitcase behind her.

Inside, a raucous crowd of 300 teenage boys and girls had returned from a two-night leave and were lining up to have their teachers search their bags.

The students here were forsaking all the pleasures of teenage life. No cellphones allowed, no fashion magazines, no television, no Internet. No dating, no concerts, no earrings, no manicures — no acting their age.

All these are mere distractions from an overriding goal. On this regimented campus, miles from the nearest public transportation, Min-ju and her classmates cram from 6:30 a.m. to past midnight, seven days a week, to clear the fearsome hurdle that can decide their future — the national college entrance examination.

“Min-ju, do your best! Fighting!” Mr. Chung shouted as his daughter disappeared into the building. Min-ju turned around and raised a clenched fist. “Fighting!” she shouted back.

South Koreans say their obsession to get their children into top-northern universities is nothing short of a “war.” Nowhere is that zeal better illustrated than in cram schools like Jongro Yongin Campus, located in a sparsely populated suburb of Yongin, 25 miles south of Seoul.

Most Jongro students are “jaesoo sang,” or “study–again students.” Having failed to get into the university of their choice, they are preparing relentlessly for next year’s entrance examination. Some try and try again, for three years running after graduating from high school.

The Jongro school pursues a strategy of isolation, cut off from competing temptations of any sort. Its curriculum is so tightly regulated and the distractions so few that students say they have no option but to study.

“Sending Min-ju here was not an ideal, but an inevitable choice,” said Mr. Chung, a 50-year-old accountant. “In our country, college entrance exams determine 70 to 80 percent of a person’s future. It’s a sad reality. But you have to acknowledge it; otherwise you hurt your children’s future.”

Admission to the right university can make or break an ambitious young South Korean. The university that students attend in their 20s can determine the jobs they get and the money they make in their 50s. The top-tier schools — Seoul National, Korea and Yonsei Universities, collectively known as SKY — may hardly register on global lists of the best in higher education. But here, their diplomas are a tickler of admission, an envied status symbol and a badge of pride for graduates and parents.

The life of a South Korean child, from kindergarten to high school, is dominated by the need to excel in standardized entrance examinations for college. The system is so demanding that it is credited with fueling the nation’s outstanding economic success. It is also widely criticized for the psychological price it exacts from young people.

Among young people 10 to 19, suicide is the second most common cause of death, after traffic accidents. When violent antigovernment protests shook South Korea this summer, most notably over President Lee Myung-bak’s agreement to import beef from the United States, many demonstrators were teenagers protesting the pressure-cooker conditions they endure at school.

Among the criticisms of Mr. Lee were accusations that he filled too many top government posts with people tied to Korea University, his alma mater. Yet when the president replaced his entire staff in June, all but one of 10 new senior secretaries had graduated from the nation’s three best-known universities.

About 600,000 Korean students enter colleges each year — 10,000 of them at the SKY schools — and more than one in five are “jaesoo sang” who have redeemed themselves through cramming.

“I first felt ashamed,” said Chung Yong-seok, 19, who is trying again for Korea University after being denied admission last year. “I asked myself what I was doing in a place like this when all my friends were having a good time in college. But I consider a year in this place as an investment for a better future.”

Many of these hopefuls study alone or commute daily to a private institute. Many others enroll in one of the 50 boarding cram schools that have sprung up around Seoul.

Jongro opened last year. Its four-story main building houses classrooms and dormitories, with eight beds per room. The school day begins at 6:30 a.m., when whistles pierce the quiet and teachers stride the hallways, shouting, “Wake up!”

After exercise and breakfast, the students are in their classrooms by 7:30, 30 per class. Each room includes a few music stands, for students who stand to keep from dozing. A final roll call comes at 12:30 a.m., after which students may go to bed, unless they opt to cram more, until 2:00 a.m.

The routine relaxes on Saturday and Sunday, when students have an extra hour to sleep and two hours of free time. Every three weeks the students may leave the campus for two nights.

The curriculum has no room for romance. Notices enumerate the forbidden behavior: any conversation between boys and girls that is unrelated to study; exchanging romantic notes; hugging, hooking arms or other physical contact. Punishment includes cleaning a classroom or restroom or even expulsion.

“We girls hear which girls boys consider pretty,” Park Eom-ji, 19, said. “But we don’t use much cosmetics, we don’t dye our hair, we don’t wear conspicuous clothes.” She added, “We know what we are here for.”

Kim Sung-woo, 32, who teaches at Jongro, remembered the even more spartan regimen of the cram school that he attended. In his day, he said, students desperate for a break slipped off campus at night by climbing walls topped with barbed wire. Corporal punishment was common.

Things are no longer that tough — too many parents complained. Still, “this place — metaphorically speaking — is a prison,” said Kim Kap-jung, a deputy headmaster at Jongro. “The students come under tremendous pressure when the exam date approaches and their score doesn’t improve. Girls weep during counseling and boys run away and don’t return.” In some schools, as many as 40 percent of the students drop out.

Korean parents are notably willing to sacrifice for their children’s futures. More than 80 percent of high school graduates go to college. The percentage of private spending on education, 2.8 percent of South Korea’s gross domestic product in 2004, is the highest among the members of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

“It’s a big financial burden for me,” said Park Hong-ki, 30, referring to the $1,936 a month that he pays to have his son at Jongro. Students write themselves pep notes on pieces of colored sticky paper and keep them on their desks. “I may shed tears of sadness today, but tomorrow I will shed tears of happiness,” one said. Another admonished, “Think about the sacrifices your parents make to send you here.”
Few immigrant groups are as closely identified with an occupational niche as Koreans with grocery stores.

A new book, "Ethnic Solidarity for Economic Survival: Korean Greengrocers in New York City," offers a look at the complex role that ethnicity plays in those mom-and-pop businesses, which have been engines of economic mobility and opportunity for some Korean families.

The book, by Pyong Gap Min, a Queens College sociologist, explains why the Korean–black conflicts, which peaked in the later 1980s and early 1990s, have almost disappeared since the mid-'90s. It also explores the history of how Korean grocers organized themselves in the 1980s and '90s to deal with white wholesalers at the Hunts Point Market in the Bronx and later with labor unions representing Hispanic employees.

Ethnicity, however, has waned as an organizing principle for the grocers as their business–related group conflicts have dissipated, Dr. Min writes.

In 1960, there were only 400 Koreans in New York, with a significant proportion of them students at Columbia University. The easing of immigration restrictions in 1965 led to a big influx, with about 170,500 Korean immigrants settling in the New York metropolitan region by 2000, including about 86,400 in New York City. While Flushing, Queens, became the "epicenter" of the New York Korean community, the "center" of the New York Korean community, it wasn’t until the late 1970s to the early '80s that it truly started to become a significant economic presence in New York’s minority neighborhoods, a process accelerated by the withdrawal of supermarkets from such areas.

Koreans had high rates of self–employment because they often faced significant language barriers (on average, knowing less English than other Asian groups). They also had experience with owning businesses back home and, starting in the late 1980s, a greater ability to take capital out of Korea to start businesses here. Strong family ties and ethnic networks helped them keep the stores staffed for up to 16 hours a day, seven days a week. (In later years, Koreans established niches in dry cleaning and nail salon businesses.)

Starting in the 1970s, Korean grocers entered minority neighborhoods in Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx by buying stores from retiring white owners or setting up new stores in vacant buildings.

In 1974, they formed the Korean Produce Association, which in 1980 opened a service center at the Hunts Point Market to support Korean grocers and truck drivers, who said they were mistreated and threatened by the produce wholesalers. The grocers complained that they were subject to higher prices for the same produce items, no exchanges for rotten items included in fruit boxes, refusals to sell hot items after receiving orders and false accusations of theft.

From 1977 to 1995, the association organized seven protests against grocery distributors. But its efforts only went so far. It tried several times from the late 1970s to the early '90s to set up a group purchasing system, Dr. Min writes, but the companies that control the market mostly defeated such efforts.

As the grocers struggled with wholesalers, they came into increasing conflict with black customers and Latino workers. By the early 1990s, the groceries had become a significant economic presence in New York’s minority neighborhoods, a process accelerated by the withdrawal of supermarkets from such areas. Mutual prejudice and stereotyping, language barriers and fears of shoplifting and crime were factors in those conflicts. Korean groceries were the target of 15 boycotts by African–American customers from 1981 to 1995, Dr. Min writes. The longest was a 17–month boycott of two produce stores on Church Avenue in Flatbush, Brooklyn, which began in January 1990 and escalated into a protracted and often violent dispute that drew international attention.

In recent years, black–Korean conflicts have largely vanished from the news, Dr. Min explains, as rezoning laws have encouraged the opening of big-box stores in some areas that have pushed smaller groceries out of business. Non–Korean immigrant business owners have increasingly set up retail stores alongside Koreans, and traditionally black neighborhoods have become more racially diverse.

A less heated, but equally significant, conflict involved Latino workers. Labor unions, state agencies and immigrant workers began to agitate against the grocers in late 1998, culminating in a series of labor disputes from 2000 to 2002. In September 2002, the state attorney general, Elliot Spitzer, announced a code of conduct under which Korean business owners would pledge to abide by labor laws and allow investigators to inspect their workplaces and financial records at least twice a year. In return, the attorney general’s office would ignore past violations of labor regulations.

Korean groceries still seem ubiquitous to New Yorkers, but that may not always be true. By 2005, there were probably fewer than 1,800 Korean produce stores in the New York–New Jersey region, according to Dr. Min — a significant decline from the early 1990s.
FOR SOUTH KOREA’S BLIND, A LIVELIHOOD IS CHALLENGED

SEOUl, South Korea

By Choe Sang-Hun

B

y the time Lee Hye-gyeong received a diagnost

is of glaucoma in 2005, she had already lost

much of her vision. By now, Ms. Lee, a for

mer shop assistant, can see only shapeless colors as she

fumbles through Seoul’s crowded subway.

Still, for the past year and a half, commuting has been part of her daily routine. She awakens at 5:30 a.m.,

cooks breakfast for her husband and two teenage

sons and then takes the subway to a government–run

school. There, Ms. Lee, 42, trains for the one job that

for most of the past century has been reserved exclu

sively for the legally blind: masseur.

But lately she fears her prospects in this new profes

sion could be threatened. Sighted people who are prac

ticing, but unlicensed, masseurs have asked the Con

stitutional Court of South Korea to declare un

constitutional a law that allows only the legally blind

to become professional masseurs. They contend that

the law violates their right to employment. A ruling

could come as soon as next week.

Passions are intense on both sides of the debate over

whether to preserve the restriction. Three people have died

in protests over who is permitted to practice the trade.

Ms. Lee is concerned that the law might change and,

with it, her chances for employment. “Massage is the

only job we blind can do,” she said. “In the name of

free competition, they are trying to take away our right
to survive.”

Japanese colonialists in 1913 introduced to Korea the

idea of reserving the role of masseurs solely for the blind.
The prohibition against people with healthy sight was

abolished in 1946 by the United States military gov

ernment but was later reinstated in 1963. In a country

where prejudice and a lack of official support have long

restricted opportunities for the disabled, the blind have

fiercely defended their exclusive right to the business.

About 7,100 legally blind people work in about 1,000

massage parlors in South Korea, and they are the only

legally registered masseurs in the country. But they

can hardly meet the demand, and so tens of thousands of

so-called sports massage centers, skin–care salons,

barber shops, hotels and public bath houses employ

sighted, but illegal, massage workers. Estimates of

their number range from 150,000 to 700,000.

National sports teams hire masseurs with healthy vi

sion. During the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s,

government offered free massage training to the

unemployed, regardless of the state of their eyesight.

“Every bride gets a full–body massage before her wed

ding, nearly always from unlicensed masseurs,” said

Park Yoon-soo, president of the Massager Association

of Korea, which is leading the legal challenge to the

law. “This shows how absurd the law is.”

Members of Mr. Park’s association, which represents

120,000 unlicensed masseurs, are working openly and

in defiance of the law. His office keeps a growing file

of members who have been accused of practicing with

out a license. Those people are usually fined, with

the fines ranging from $450 to $4,500, although the law

calls for up to three years in prison.

“It breaks my heart when I think that what I am doing
every day, what I consider my calling, is a crime,” said

Mr. Park, whose strong fingers have kneaded the backs

of numerous politicians and celebrities over the past 25

years. “We are not trying to steal jobs from the blind.

We just want to share the market. We want to live as

normal citizens, not as criminals.”

The South Korean Constitution guarantees people the

freedom to choose jobs, but it also requires the state to

protect the disabled.

The two principles clashed in 2003, when sighted

massage workers challenged the prohibition before the

Constitutional Court. That time, the court ruled in

favor of continuing to restrict the trade.

But in 2006, a reconstituted court issued a ruling that fa

vored the sighted, saying that restricting people’s choice of

jobs by government directive — the prohibition was not

then a formal law — was “excessively” discriminatory.

That set off weeks of protests by the blind. Some blind

masseurs leaped from buildings and jumped on to sub

way tracks. Two blind people died. The police filed

blind activists from the Han River in Seoul after they

jumped from a bridge to highlight their cause. The

protests continued until the National Assembly passed

legislation enshrining the massage monopoly into law.

Then the sighted staged their own protests in response
to the new law. One activist killed himself by jump

ing from the same Han River bridge. More than 7,300

sighted masseurs have joined in the current lawsuit,

which asks the Constitutional Court to strike down

the 2006 law.

Earlier this month, blind protesters again jumped from

the Han River bridge, this time to protest a govern

ment proposal to license skin–care specialists to also

give massages. The protesters demanded that the skin

care specialists be permitted only to massage heads

and hands, leaving the rest of the body to the blind.

Over all, conditions for the disabled in South Korea

have generally improved in recent years. Subways and

buildings have begun improving access to the handi

capped. The government now provides tax cuts for

businesses that hire the disabled.

But the disabled say much remains to be done. Few

buses are equipped to board people in wheelchairs,

and many people who use canes or wheelchairs com

plain that taxis will not stop for them.

Still, some blind people sense a persistent social stigma.

“One of us don’t go to our children’s graduation cer

emonies for fear they might be ashamed of us,” said Lee

Gyu-song, secretary general of the organization repre

senting blind masseurs, the Korea Masseurs Association.

Dong Seong-geun, a blind masseur, staged a lone pro

test in front of the Constitutional Court recently.

“I have a wife and two children to support,” he said. “If

I lose this job, I will have to beg on the streets. How
can taking away one job a person who only have one

compare with taking one job away from sighted

people who have a hundred jobs to choose from?”

The sighted masseurs, for their part, argue that the law

is holding the blind back by confining them to a single

vocation.

“What blind people must realize is that by clinging to

the one benefit the government tossed their way, they

are actually impeding their own welfare,” said Kim

Myong-bo, a sighted masseur.
When South Koreans evoke the good life, they talk of a “warm back and full stomach.”

Nowhere has the Korean longing to lie on a heated floor (a feature of traditional houses) and eat one’s fill found fuller expression than in the jjimjil-bang, the 24–hours–a–day public bathhouse.

But calling the jjimjil-bang a bathhouse hardly begins to describe its attractions.

“The first thing we Koreans think of when we’re feeling stiff and sore is lying on a hot floor,” said Lee Jae-seong, 35, who works for a television station.

The communal nature of the jjimilbang also suits many South Koreans; until recent decades, most people lived with their extended families.

On this recent day, Ms. Kim was relaxing in a common room at World Cup Spaland. She had just crawled out of an igloo–shaped room. Inside, a dozen men and women in identical yellow T–shirts and shorts huddled on a layer of snow–white rock salt. The temperature in the room, appropriately called a kiln, was more than 200 degrees Fahrenheit.

“My family comes here at least once a month,” said Ms. Kim, who teaches Japanese at Hanyang University in Seoul. “When my friends and I want to get together, we say, ‘Let’s meet at a jjimjilbang.’ We even held our school reunion here.”

The jjimjilbang is modeled on the public bathhouses that were popularized early last century by the country’s Japanese occupiers but eventually fell out of favor when showers became a standard feature of Korean homes. In their modern incarnation, the bathhouses are a reflection of South Korea’s relatively newfound wealth, but also a way to satisfy nostalgia.

Koreans often say they are drawn to a jjimjilbang because they miss the ondol, the heated floor most families slept on until they began moving to high–rise apartments and Western–style beds. The floor is enough of a draw that some families occasionally spend the night in the bathhouse’s common rooms.

The jjimjilbang is one of many South Koreans turn to bathhouses for all kinds of good, clean fun, and to relax.

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M any Korean adults share a childhood memory of being taken to public baths for no-nonsense, sometimes tears-inducing scrubs by their mothers. The bathhouses began adding amenities in recent decades as more people bathed at home. Those included steam rooms and professional body scrubbers, barbershops and hair salons, and communal sleeping rooms, where the business people — often expected to work long hours and stay out late drinking with colleagues — could come during the day for a nap on a heated floor. By the late 1990s, many bathhouses had turned into true recreation complexes, and going to one became as much a part of Korean social life as going to the movies. In 2006, there were more than 13,000 in the country, more than 2,500 of them in Seoul. Some can accommodate thousands of people. Because they are open around the clock and are relatively inexpensive, the complexes have attracted budget-minded travelers, who stay in the communal sleeping room. Recently the government banned minors without adult escorts from jjimjilbang from 10 p.m. to 5 a.m., after reports that the sites were becoming havens for runaways.

At the front counter, customers pay about 8,000 won, or $7, pick up their top and shorts and a towel and enter the sex-segregated bath halls. There, for an extra fee, they can be scrubbed by a professional using exfoliating mitts.

From the bathing halls, patrons of both sexes dressed in the facility’s “uniform” step out into the common room, which usually looks like a mix of hotel lobby, giant living room and small shopping mall. Some jjimjilbang have karaoke rooms, concert halls, swimming pools, even indoor golf ranges, as well as cafeterias and rooms to watch videos.

But a jjimjilbang’s reputation owes much to its saunas. Some feature heated huts suffused with the aroma of mugwort (important in traditional medicine). Sometimes the walls are studded with jade and amethyst, which many Koreans believe emit healing rays when heated.

Chun Byung-soo, who opened World Cup Spaland five years ago at Seoul’s World Cup soccer stadium, said the pioneers of jjimjilbang were inspired by the ancient Korean custom of sitting in giant charcoal or pottery kilns for heat therapy. Many Koreans believe heat can help cure some illnesses.

But the jjimjilbang are as important for socializing as they are for restorative treatments. “We don’t consider someone a real friend until we take a bath together,” said Han Jae-kevan, 25, a college student. His girlfriend, Yang Eun-jeong, 25, agreed: “We women also believe we become closer when we get naked and bathe together.”

The two were playing the board game Go after emerging from a sauna. Since most young Koreans live with their parents until they marry, jjimjilbang have become popular places for couples to spend time together. “We often come here on a date,” Mr. Han said. “At a cafe, the owner gives you an unwelcome look after a few hours if you don’t order more. But here, you can stay as long as you want.”

Ms. Yang winces as she recalls some scenes she has witnessed in the jjimjilbang: young couples kissing and a girl sleeping with her head on her boyfriend’s arm in a room full of strangers. Such public displays of affection are still generally frowned upon.

Snoring is another problem, when people doze off on the heated floor. So are the potential complications of so many people sleeping together. “At night, many different families sleep on the same large floor,” said Ms. Kim, the Japanese instructor. “Sometimes, they get mixed up while they’re sleeping. It can be embarrassing.”

D aunted by the stigma surrounding adoption here, Cho Joong-bae and Kim In-soon delayed expanding their family for years. When they finally did six years ago, Mr. Cho chose to tell his elderly parents that the child was the result of an affair, rather than admit she was adopted.

“My parents later did believing that I’d had an affair,” said Mr. Cho, 48, a civil engineer who has since adopted a second daughter.

Now, with South Korea becoming more accepting of adoptive families, Mr. Cho and Ms. Kim feel they can be more open, with relatives and nonrelatives alike. Ms. Kim, 49, attributed the change partly to the growth of other nontraditional families, like those headed by single parents or including foreign spouses.

“We feel attitudes have changed,” she said.

Just how much, though, is the critical question as the South Korean government is pushing aggressively to increase adoptions by South Koreans and decrease what officials consider the shameful act of sending babies overseas for adoption. Since the 1950s, tens of thousands of South Korean children have been adopt ed by foreigners, mostly Americans, because of South Korea’s traditional emphasis on family bloodlines and reluctance to adopt.

But last year, for the first time, more babies here were adopted by South Koreans than foreigners, as the government announced recently with great fanfare: 1,388 local adoptions compared with 1,264 foreign ones. What is more, South Korea — which still is one of the top countries from which Americans adopt — has set a goal of eliminating foreign adoptions altogether by 2012.

D “South Korea is the world’s 12th largest economy and is now almost an advanced country, so we would like to rid ourselves of the international stigma or disgrace of being a baby-exporting country,” Kim Dong-won, who oversees adoptions at the Ministry of Health, said in an interview. “It’s embarrassing.”

To bolster domestic adoptions, the government last year began offering $90 monthly allowances per child for those who adopt children up to 12 years old, as well as more generous health benefits for the children. Even greater health benefits are now given to adopted disabled children.

The government also made it easier for South Koreans to adopt. Single people can now qualify, as well as older ones. Until last year, prospective adoptive parents could be no more than 50 years older than the child; now the age gap has been increased to 60 years. In addition, the government has made foreign adoptions more difficult by imposing a five-month waiting period before children can even be considered for overseas adoption. It also increased payments to foster parents to try to keep children inside South Korea longer and increase their chances of being adopted domestically.

The government’s goal has received much media attention and popular support here. But adoption agencies and some adoptive parents and experts say the government’s new policies are concerned less with the children’s welfare than with saving face. Increasing the age gap and allowing singles to adopt have lowered the standards for domestic adoptions in a way that could be detrimental to the children, they say, even as the government has created unnecessary obstacles to foreign ones.

SEOUL, South Korea

SEOUL, South Korea
The government is hung up on numbers and on South Korea’s image,” said Lee Mira, who oversees domestic adoptions at Social Welfare Society, a private, nonprofit organization that is the second largest adoption agency in South Korea. “When North Korea taunts South Korea by saying we’re selling Korean babies to foreigners, it hurts the pride of South Korea.”

Since 1958, when South Korea began keeping track of adoptions, 230,635 children have been adopted. About 30 percent were adopted by South Koreans, while 70 percent found homes overseas. Two-thirds of all foreign adoptees ended up in the United States.

While orphans made up a majority of adopted children in the two decades following the Korean War, children born to unwed mothers have accounted for the largest numbers since then.

South Koreans who did adopt tended to hide their children’s origins from the children and others.

In recent years, adoption agencies have conducted campaigns — some featuring movie and TV stars — urging adoptive parents to tell people about how their families were formed in the hopes that more openness would lead to less prejudice. The government’s efforts got a boost when some celebrities adopted and went public with the news.

Still, many adoptive parents choose not to share how their families were formed, according to adoption agencies, with some engaging in elaborate ruses to pass off the children as their biological sons or daughters.

A middle-aged couple now living in a suburb of Seoul learned long ago that the husband was sterile. But he was reluctant to consider adopting, unwilling to accept his condition and afraid of the lingering prejudice that still values bloodlines, where many people keep detailed records of their ancestors, he was worried that adopted children might face difficulties in their careers or with marriage prospects.

So when the couple decided to adopt three years ago, they chose to fake a pregnancy, as many adoptive parents here do. The couple moved, and the husband, now 43 and a real estate agent, switched jobs.

The wife, an employee at a telecommunications company, began wearing maternity clothes over a special pillow, made by a company recommended by the couple’s adoption agency.

All was going well until a colleague the woman had confided in spilled the secret to a supervisor.

“I was so hurt and embarrassed by that experience,” she said. “I would like to adopt a second child, if only to go through the experience in a proper manner this time.”

Given the bias against adoptions, some couples who are initially open become more guarded as their children grow older.

Yoo Hae-yon, 48, has told relatives and neighbors that his two sons, now 4 years old and 18 months, were adopted. But he has since become worried that the boys will suffer in a society where television shows typically portray adopted children negatively, as schemers who end up damaging families.

“My sons haven’t been teased yet, but that will be a possibility in elementary school,” Mr. Yoo said. “So once they start school, we won’t disclose their adoptions. And in junior high school or later on, we’ll let them decide.”

Holt International, a private American adoption agency that has long been South Korea’s leading agency, welcomed the government’s new financial incentives for families but said that trying to curb foreign adoptions would risk hurting the children least likely to be adopted by South Koreans: older ones; the disabled, who still face severe discrimination; and boys, who, once preferred by South Koreans, are now considered by many to be less devoted to their parents than daughters.

“The changes could end up postponing the adoption process of those children,” said Lee Jin-hee, who oversees domestic adoptions at Holt here.

And Huh Nam-soon, dean of the social welfare department at Hallym University outside Seoul, said changing the standards for domestic adoptions could cause serious problems in the future.

“How many of those adopted children will end up in orphanages because of broken adoptions?” she said.

Mr. Huh, who has researched the history of South Korean children adopted by Americans, said that, in general, they had found good homes in the United States, even though some struggled with their identities.

Mr. Kim, the Health Ministry official, acknowledged that the history of American adoption had been largely positive. But he said that the government believed that South Korean children would be happier if adopted by South Koreans and that it would stick to its goal of phasing out foreign adoptions in four years.

A gencies and adoptive parents said the goal was unrealistic, if only because very few disabled children had been adopted here. Last year, only 40 disabled children were adopted domestically, while 500 went abroad.

“We wouldn’t feel confident adopting a disabled child since we even felt overwhelmed adopting a healthy one,” said Kim Chang-shik, 37, who, with his wife, Yoon Yeom-in, 38, adopted a daughter four years ago, after the birth of their biological son. “I don’t know whether it’s because I’m Korean, but I’m grateful that foreigners are willing to adopt children who can’t find homes here.”
EXOTIC FLAVOR, BEYOND JUST THE FOOD

By Deborah Baldwin

Visit Koreatown for the first time on a Saturday night, when West 32nd Street turns into a neon-lighted playground for clubbers and noshers, and you may wonder where it has been hiding all these years.

Once you have seen it in lights, you may be tempted to settle in. And you won’t be alone. Before the credit chill descended on New York, high-end developers, hoteliers and home buyers were converging here, too, bumping up values along Fifth Avenue, rejuvenating historic residential towers on Herald Square, and helping to turn this pathway between the Empire State Building and Penn Station into a destination.

Bordered by Fifth Avenue and the Avenue of the Americas and 30th and 36th Streets, and a short hop to Madison Square Park and Union Square, Koreatown is a remnant of the old textile district — neither Chelsea nor Murray Hill, neither Midtown nor downtown.

Few would describe the area’s odd mix of Korean lounges, Irish bars, sooty office buildings, vintage architecture and discount clothing stores as closely knit. But for some newcomers, prying out its secrets is part of the allure.

“It’s a really strange animal,” said Joe Testone, who left Greenwich Village for an atmospheric 1890 building at Fifth and 30th three years ago. “I never thought I would love it as much as I do.”

Mr. Testone, who has made a hobby of tracking down the area’s mansard roofs, Beaux-Arts ornamentation and copper trim, added, “You really do have to look up.”

True, the Empire State Building long ago took over this stretch of Fifth, filling the vacuum at street level with souvenir shops and rivers of tourists. But never mind the seedy storefronts, Koreatown fans say; pay attention to the wonderful old dowager buildings left behind by the celebrity retailers and hotelkeepers of the early 1900s.

B. Altman’s 1906 Fifth Avenue beauty, filling the block between 34th and 35th, still has its voluptuous glass canopies and French limestone facade (and is now a public library and a City University of New York building). The plainer 1910 building across the street, at 372 Fifth Avenue, once held Best & Company (and is now a co-op).

With Chelsea and Gramercy Park hemming it in, Koreatown has come up in the world, acquiring an affiliation with SoFi (South Fifth Avenue) and NoMad (North of Madison Square). Yet prices are lower than in Chelsea or Gramercy Park, said Scott Elyanow, a senior associate broker at Citi Habitats — while the scenery is still fine. “Walking down Fifth,” he said, “you have a quintessential view of New York with the Flatiron Building.”

And as for cab fare, it is expendable, because Koreatown is “right smack in the middle of everything,” as Mark Hamrick, who lives at 372 Fifth Avenue, put it. The vagaries of census tracts make it impossible to pin down the area’s demographics, but a slightly larger area had a few thousand residents and was about 47 percent white, 46 percent Asian and 4 percent black, according to an analysis of 2000 census data by Susan Weber-Stoger, a Queens College sociologist.

Montgomery Lee landed at the two-year-old Tower 31, a Costas Kondylis–designed apartment building at 9 West 31st Street, after self-imposed exile from TriBeCa. He says he didn’t do it for the money — he did it for the commute.

Only later did Mr. Lee, who can now walk to work, stumble on the exotic groceries, handmade dumplings and buzzing vertical village that has shot up along West 32nd Street.

“I’m Korean, so it is kind of convenient,” he said. “The nightlife is stealthy. It’s not out in the open — you have to know about the third floor.”

What You’ll Find

The rakish Main Street — West 32nd between Fifth and Broadway — has so many kimchi and karaoke joints, Internet cafes and all-night spas that they have started stacking up, Seoul-style.

In years past, Korean entrepreneurs typically commuted from Queens, but with the arrival of new condos, more Koreans are moving in, said Stacy S. Yoon, an agent at CiCi Realty. She added, “Lots of Korean nationals also want to invest in property in Manhattan either for their kids, who come to New York to study, or for long-term investment, or both.”

Europeans are shopping for property as well, said Richard Bernstein, a vice president of the Corcoran Group. “They like an urban city feel.” As do locals, he added. “People really do want to be close to work.”

Still, the housing inventory is small, with only a handful of properties for sale at a given time, Ms. Yoon and other real estate agents said.
 Prices in previous years, said Michael J. Franco, an associate broker at the Corcoran Group.

Now, of course, prices are slipping.

Mr. Franco recently lowered the asking price on a three-bedroom two-bath penthouse co-op with a terrace, at 372 Fifth Avenue, from $1.775 million to $1.645 million, or $1,175 a square foot (not including the terrace).

A one-bedroom at Herald Towers rents for $2,700 a month, a leasing agent there said. Studios at the Wilbraham, at 284 Fifth Avenue (with an entrance on West 30th), are advertised at $1,700 a month.

The Commute

Herald Square sits over a noodle soup’s worth of subway lines, including the B, D, F, Q, N, R, V and W, and there’s a PATH station there, too. Buses run along way lines, including the B, D, F, Q, N, R, V and W, and there’s a PATH station there, too. Buses run along.

What to Do

If you’ve never made your way to the top of the Empire State Building, now’s your chance. Just be prepared for a wait (see esbnyc.com). Continue your architectural tour down Fifth Avenue, where the quirky skyline includes a former carriage factory, at No. 335, with arched windows four stories high. Turn west on 32nd Street and you’ll catch a landmark at No. 17 — a 1904 Beaux-Arts façade — and, at No. 49, the French Renaissance-style Martinique, which was designed by Henry J. Hardenbergh, the architect of the Plaza Hotel and the Dakota.

You can watch dumplings being made in the window at Mandoo Bar, 2 West 32nd Street, or try Kom Tang, nearby at No. 32, described by its chef as the oldest Korean restaurant on the street. Fried chicken and beer, a popular combo in Koreatown, can be had at Forte Baden Baden, a sports bar one flight up at 28 West 32nd Street. If the hour is even later, climb to the third and fourth floors at 11 West 32nd, and unwind at Maru lounge.

The Schools

There are no elementary schools within Koreatown, but ones nearby include No. 33, where 67 percent of fourth graders showed proficiency in reading and 96 percent in math last year, and No. 31, where proficiency levels were 58 percent in reading and 95 percent in math. (Citywide, the averages were 61 percent and 80 percent.)

At Junior High School 104, 65 percent of eighth graders showed proficiency in reading and 73 percent in math, versus 43 and 60 citywide.

Older students can apply to any school in the city; one option near Koreatown is the High School for Fashion Industries, which last year had SAT averages of 419 in reading and 416 in both math and verbal, versus 438, 460 and 435 citywide.

On Saturdays, some families send their children to Korean-language schools. There is one in Lower Manhattan, the New York Broadway Korean School, at 601 East 12th Street.

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The History

In the 1890s, the city Landmarks Preservation Commission says, the area was known for its chic shops, theaters, clubs and residences. The Empire State Building went up in 1931, casting its shadow on what was by then a largely commercial area, and by the 1970s, Korean business owners led the redevelopment of West 32nd Street; in 1995, Broadway between West 31st and 32nd was officially named Koreatown Way.
They think, ‘My kids are doing well — why should I come?’” said Sophia Bae, 38, a Korean immigrant who shied away from P.T.A. meetings when she first moved here from Queens four years ago. Now a member of the organization, she invites other Koreans to her home and encourages them to participate in pretzel sales. “They don’t realize it’s necessary to come and join the school to understand their kids’ lives.”

Parental involvement is a perennial struggle in poor urban neighborhoods, where many innovative school leaders have run parent academies and strongly encouraged school visits or committee membership in hopes of mimicking the success of the suburbs. Now Jericho is taking a page from that handbook, trying to lure Asian parents into the schools with free English classes and a multicultural advisory committee that, among other things, taught one Chinese mother what to wear and what to bring to a bar mitzvah. The P.T.A. has been trying to recruit more minority members and groom them for leadership roles.

The Asian parents are anything but uninterested. They call with concern if their children receive “unsatisfactory” rather than “excellent” progress reports, and bestow so many Godiva chocolates on guidance counselors at Christmases that the gift boxes are donated to charity. But having come from a culture where performing well on tests was the only school activity that mattered, and self-conscious about their limited English skills, they are scarce at social activities like back-to-school nights, bake sales and football games.

One Chinese mother said friends told her not to bother with the P.T.A. because “it’s run by a bunch of Jewish ladies.” Yimei Cui, a mother of two young girls, signed up for an English class this fall but said that she was still not comfortable joining the P.T.A. or calling her older daughter’s teacher. When she was growing up in China, she said, her own parents came to school only twice a year, at the teacher’s request, to find out her test scores.

“We’re used to just listening to the teacher,” said Ms. Cui, 37, a former news anchor on Chinese television. “We think they will do the job well and we don’t like to bother them.”

But the district’s superintendent, Henry L. Grishman, sees parental involvement in all aspects of school life as critical to improving communication and helping students become emotionally well-adjusted and socially successful. He said the district, where 15 percent of last year’s senior class was Ivy bound, was paying for the English classes, which started last spring, with $5,100 in federal grants.

“We saw over time that the hallways and parking lots were not as crowded with parents at school events — there was a sense that we needed to assess what was going on,” he said. “Why do Jericho schools do so well? Parental involvement is part of the culture, and it is part of the success of our kids.”

Shuhan Wang, executive director of a Chinese language and culture program at the Asia Society in Manhattan, said that the education systems in Taiwan, China and Korea place so much emphasis on testing because scoring well on national college entrance exams is widely viewed as the way to advance in those societies. As a result, she said, even when Asian parents move to this country, they continue to define education in terms of grades, test scores and college acceptances.

Ms. Wang, who went to school in Taiwan, recalled her own experiences cooking spaghetti dinners for the cross-country team and decorating for proms in the Wilmington, Del., suburbs, where her three children went to school. “At first, I felt like not again — it’s another activity, another waste of time,” she said. “But actually schools provide an opportunity for immigrant families to grow roots and feel like they really belong to the community.”

While Jericho has its share of families with two working parents, Asian parents and students here say that the lack of parental participation in school functions goes beyond being busy. Justin Park, a sophomore who plays the cello, said that his Korean-born parents — a computer consultant and an interior designer — will always make time for activities they consider important for his college aspirations. For instance, they have not missed a single one of his concerts at the Juilliard School because “they want me to be really good,” but neither Justin nor his parents attach the same priority to his high school concerts.

The English-language classes — two of the three are held in the mornings — and the multicultural advisory committee have also attracted more than two dozen Chinese and Korean children who do not work, but until now had stayed away because of language and cultural barriers.

Daborah Lee said that after her son, Jason, started kindergarten two years ago, she dreaded going to his school because she felt that she was the only one who did not know how things worked. Once, she came to his class for a reading project but did not realize she was supposed to check in first at the main office until someone tracked her down.

“It’s my son’s school so I don’t want to mess it up for him,” said Ms. Lee, 42, who grew up in Hong Kong. “Sometimes, if you don’t do something, you won’t make a mistake.”

She joined the multicultural advisory committee and found a forum for answering her questions about play-date etiquette and bar mitzvahs. Last month, she attended her second one.

Nancy Weiss, president of the Jericho Joint P.T.A. Council, said that the outreach had started to make a difference, with more Asian parents coming to meetings, translating for one another and joining P.T.A. boards and committees. “They’re bringing their friends,” she said. “The word’s getting out that it’s not such a terrible place, and it’s not being run by one group.”

In an English-language class the other morning, Ms. Bae and a dozen other Asian mothers took notes around a conference table. They reviewed the words used in an elementary school report card before moving on to the shorthand that American students use in text messages: “jk” (just kidding), “em” (too much information), and “ctpir” (can’t talk; parent in room).

“My kids ask me, ‘How do you know that?’ and I pretend that I know everything,” said Aileen Wu, 49, a Taiwanese-born mother of two teenage boys who has gone to lunch with her new classmates and cooked at their homes.

Mary Marks, the district’s director of community relations, who is coordinating the outreach efforts, told Ms. Wu: “That crosses cultural barriers. It’s ‘Mother-ese.’ Have you heard of ‘eyes in the back of your head?’”
Her future once seemed limitless, her path to the pinnacle of women's golf inevitable. The question was not whether Michelle Wie would win a United States Women's Open or an L.P.G.A. Championship; it was when she would win on the PGA Tour.

She seemed to welcome, even encourage, the burden accompanying such expectations. On CBS's "60 Minutes," she said she was interested in being the first woman to play in the Masters at Augusta National Golf Club, which has no women as members.

“I think it’d be pretty neat walking down the Masters fairways," she said then. “But I think the green jacket’s a little bit out of fashion, you know?" 

The 14-year-old girl who casually said that is 18 now, a second-year student at Stanford and a professional golfer who has already banked more than $30 million — almost all of it from endorsements. At 6:45 a.m. Saturday, she was on the ninth tee at Interlachen Country Club, pacing back and forth, rehearsing her backswing and checking the positions of her clubface at the top of her swing.

She had come back at sunrise to complete the one hole remaining in her second round at the Open. She stood at 10 over par and would miss the cut by six strokes. For a gallery, she had three reporters; her parents, B. J. and Bo; and a police escort. For perspective, that group of six was 16 fewer than the 22 teenagers in the Open field that Wie was unable to beat with her score of 81–75—156.

Just two years ago, things were different. Wie finished in the top five in the first three majors of the year. She came closer than any woman has to qualifying for the men's United States Open, reaching the sectionals and creating a huge stir at Canoe Brook Country Club in Summit, N.J., before fading to a tie for 59th. On a roll that began in 2004, she finished in the top 25 in 10 of her first 11 L.P.G.A. majors.
In her last 99 holes at major championships, Wie is 54 over par. Comprising her last five major championship finishes are four missed cuts and a tie for 84th. She has battled an injury to her wrist, a soap opera drama in her professional relationships with other L.P.G.A. players, and she has gone through more caddies than most pros have drivers.

And the triumph that started the whole ride, her 2003 win in the Amateur Public Links at the age of 13, remains her only win outside her home state, Hawaii.

It would be easy to look to Wie's lost 2007 season for answers. She was injured in a fall while running in January, hurting her right wrist, then she fractured her left wrist in February while breaking a fall — and protecting her sore right wrist. What ensued was a series of fits and starts that included bruised feelings between Wie and the L.P.G.A. star Annika Sorenstam, the host of the Ginn Tribute, over Wie's abrupt withdrawal from that event in May and outrage from other players for what followed.

Wie pulled out of the event during the first round when she was 14 over par through 16 holes. The withdrawal raised red flags. She was in danger of shooting 88, a number that would have disqualified her from playing in any L.P.G.A. events for the remainder of the season. That might have been overlooked had Wie not been spotted two days later hitting balls on the range at Bulle Rock Golf Course in Havre de Grace, Md., site of the next week's L.P.G.A. Championship. Tour members were not permitted to practice at the site during the weekend.

Last week, Wie expressed regrets about the year she had. "I don't know what I was thinking." She said her teacher, David Leadbetter, was opposed to her playing. "David told me not to play," she said. "My parents, at times, told me not to play. "But I had to face reality sometime. I hate to say it, but they were right. It's a learning experience."

The reality now is that Wie is behind in her development as a world class golfer. Her original teacher, Casey Makama, told The Honolulu Advertiser last June that he believed Wie should go back to her old swing, a more flowing, natural move. She continues to work with Leadbetter, who has tightened up her action, shortening her backswing and making her path somewhat steeper into the ball.

As she tries to rebuild her game, working to regain the length off the tee she lost to injury last year, people whom she competed against as a youngster, like 19-year-old Yani Tseng, who won the L.P.G.A. Championship three weeks ago, and Morgan Pressel, who won the Kraft Nabisco at 18, have won major championships.

Paula Creamer, who won the 2005 Sybase Classic a few days before graduating from high school, became the youngest winner of a multi-round event in L.P.G.A. history at 18. Creamer said the only way to win was to draw from the experience of having been there. "It is all about confidence and knowing that you've done it before and, definitely, it's helped a lot," Creamer said. "Knowing that you can win in match play or stroke play, come from behind, go out with the lead, that kind of thing."

Wie hit her drive from the tee well right of the fairway at the ninth hole Saturday, wide of the drive she hit Thursday that set up her quintuple-bogey 9. Unlike Thursday, Wie was able to hold her second shot, hitting it near the edge of the green. She pitched above the hole and spun the ball back about 4 feet from the pin. She made it for par to finish 10 over.

Afterward she talked about how well she hit her irons during the week and how, if not for the one bad hole, she would have been playing this weekend.

"This week just showed that I have to work harder at it and I'm not fully there yet," she said. "I'm confident that I can be a better player. I didn't have my confidence shaken, but I'm just really disappointed that this week happened this way."

She had three birdies. Not too bad. Not too good. She now must think about how she will earn playing privileges. She has earned just $21,457 on tour this year and has only three exemptions left. The L.P.G.A. exempts the top 80 players on the money list, and to get there she will have to win a tournament or earn another $100,000 or so with some decent finishes.

She is calling this year a "work in progress." Much progress is needed, not exactly the situation Michelle Wie or anyone else anticipated.
It was an unforgettable day for many. Sorenstam made one of the great exits in golf, holing a 6-iron from 199 yards for an eagle at the 18th hole. Although she shot 78 and finished in a tie for 24th, she walked through a roaring 200-yard tunnel of cheers up to the 18th, picked her ball out of the hole and threw it into the stands to more cheers.

“It’s hard to be upset,” Lewis said. “I finished third at the U.S. Open, my first pro event. It’s kind of hard to be upset. I just don’t really feel like I played that poorly.”

Creamer, a four-year professional with six L.P.G.A. Tour wins, viewed it through a different prism. A round that started with her one shot behind but included two double bogeys was not exactly what she had in mind.

“Definitely not, no,” she said after finishing in a tie for sixth. “But you learn from these. Just honestly it was not my day. Probably the most disappointed I’ve been in a very long time.”

She had reason. She made her first double bogey of the week at the 473-yard, par-5, semi-cupcake of a third hole, which she had birdied the previous three days. It started with a drive into a sketchy lie in the left fairway bunker. It continued with a shot into the right rough, and another over the green. She flubbed a pitch shot, left her 12-footer for bogey short and set the tone for the day.

“A par-5,” she said, still incredulous afterward. “That’s horrible, especially on that hole when I’d been in front every day.”

Lewis took a different route to the same score, missing the green on her third shot from 70 yards, then watching in disbelief as her little chip shot from 20 feet away slid down the front of the green and trickled off down the hill. Her pitch went between the hole, and she missed a 12-footer for bogey.

While all this was going on, the lead fell right into Park’s hands. She had birdied the first two holes, chirping in from 60 feet off the green at the first and tapping in for birdie at the second after a chip stopped dead next to the hole. She played the rest of the way in even par, with bogeys at the sixth and eighth holes, birdies at the 11th and 12th, and a bogey at No. 17 offset by a birdie at the 18th.

Alfredsson, who last won a tournament in 2003, kept it together despite missing a 1 1/2-foot and bogeying the third hole. She eagled the 13th, a 525-yard par-5, to pull back into contention at five under, then offset a bogey at No. 16 with a birdie at 18.

Alfredsson had a veteran’s appreciation for what she had seen Park do all day.

“I was very impressed with her composure,” she said. “She was very calm. Never changed anything. And really that’s very impressive for a 19-year-old, I think. She’s going to win a lot more.”

Anthony Kim is on the cusp of joining the short list of challengers to Tiger Woods, a point driven home Sunday not so much by his victory at the AT&T National but by the telephone call he received from Woods, the tournament host.

Kim became the first American younger than 25 since Woods to win at least twice in the same year on the PGA Tour.

Anthony Kim won the AT&T National by two shots with a bogey-free final-round 66...
“He told me to just keep working hard and keep it up, and the sky’s the limit and there’s no reason to stop now,” Kim, 23, said of his call from Woods, who was home in Florida recovering from knee surgery.

Even more valuable was what he learned from Woods late last season at the BMW Championship.

Kim showed up at Cog Hill with enough time to wolf down a breakfast burrito, rap a few putts and go to the first tee. He noticed that Woods, scheduled to tee off 11 minutes ahead of him, had been on the course for some time getting ready for the round.

Woods wound up winning the tournament. Kim finished 22 shots behind.

“That was quite a low point in my golf career, to feel like I wasn’t doing myself justice to act that way and prepare that way,” Kim said. “I just took a step back and said, if I’m going to do this, I’m going to do it the right way. And I’ve been doing it ever since.”

First came a five–shot victory at Quail Hollow in the Wachovia Championship. Equally impressive was how Kim steadied himself at Congressional, coming from three shots behind and building a four–shot lead on the back nine until a late charge by Jacobson.

Kim moved up to No. 6 in the Ryder Cup standings, virtually assuring himself a spot on the American team in September. “He’s fearless,” Fred Funk said. “And he’s just got that arrogance, cocky attitude, that you need to have when he’s in the position that he’s in. And he’s got the game to back it up.”

Kim played the final 22 holes at Congressional without a bogey and emerged from a crowded leaderboard with birdies around the turn, including a 5–iron that covered the flag on the par–3 10th and settled 18 feet behind the cup.

Kim finished at 12–under 268 and earned $1.08 million, putting him at No. 5 in the FedEx Cup standings and moving him closer to cracking the top 10 in the world.

Jacobson birdied four straight holes to close the gap, but he had to settle for a par on the 18th hole that came with a consolation prize. He earned a trip to the British Open as the highest finisher among the top five at the AT&T National not already exempt. The United States Open runner–up Rocío del Rosario Mediate also qualified for Royal Birkdale from a special money list. Tommy Armour III closed with a 69 and was among six players who tied for third at 271.

Birdie on 18 Wins It

After a weekend of optimal scoring conditions at the L.P.G.A. Tour’s NW Arkansas Championship in Rogers, Lee Hwa Lee made one birdie on the back nine in the final round.

That was enough.

Lee, of South Korea, birdied the final hole for a one–stroke victory over Jane Park, who shot a 10–under 62 on Sunday, equaling the lowest round on the tour this year; and Meena Lee. Seon Hwa Lee closed with a 68 to finish at 15–under 201.

Meena Lee (70), also of South Korea, had a chance to tie on 18, but missed a 15–foot birdie putt.

The weather was a factor for much of the weekend, delaying play Friday and Saturday.

Romero Edges Pair

Eduardo Romero of Argentina beat Fulton Allen and Gary Koch by one shot to win the Dick’s Sporting Goods Open in Endicott, N.Y., for his second Champions Tour victory. Romero shot a three–under 69 to finish at 17–under 199, equaling the score recorded by R. W. Eaks a year ago in the inaugural event.

Joey Sindelar was at 16 under entering the final hole, but his tee shot sailed into the right trees and he made double bogey to finish fourth at 202, his fourth top five in nine events since turning 50 in March and joining the Champions Tour.

Allem had final–round 69, and Koch shot 65.

Englishman Romps

Ross Fisher won the European Open, closing with a four–under 68 in windy and rainy conditions for a seven–stroke victory over Sergio García.

Fisher, of England, finished at 20–under 268 on The London Golf Club’s Heritage Course. García shot a 66, the best round of the day.
SEOUl, South Korea

For South Koreans, boxing is mainly a sport of the past, a metaphor for what the country was in the 1970s and 80s before its economy jumped to 13th largest in the world and a generation of young people grew up with privileges their parents could only imagine. Boxing was the sport of poor people, fighting for what they believed was rightfully theirs.

Now, a girl whose family fled north Korea is breathing just a hint of new life into the sport by winning a world championship at age 17. In a soccer–crazed country, her hardscrabble tale has generated some headlines.

Her promoters, striving to fill the seats for matches, played up her story. Posters for her fights bill her as Choi Hyun–mi, the “Defector Girl Boxer.”

The boxing metaphor is still apt for Ms. Choi and her family. She and her parents and an older brother fled the North for a better life only to run into prejudice.

Even many South Koreans who want their nation to reunite with the North view the approximately 10,000 refugees a bit like poor relations, less skilled and less urban than the South’s highly educated citizens.

Ms. Choi’s father, who had been a successful businessman in the North, has been unable to find work, and the family has been reduced to living mainly on government handouts to the refugees.

Ms. Choi hopes to supplement her family’s income with her fighting fees. Like Americans who vaulted past class bias through a life in the ring, Ms. Choi also hopes to lift her family’s stature.

“My parents gave up everything in North Korea to hopes to lift her family’s stature. In the past class bias through a life in the ring, Ms. Choi also forced the government to give handouts to the refugees. Her promoters, striving to fill the seats for matches, played up her story. Posters for her fights bill her as Choi Hyun–mi, the “Defector Girl Boxer.”

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“My parents gave up everything in North Korea to give their children a better life in the South,” she said. “Boxing is my way to prove that my parents made the right decision.”

Ms. Choi pursues that dream in a gym on the top-floor of a five–story building with no elevator, in a ring with an uneven and patched canvas. Faded photos of former South Korean boxing greats line the walls.

The photos, and the American hip–hop that blares from speakers, are constant reminders of how much Ms. Choi’s life has changed since her family arrived here four years ago. When she began her boxing career in North Korea, she trained daily under portraits of North Korea’s leader, Kim Jong–il.

Government scouts in North Korea detected Ms. Choi’s potential when she was 13. Ms. Choi, now 5 feet 7 inches, was almost a head taller than her peers in a country where many children suffer from malnourishment, and she was faster than anyone in her school in Pyongyang, the North’s capital.

In 2003, she was approached by the head coach of the prestigious Kim Chul–joo Educational University in Pyongyang, who was developing a national women’s team in the hope that women’s boxing would be added as an event in the 2008 Olympics.

She was the youngest of the 20 girls the government trained, encouraging them with more food and a cash allowance. (The International Olympic Committee, however, decided not to admit women’s boxing as an Olympic sport.)

In 2004, her father, Choi Chul–soo, decided that the family should flee the North’s rampant repression and poverty. He had gotten a taste of the freedoms other countries offered while on business trips abroad.

It was not an easy choice. The family had lived a life of relative comfort. He traveled overseas for his state–owned company, which exported zinc to China and sea urchins to Japan. The family’s apartment was stocked with Japanese appliances.

“I dressed my children in nothing but Japanese clothes,” Mr. Choi said. “But in North Korea, even if you were rich, you were always under surveillance. People disappeared.”

He was still worried enough about North Korea when he first arrived that he changed his given name to the one he has now, hoping the North’s government would take longer to identify him and possibly punish his relatives who remained behind.

The family escaped when Mr. Choi was on a business trip in China. He sent for his family and bribed border guards to ensure a safe crossing. From China, the family was smuggled into Vietnam. After four months there hiding in hotel rooms, the family was granted asylum by the South Korean government and flown to Seoul.

But once here, Mr. Choi’s fears were realized. Without work, he could no longer afford luxuries for his family, which lives in a rented apartment that is half the size of its apartment in Pyongyang.

“I sometimes miss my life in North Korea and wonder whether I made the right choice,” he said.

One bright spot is his daughter’s budding career. After entering amateur contests in 2006, she swept five domestic championships, suffering only one defeat in 17 fights. In September 2007, she turned professional.

A little more than a year later, on Oct. 11, Ms. Choi beat Xu Chunj Yan of China for the World Boxing Association’s women’s featherweight championship.

It was not an easy match. Ms. Choi’s more experienced opponent landed many punches. But she eventually tired, and Ms. Choi used her straight punches to dominate the later rounds. Her coach, Kim Han–sang, said Ms. Choi’s height gave her an advantage.

The win made her one of five South Korean women to hold a boxing championship title.

“When I returned to my corner between rounds of my championship bout, I glimpsed down at my mother sobbing,” Ms. Choi said.

It was clear to Ms. Choi that she was not only helping shoulder the family’s hopes, but that she might even be able to raise its income a bit with her cut of the $7,000 she makes per fight.

On a recent day, she returned to the gym after taking a week off to recuperate from her championship bout. She wore oversized sunglasses on the street to hide her black eyes and swollen face. Her arms still bore bruises.

She said she boxed for her family, for fame and for her figure. “Boxing makes you curvy,” she said, striking a pose with a giggle. “I want to be a pretty girl who does pretty boxing.”

She added: “But in this sport, you do take some punches.”

She is about to resume her daily training routine, which includes three sessions a day, in order to prepare to defend her title in December. Her school allows her time off to train. She must lose 10 pounds to weigh in at 126 pounds or under for her featherweight class.

Her coach says she needs to develop a knockout punch. But he has faith. He says that, unlike other female boxers, she is at least as concerned with being a good fighter as with staying in shape.

Ms. Choi says she wants to sweep all the world titles in her weight division and then break into the country’s entertainment industry, where a few former athletes have found success.

Raising her gloved hand into the air, she said, “I’m going to make everyone recognize my name.”
CULTURE CLASH

BY KAREN CROUSE

While waiting for her parents outside the pro shop, Song–Hee Kim took her sand wedge and bounced a ball off the toe, then the heel. After a dozen bounces, Kim froze the ball on the face of the club and spun it as if she were a chef sauteing it. By the time the ball stopped spinning, she held a small crowd in her sway.

This was how Kim began one of her best weeks as a professional, by entertaining L.P.G.A. fans last month at the Samsung World Championship in Half Moon Bay, Calif. The week ended with Kim, a 20–year–old South Korean, in second place, one stroke behind Paula Creamer, and panic–stricken about speaking to American reporters.

Kim felt enormous pressure to conduct her news conference in English because of L.P.G.A. Commissioner Carolyn Bivens’s short–lived proposal that foreign–born players with two years’ experience on the Tour be proficient in English or face suspension beginning in 2009. Entertaining answers are not a trick Kim can pull out of her bag. Growing up in South Korea, she spent countless hours addressing a golf ball but rarely an audience, public speaking being a skill that is not encouraged. Although Kim speaks English well enough to have been her mother’s interpreter during the tournament, she opted to play it safe. She spoke in Korean while an L.P.G.A. official translated.

And another chance to shine a light on a tour personality was lost in the translation.

Although language has become a primary talking point on the tour, the cultural gap may be wider than any English–speaking policy can bridge. Bivens has since strained relations more by indicating that her plan was also meant to help the South Korean players shake their omnipresent fathers. By singling out the South Koreans, Bivens has reduced them to one–dimensional stock characters, which is like reading no break in a putt on a contoured green.

Walking the fairways of the L.P.G.A. Tour for two weeks, one finds that the South Korean players are an eclectic and varied lot who love their parents, Facebook and pumpkin pie. They are crazy about purses, texting and practicing, and manage to balance a lot of complex relationships, including their often confused feelings about golf.

The L.P.G.A.’s South Korean Factor

TOTAL FOREIGNBORN PLAYERS ON TOUR: 120 SOUTH KOREAN PLAYERS: 45 2008 TOURNAMENTS WON: 7 TOP 10 MONEY EARNERS: 8

An Evolving Image

The L.P.G.A. Tour is the longest–running and most successful professional women’s sports organization. Its image has undergone more makeovers in its 58 years of existence than Betty Crocker: from dilettante to tomboy to pin–up to postfeminist and, much more recently, to multinational.

This year, 120 players — half the tour’s membership — are from outside the United States. Of those, 45 are from South Korea. They have won seven tournaments this year and have eight players among the top 20 money earners. The pipeline shows no signs of drying up as more than three dozen South Koreans competed this year on the Futures Tour, the L.P.G.A.’s development circuit.

The influx of international talent comes as the tour has recently lost four title sponsors and has yet to complete a television deal beyond the one with ESPN and the Golf Channel that expires next year.

When she met with South Korean players in August, Bivens said she had received complaints from corporate sponsors in the lucrative pro–ams because some L.P.G.A. players could not schmooze in English. After the details of her language–proficiency policy were leaked, the public outcry was louder than any gallery roar.

Within two weeks, the L.P.G.A. announced it was rescinding the threat of suspension but maintaining its expectation — fostered through its program of language tutors and software programs — that playing members would become proficient in English.

Bivens’s motivation extends beyond the fiscal health of the tour. In a recent interview, she said her goal was to help assimilate the South Korean players into a culture starkly different from their own and to emancipate them from what she characterized as overbearing fathers. Forcing the players to learn English and threatening their livelihoods was the best way she saw to accomplish that.

“The language is part of the control the parents have over their young daughters,” Bivens said. “If they don’t even know survival English, they’re totally dependent on the dad.”

Seon Hwa Lee, the L.P.G.A. rookie of the year in 2006 and a two–time winner this year, is considered one of the quieter South Koreans, but she was outspoken about Bivens’s emancipation proclamation.

“I don’t think that’s her job,” Lee said.
Father, Father

Christina Kim, a 24-year-old who dresses to blind and has a neon nature, has a split personality, cavoring like the American girl immortalized in song by Cyndi Lauper while main-
gogi (barbecue beef) and letting their mothers or fa-
see nothing contradictory about taking home the bul-
At night during the Danville tournament, the halls of
ents. For golfers, that means fathers leave their jobs to
sons and daughters confers great prestige on the par-
name for it, child farming, and cultivating successful
sary to help their children's prospects. They have a
In Korean culture, parents will do whatever is neces-

Coach and father. He sacrificed so much to get me to

The next night, Jang, who has earned more than
$900,000 in 24 starts this year, was in the hotel doing her
father’s laundry.

“He has more clothes than I do,” she said.

Jang was counting down the days until she returned
home to play in this week’s tournament in South Korea.
She had been away since March. Sometimes, she
said, when her scores are high and her spirits are low,
she will call her mother.

ask my mom, ‘Why me?’ ” Jang said. “Why you
guys pick me to play golf?”

She spoke of the pressures that come with be-
ing her family’s Chosen One.

“I really appreciate what my dad is doing,” she said.
“But think about it. How you’d feel if your dad retires
because of you, and your mom is lonely because of
you. I don’t want everything to be about me.”

Her father, who explained through an interpreter that
he travels with Jang because his presence “keeps her
from being lazy,” spoke of the long absences from his
wife and two daughters and said he experienced “sepa-
ration anxiety.”

“The person I feel most sorry for is my wife,” he said.
“I’d like to apologize to her for being away.” He rose
abruptly and went outside to smoke.

Separation Anxiety

Hee-Won Han, a 30-year-old player from Seoul, has her own separation anxieties. She longs to see her
1-year-old son, Dale, who is being cared for by her
in-laws in South Korea and her husband, Hyuk Son,
a retired baseball pitcher, as she completes her eighth
year on the tour. Han glues photographs of Dale onto
the covers of her yardage books.

“I miss him,” she said, adding, “In Korea, every time
it’s a big deal when I want to take him on a plane. They
say he is too young to be traveling.”

She is the first South Korean to have a child and return
to the L.P.G.A. Tour.

“Everyone’s not getting married,” Han said. “All the
players are the same. They practice, practice, practice.
They just want to play golf harder.”

As children, South Koreans are funneled into sports or
schoolwork. The two do not mix in a culture that plac-
es a premium on excellence, not well-roundedness.

Seon Hwa Lee turned pro at 14 and won her first event
on the South Korean L.P.G.A. tour the next year. Song–Hee Kim was 17 when she won on the Futures
Tour in 2006. When Lee and Song–Hee Kim gained their
full L.P.G.A. privileges, they were coconooned

Teenagers not quite ready to be social butterflies.

At last year’s pro–am in Danville, Chuck Rydell, an
employee of the tournament sponsor Longs Drugs,
was paired with a young South Korean who spoke lit-
tle English. He said he spent an enjoyable round teach-
ings her American curse words.

This year, his pro partner was Sun Young Yoo, a
21-year-old who is known among the South Koreans
as the course clown. She made Rydell laugh when
the windshield in her cart flew off. Without missing a beat, Yoo said, “Maybe we are going to lose tires next.”

The pro–ams are like a roving cocktail party, with
plus–fours instead of petit fours, and entry fees of
$3,500 to $12,000 a person. Coolers around the course
are stocked with soda and beer; golf is the ice–breaker
for conversation. This kind of socializing is new to the
South Koreans, who may even consider it improper. In
their culture, it is unusual for young people to mingle
with older strangers.

Juli Inkster, who has had a front–row seat for golf’s
globalization during her 26-year L.P.G.A. career, said:
“You put an 18– or 19–year–old girl that’s maybe not
comfortable with her English with four C.E.O.’s, men
or women, she is not going to feel comfortable going
up there and making small talk. That’s not the way
they are brought up.”

With a little ingenuity, this gap can be bridged. For
the last two years, the tour stop in Portland, Ore., has
held a separate pro–am for Korean–speaking amateurs.
They are paired with Korean–speaking amateurs for
18 holes, and a meal catered by a local Korean estab-
lishment is served afterward. Everybody wins. The
players gain practice interacting with strangers, and
the tournament is tapping into a new fan base. This
year, the Portland tournament sent out nine fouromes
with South Korean pros, up from five in 2007.

Among the players who took part in this year’s South Korean pro–am was Song–Hee Kim. One of 10 play-
ers on the tour this year with the surname Kim, Song–
Hee is easy to pick out. She walks the course with a
thoroughbred’s gait and favors short, cropped hair and
long pants. Until she signed a clothing contract with
Fila, her father was her stylist. He bought her shirts in
pro shops, choosing what he might wear himself.

Song–Hee’s Kim’s personality is blossoming with her
golf game. One day she left the practice green with
a messenger bag slung over her right shoulder. The
Swedish veteran Helen Alfredsson touched the flap
and pursed, “Nice bag, Song–Hee.”

Beaming, Kim said her coach had helped her choose
the Louis Vuitton, the first purse she had ever owned.
Her English was perfect.

Firefighters on Monday tried to bring under control a fire of unknown origin at the Namdaemun, or the Great Southern Gate. Designated as South Korea’s “National Treasure No. 1,” it was part of the city’s original walls, its construction completed in 1398.
SEOUL, South Korea

The destruction in a fire of the 600-year-old southern gate to what was once the walled city of Seoul, a landmark that survived foreign invasions and wars to be designated South Korea’s top national treasure, has shocked the nation.

A 69-year-old man suspected of setting the fire was arrested Monday night on Kanghwa Island, west of Seoul, The Associated Press reported the police as saying. The man was identified only by his family name, Chae.

The suspect “has confessed his crime,” said Kim Young-soo, chief at a police station handling the case in Seoul, The Associated Press said. The police have a letter from the suspect complaining about a land dispute with a development company, Mr. Kim was quoted as saying, adding that the suspect maintains he did not get enough compensation from the developer for his land in Kyonggi Province near Seoul.

Mr. Kim said the man had been charged in 2006 with setting fire to the Changgyeong Palace in Seoul, which caused $4,230 in damage.

“With this fire, our national pride was burned down as well,” said Lee Kyung-sook, top aide to President-elect Lee Myung-bak, who rushed to the scene of the blaze on Monday.

Namdaemun, made of wood and stone with a two-tiered, pagoda-shaped tiled roof, was completed in 1398 and served as the main southern entrance to Seoul, which was then a walled city. It was the oldest wooden structure in Seoul, an iconic reminder of old Korea in this modern Asian city, the capital of South Korea, and a major tourist attraction. The site is surrounded by a bustling commercial district. Lately, homeless people had sought shelter there.

The gate survived the Chinese and Japanese invasions that devastated the city. It was repaired several times, most recently after the Korean War of 1950 to 1953. When the South Korean government cataloged its national treasures in 1962, it gave the gate the No. 1 ranking.

Some historians opposed that designation because Japanese invasion forces had passed through it in the late 16th century to destroy Seoul.

The fire was first reported Sunday evening. By late Sunday night, firefighters said they believed that they had contained it. But the fire roared out of control again after midnight and finally destroyed the structure, despite the efforts of more than 360 firefighters.

Cheon Ho-seon, a spokesman for President Roh Moo-hyun, called the loss “an utterly unfortunate and unspeakably deplorable incident.”

“The gate has been our representative cultural asset that has been with us for 600 years,” Mr. Cheon said in a regular news briefing. “All Koreans were shocked and hurt when they saw the gate crumbling in flames.”

The Cultural Heritage Administration said it would take three years and $21 million to rebuild the structure.

Namdaemun succumbed to the very thing it was designed to fight off, according to Korean legend: fire. Korean kings chose the site in the belief that the gate would protect the capital from the fiery spirit of a mountain south of Seoul, historians say.
GUYS AND DOLLS: AN UGLY REMAKE

BY DONALD G. MCNEIL JR.

What is it about Uglydolls? They're soft, they're plush, they're cute, they're openly called by a name that is usually anathema to boys: dolls.

And yet, in many cases, when you see a bed covered with them or a backpack open just far enough to let one breathe, that bed or backpack belongs to a testosterone-burning little sneak—scuffer.

They are the dolls that many boys are willing to nap with, to be seen on the street with and take to sleep—away camp. As Marcele Jaimes–Lukes, who got his first Ugly as a third-grader at the Little Red School House in Manhattan, put it: "No, you didn't get teased for having one. In my class, you'd be teased not to have one."

I noticed this because my 6-year-old stepson totes three to school, and his doll games are all about adventure. He and his mates pile their Uglies into a plastic crate named the Voyager and soar off. "We go to Persia," he said, "or a pet shop. One time we went into the sewers to go surfing."

In his class, it's the boys — plus the one tomboy — who love Uglydolls, said his teacher, Scott Cunningham. "And if you want to see an avatar, this is it," he said. "The kids do their speaking through them."

Many girls like them, too, but there is no doubt that there is something preternatural about the boy–Ugly bond. The Pretty Ugly company, which recently sold its millionth doll, knows it, said Alita Friedman, director of operations. "It wasn't deliberate," she said. "It just happened."

F. A. O. Schwarz, toy store to the hedge-funded, also recognizes it. Its famous stuffed toy department in Manhattan — including nearly life-size elephant calves — is gender-neutral. But one flight up the escalator, and it's girls' stuff to the right and boys' to the left. The Uglydolls are not only firmly to the left, but next to the National Football League action figures and directly across from the Star Wars light sabers guarding the action figure of Princess Leia in a serpentine brass bikini — which is about as boy—fantasy as it gets.

"Boys need figures to play with," he said. "You see that going back to the Egyptians. But they become über—male when they reach that 5— to—7—year—old range. It's O.K. to hug something, but it may not be to have a little teddy bear."

Getting away with being naughty is a boy's way of proving himself lovable, he said, citing the Katzenjammer Kids, Buster Brown, Curious George and Dennis the Menace.

Gary Cross, a professor of modern history at Penn State who follows toy trends, said Uglies echoed boys' needs, and boys themselves.

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Even the girl Uglydolls signal something to boys. Moxy is cool — she is OX's baby sister, a party animal with a motherly streak. But Tray is "the brain of the bunch," and good at getting poor Balbo to fetch her blueberry pie. Puglee "is super smart" and "gets all A's no matter how hard she tries."

Exactly the way a lot of boys experience first grade. Little sisters must be suffered, but girls as peers are a foreign race: smarter, a bit unfathomable — and a lot better at managing boys than the other way around.

The dolls are not specifically marketed to boys. But in their early days, they weren't even marketed to children. Mr. Horvath and Ms. Kim met as art students, but when her visa expired in 2001, she had to move back to South Korea.

Lonely and upset because toy companies were snubbing his ideas, Mr. Horvath drew one of his characters on the bottom of his love letters: Wage, a little orange everyman in an apron who works in a supermarket.

As a Christmas present, Ms. Kim sewed him one. A friend who had just opened Giant Robot, a Los Angeles store specializing in Asian pop culture, asked if she could make 20. At first, she didn't even own a sewing machine, so it took weeks. They sold out in a day.

She bought a machine and made more. After 1,500, with her cramping hands regularly changing colors, they knew they had to find a factory.

Since 2003, Uglies have been made in China, but their faces are still hand—sewn, which is why a row on a shelf all look slightly different — off-center eyes or slightly crooked grins. In New York, said Ms. Friedman, Uglies were first sold at the Whitney and MoMA gift shops, Toy Tokyo, Jim Hanley's Universe comics and Barneys.

Adults bought them for fun or décor — a $20 throw pillow with personality. Soon, she said, "kids with cool parents got a hold of them."

The boy connection was solidified by their first marketing venue: a 2003 San Diego comic book convention, where audiences are mostly male.

"We had a Come as Your Favorite Uglydoll contest," Ms. Friedman said. "It was all boys."

Last weekend, with his mother's help, my stepson sewed his own ugly doll. It's orange and cuddly. And named Blaster.
SOUTH KOREA WILL LIFT ITS BAN ON AMERICAN BEEF

BY CHOE SANG-HUN

SEOUL, South Korea

South Korea agreed on Friday to resume beef imports from the United States, ending a ban begun in 2003 over concerns about mad cow disease.

The decision removed a major dispute between the allies, hours before President Bush was to meet South Korea’s new president, Lee Myung-bak, in Washington to discuss free trade and North Korea.

The deal clears an important obstacle to Congressional support for a wider free trade deal that the Bush administration has struck with South Korea. The agreement also shows how eager Mr. Lee is to mend ties with Washington, even though American beef imports are unpopular among South Korean farmers.

Mr. Lee welcomed the beef deal as “removing a stumbling block for the Korea-U.S. free trade agreement,” the news agency Yonhap reported from Washington.

South Korea suspended American beef imports in 2003 after an outbreak of mad cow disease, depriving United States exporters of their third-largest market for American beef.

Agricultural officials in Seoul said Friday that South Korea would allow American beef imports from cattle younger than 30 months. Younger cows are believed to be less at risk from mad cow disease.

Imports will resume in mid-May and expand later to beef from older cattle, it said.

A study sponsored by the Korea Society in New York and the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center at Stanford University, a group of American scholars warned this week that a failure by the United States to ratify the free trade deal “would damage U.S.-Korea relations.”

But the free-trade pact faces stiff opposition from the two Democratic presidential candidates: Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and Senator Barack Obama.

Congressional approval of the trade deal, the biggest since the North American Free Trade Agreement went into force in 1994, would be an important part of Mr. Bush’s legacy.

As for Mr. Lee, the pact — although it was negotiated by his predecessor, Roh Moo-hyun — would help him pursue his most important election promise, which was to revive South Korea’s economy.

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SEOUL, South Korea

The scandal had all the makings of a tabloid blockbuster: a soap opera actor accused his wife, another popular television star, of infidelity with his close friend and an Italian chef who was giving her private cooking lessons.

The actor, Park Chul, pressed charges against his wife, Ok So-ri, and the two men under South Korea's adultery law, which prohibits extramarital affairs and can land those found guilty in prison for up to two years.

Then Ms. Ok, 39, took the drama a step further. She admitted to having an affair (with the friend, not the chef), and she filed a petition in court, challenging the constitutionality of the 55-year-old adultery statute.

With that move, she turned a messy marital struggle into a public battle over the country's changing mores.

Like many countries, South Korea has long been troubled by contradictions over sex outside marriage. Until this century, women faced ostracism—shunned even by their birth families—if they cheated on their husbands, but men, especially wealthy ones, were allowed to keep concubines.

Now, even as some hold to fairly puritanical standards—sex education in schools is still discouraged—the country's strict social code seems to be weakening somewhat. Divorce is becoming more common, and so-called love motels, which cater to guests having illicit sex, are opening throughout the country.

Those who support the adultery law see it as the last bulwark against the "free-sex culture of the West," while opponents call it an anachronism.

"The state meddling in which sex partner we should have—that's too much," Lim Sung-bin, Ms. Ok's lawyer, said this month after a three-hour hearing at the Constitutional Court, where his client did not appear. "Such a time is gone."

The nine-member court said it would rule on the case soon. It is deliberating Ms. Ok's suit, along with three other petitions against the adultery law, all filed in the past year.

South Korea is among a dwindling number of non-Muslim countries where an adultery conviction can earn a jail sentence. About 70 percent of South Koreans support the adultery law, according to surveys conducted in recent years by the government and the news media.

Each year, more than 1,200 people are indicted under the law and about half are convicted.

"Some argue that no law should intrude beneath the quilt," said Han Sang-dae, a Justice Ministry official who defended the law during the Constitutional Court hearing. "But if we allow freedom for extramarital affairs, it will threaten our sexual morality as well as monogamy, a foundation of our society."

The Constitutional Court has already ruled three times in favor of the adultery law, the last time in 2001. But the cases were never as high profile.

The challenge also comes as the law is losing some of its staunchest backers. Two longstanding champions of women's rights and the adultery law—the Korean Women's Association United and the Ministry of Gender Equality—say it is time for South Korea to consider abolishing it.
In South Korea, women’s groups had been some of the strongest supporters of criminalizing adultery. In the past, most adultery suits were filed by wives against husbands; the law gave them leverage in a society where women had little recourse against their husbands’ infidelity.

With their economic and legal status rising, many women no longer fear divorce or feel that they need a law to help them deal with a cheating husband. And with a growing number of men applying the law against their wives, women are questioning whether the protections it offers are worth the risks.

“Adultery was once considered something only husbands could do,” said Kwak Bae-hee, president of the Korea Legal Aid Center for Family Relations, a nongovernmental agency. “But now women think they can do it too, and some of them actually do it.”

Mr. Park filed divorce and adultery lawsuits in October, saying he had evidence that his wife had engaged in extramarital affairs with an Italian chef in a Seoul hotel and with an opera singer who was a friend of Mr. Park’s. In a highly unusual move for a South Korean woman embroiled in a sex scandal, Ms. Ok called a news conference to defend herself. After confirming her relationship with her husband’s friend, she explained in shocking detail why she had had an affair.

“I had a very lonely and unsatisfied marriage because of a loveless husband,” Ms. Ok said, fighting back tears. “We only had sex 10 times in our 11 years of marriage.”

Mr. Park said he felt like “an innocent pedestrian hit by a car.”

“Ninety-eight percent of what she said was either distorted or wrong,” he said at a news conference.

The case against Ms. Ok was suspended while the Constitutional Court deliberated over the adultery law.

Many of those who oppose the adultery law say it is so difficult to build a criminal case that the law is impractical. A conviction requires proof of sexual intercourse, leading some spouses who believe they have been wronged to raid motel rooms, accompanied by police officers.

The punishments tend to be lenient. Last year, only 47 people convicted of adultery ended up behind bars.

Some experts also find it absurd that South Korea criminalizes adultery while there is no law against incest.

Still, many think it is too early to rescind the adultery law. In a country where many women silently suffer their husbands’ infidelity out of fear that a divorce could leave them impoverished, adultery charges remain a potent tool to secure a better financial settlement or child custody, Ms. Kwak of the Korea Legal Aid Center said. Although divorce laws have become more equitable, in many cases, the men still receive most of the family’s wealth.

Hai Ji-eun, a student at Ewha Womans University in Seoul, said she believed that the law still offered important protections.

“Korean men, many of them still get away with adultery because women are weak,” Ms. Ha said. “It was as recently as during my grandparents’ days that men brought in concubines and kicked out their wives. If this law is abolished, I am sure women will suffer more.”

Cubicle Rats

By Mark Sarvas

When the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said that “work is the only practical consolation for having been born,” he could not have foreseen the lot of the 21st-century cubicle drones who populate Ed Park’s witty and appealing first novel, “Personal Days.” Today, it seems, notions of work have been transformed from “every man a king” to mass e-mailings of cat pictures.

Much is likely to be made of the similarities between “Personal Days” and Joshua Ferris’s 2007 National Book Award finalist, “Then We Came to the End.” Both are set in offices convulsed with layoffs. Both are comic ensemble pieces, and both employ the first-person plural (Ferris throughout, Park in his opening section). But considering the ubiquity of the work experience in American lives, and the thousands upon thousands of novels published annually, perhaps the question shouldn’t be why there are two work-related novels right now but why there aren’t many more.

What better shorthand is there, in terms of getting to know a character, than by understanding his or her job? But the list of literary novels dealing with work as the main topic is fairly short. Nicholson Baker’s “Mezzanine” comes to mind. There’s also Upton Sinclair’s “Jungle,” now more than 100 years old. After that, one struggles — it’s more often the lack of employment that defines a character, as with the hobbled Tommy Wilhelm in “Seize the Day.”

As Bellow knew, little is more central to one’s sense of self than one’s work, and this same understanding informs Park’s novel, giving it considerable ballast to balance the book’s tart and shrewd (if occasionally twee) humor. Park, a founding editor of The Believer (part of the McSweeney’s empire), knows a thing or two about his subject. When New Times Media took over The Village Voice, Park was one of a number of editors let go in August 2006. He has, however, used his hiatus profitably.

“Personal Days” unfolds in three parts — “Can’t Undo,” “Replace All” and “Revert to Saved,” headings that will be instantly recognizable to any reader who has launched Microsoft Word. The book effectively employs any number of familiar McSweeney-esque devices (or tics, depending on your point of view), including catchy section headings; short, impressionistic passages; and creative typesetting.

But there’s a dark undercurrent to all the whimsy, a Beckettian dread as co-worker after co-worker is blasted out of the desolate landscape. (An interoffice messenger is known only as the Unnameable, and even his description — “50ish, tall, with a healthy fringe of white hair and gleaming, inquisitive eyes” — recalls Beckett’s visage.) Indeed, Beckett’s oft-quoted “You must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on” precisely mirrors the plight of Park’s beleaguered characters.

It is the novel’s first part, “Can’t Undo,” that will draw the most comparisons to “Then We Came to the End.” Like Ferris, Park uses the first-person plural to introduce his workplace:

"Most of us spend our days at a desk in one of the two archipelagoes of cubicle clusters. The desks have not been at capacity for over a year now, and as we let our stuff sprawl, colonizing adjacent work spaces, hanging a satchel in one, a jacket in another..."
ut the similarity seems superficial; the perspective is a logical way to depict the herd existence of the modern workplace. And where Ferris maintains that perspective, once Park establishes his setting and his players he moves on. Before he does, though, he treats readers to some very funny riffs on contemporary office life. There's a "Bad Starbucks" ("low-impact saxophone music and an absence of natural light combined with doomed, possibly improvised original drinks like the Pimm's cup chai") and a "Good Starbucks" ("looks like a house of ill repute, but with better ventilation and more freebies"). Employees coin handy neologisms like "deprotion" — "a promotion that shares most of the hallmarks of a demotion." Insufferable mass e-mails of cat pictures proliferate. And anyone who has ever groaned to hear "impact" used as a verb will cheer as Park skewers the avatars of corporate speak, hellbent on debasing the language.

The low-hanging cloud of layoffs, however, looms over the fun, and the second section, "Replace All" — with its sinister implication — is typeset in the style of a contract or other legal document:

"II (C) i (b): Jenny remembered that Jill used to hoard paper clips, staples, every sort of fastener and fixative. She had a huge thing of rubber cement, Jenny said."

The company — whose name and business we are never told — has been purchased by "the Californians." Sinister conference calls and increasingly erratic behavior by upper management bode ill. In "Replace All" things take a dark turn, and the section ends with the layoff survivors sinking into despair. Park is especially good at describing the helpless ignominy of being "terminated":

"Jenny came in and Lizzie lingered by the door, just out of sight, listening. The Sprout told Jenny to have a seat. There was silence for 10 seconds. Then he told her to go see Henry in H.R. Why had he told her to sit down first?"

Park's decision to omit all details of the business, however, exacts a cost. He no doubt intended to speak to something dehumanizing about the nature of modern work. But novels thrive on specificity, and this decision has the effect of dehumanizing his characters to the reader — a subtle but crucial distinction. Unmoored from the details of their daily toil, the large cast becomes hard to differentiate throughout the first two-thirds of the book.

Fortunately, in the last section — a bravura e-mail soliloquy reminiscent of Molly Bloom — Park uses the first person, and the intensely personal section floods this black-and-white newsreel with vivid color. In a single, fluid release of emotion and truth, the mysteries of the layoffs are solved and a measure of humanity is reclaimed. It is a heartfelt antidote to the comic bleakness of the first two sections.

Park has written what one of his characters calls a "layoff narrative" for our times. As the economy continues its free fall, Park's book may serve as a handy guide for navigating unemployment and uncertainty. Does anyone who isn't a journalist think there can't be two books on the same subject at the same time? We need as many as we can get right now.

Mark Sarvas is the author of "Harry, Revised," a novel, and he writes The Elegant Variation, a literary blog.

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**RETURNING IN HER FAVORITE ROLE, HERSELF**

**BY MIREYA NAVARRO**

Returning in Her Favorite Role, Herself

Margaret Cho will return to television, a goal she has struggled to achieve over several tryouts before finally landing VH1's "The Cho Show" starting on Aug. 21.

Right at the outset of "The Cho Show," Margaret Cho brings up her unfortunate first dalliance with television, the 1994-95 flop "All-American Girl."

"Hollywood thought I was too Asian, and Asians thought I wasn't Asian enough," she says of her short-lived ABC sitcom.

"The Cho Show," a new seven-episode, half-hour series billed as a "reality sitcom" and set to start on Aug. 21 on VH1, will be her chance to show a television audience who she really is. In the first episode Ms. Cho, 39, appears naked except for a painted-on dress and a G-string. She also introduces her quirky entourage: Selene Luna, Ms. Cho's 3-foot-10 assistant and enabler; a gay "glam squad" in charge of the star's makeup, wardrobe and hair; and her long-suffering parents, Seung Hoon and Young Hie Cho, who are given the rare opportunity to speak for themselves after years of being known only through their daughter's merciless impersonations.

Ms. Cho is an executive producer in what she described as a blend of unscripted dialogue and scripted situations based on real incidents in her life, which include her often-risqué stand-up comedy and her often-risqué stand-up routine.

Onstage Ms. Cho is foul-mouthed and as raunchy as she is political, as prone to elaborate on her bisexual exploits as to champion equal rights regardless of gender, sexual orientation or appearance.
A nyone familiar with her observational comedy has also heard about the hopes she had harbored as the first Asian–American to star in her own broadcast network show and about getting her shot and having it backfire.

Not only was her bland, “young and cute” character nothing like her, Ms. Cho has complained, but she was steered to lose weight, which she did so rapidly that she ended up in the hospital.

Ms. Cho was devastated when that show was canceled but has spent the last 13 years away from television establishing her persona, in addition to her stand–up act and concert films, through two books, film work and an off–Broadway show, the neo–burlesque revue “The Sensuous Woman” last year. (Her “Beautiful” tour will visit Radio City Music Hall on Oct 4.)

Like her friend and fellow comedian, Kathy Griffin, who has found television stardom through a reality show, the Emmy–winning “My Life on the D–List,” Ms. Cho has a faithful gay following and parents who are game to be the butt of the joke. But the stakes seem higher for Ms. Cho, who also brings to the table a vulnerability born out of being an anomaly among generally conservative Korean–Americans. Much of the first episode of “The Cho Show” is devoted to her fretting over whether to accept an entertainment achievement award given to her by KoreAm Journal, an English–language monthly magazine that covers Korean–Americans nationwide.

“You’ve never supported me, you don’t care about your kids, you want us all to be pianists,” is what Ms. Cho says she would like to say to the Korean–American media, who once skewered her as “the worst thing to happen to Koreans since they put up the demilitarization zone.”

Her father advises her to cover up her tattoos and accept the award, but a friend’s encouragement holds her sway.

“Let me tell you something, O.K.?” says Bobby Lee, a Korean–American comedian who appears on “Mad TV” on Fox. “When I was in high school, I saw your special, and it made me realize that I could do it also. Margaret, you’re a pioneer.”

Ms. Cho, who lives in Los Angeles with her husband, Al Ridenour, a writer and performance artist, said her parents are also proud, despite bearing the brunt of many awkward moments on their daughter’s show.

At one point they present Ms. Cho with new baby clothes, so bent are they on becoming grandparents.

“For your future,” her smiling mother replies.

Ms. Cho, taken aback, replies, “It’s not my size, really.”

In separate interviews her parents, who live in San Diego, where they run a book export business, said they enjoyed being part of “The Cho Show” but admitted their main motivation was to spend more time with their daughter.

“She’s so busy, we only see her a few times a year,” Mrs. Cho, 71, said.

Despite her early disappointment at losing her first television show, Ms. Cho was not easily sold on this new one. Jeff Olde, the VH1 vice president for original programming and production, said it took several meetings over a year and half to get Ms. Cho to trust that she would be allowed to have the show she wanted.

And while still subjected to the standards of basic cable television, he said, Ms. Cho has “great license” to express herself.

For Ms. Cho, the only thing worse than bombing on television would be bombing in front of a room full of Koreans. During the course of the first episode she decides to accept the KoreAm Journal award and during her acceptance speech recalls her dismay at finding out that the killer in the shootings at Virginia Tech last year was not only Korean–American but also named Cho. She lets out a few expletives and, from the faces in the well–heeled audience, it looks as if she’s giving them indigestion.

But the moment passes, and Ms. Cho wins her audience back by making fun of North Koreans and — who else? — her parents, who beam at her.

At the end of the evening a young woman approaches her with a note, from which she tearfully reads: “I totally identify with you. I look up to you because you fight for those who are oppressed and amazingly you do it with humor.” For once Ms. Cho is speechless. More than anything, she said in the interview, “I hope I can inspire other people to do things even though they don’t see anybody else doing it.”

That’s not to say that she doesn’t also pine for more fame and fortune.

“I want mainstream acceptance, I want huge success, I want to play huge stadiums,” she said. “I just do.”


DESOLETE DOTS
IN THE SEA STIR
DEEP EMOTIONS AS
SOUTH KOREA RESISTS
A JAPANESE CLAIM

BY CHOE SANG–HUN

DOKDO, South Korea

E ach day, weather permitting, hundreds of South Koreans sail to this cluster of nearly uninhabitable islets and outcroppings, seven seaward hours from the Korean mainland.

The waves are so unpredictable that only a little more than half of the visitors can land. When they do, it is for a 20–minute stay to snap photos from a wharf, the largest flat surface on this 46–acre collection of two main islets and dozens of other specks of land.

The rest of the visitors must content themselves with circling on the ferry, waving South Korean flags and throwing cookie crumbs at the sea gulls flying overhead.

Still, over the past three years, the voyage to these islets, which South Korea administers but Japan claims, has become a popular pilgrimage for Koreans. This year, 80,000 people have set foot here, hampered by the lack of a souvenir shop, restaurant or public toilet.
The board insisted that its decision was just technical. But the Bush administration intervened, ordering the board to restore the old designation. The move was well received in Seoul. When President Bush visited this month, after years of tension between the United States and South Korea over North Korean policy, tens of thousands of residents greeted him waving American flags and placards that read “Welcome President Bush!”

Japan’s chief cabinet secretary, Nobutaka Machimura, later said, “There is no need for us to overreact to a decision made by just one organization in the United States.”

South Korea’s offensive in the battle for world opinion featured a press trip last week that included a reporter for The New York Times. The government sponsored the voyage, aboard a Coast Guard ship, for journalists working for foreign news organizations.

Among the post–World War II generations of Koreans, a desire to surpass Japan — and fear that they could once again be subjugated by a larger neighbor — remains a powerful driving force.

Mr. Cho of the Northeast Asian History Foundation said, “Even in sports, such as Olympic baseball, South Koreans get twice as happy when they beat Japan as when they defeat, say, the United States.”

“Besides,” he said, a rifle on his shoulder as he gazed across the sea toward Japan, “I never liked the Japanese.”

Dokdo is not an easy posting. Until a South Korean company recently donated desalinization equipment, the islets had no reliable water supply. There are almost no trees, and winter weather cuts off ferry service for weeks at a stretch.

Although regional security experts say South Korea and Japan have too much at stake to use military means to settle their differences here, the South Korean Coast Guard says that the number of Japanese patrol boats sailing around the islets has increased since the sovereignty issue resurfaced in 2005.

Kim Sung-do, 68, an octopus fisherman, and his wife have lived here for 40 years as Dokdo’s only year-round civilian residents. He said he did not expect the Japanese to invade.

But “if they ever do that,” Mr. Kim said, “I will fight them, even if the only weapons I have are my bare fists.”

In front of his concrete home, at the foot of a bluff, seven South Korean flags whipped in the wind.

When Japan claims Dokdo as its own territory, we Koreans feel as outraged as if someone pointed at our wife and claimed that she is his own,” said Cho Whan-bok, secretary general of the Northeast Asian History Foundation, a government-affiliated institute established in 2006 to examine territorial and other disputes with neighboring countries.

For outsiders, the dispute over islets that seem to rise vertically from the sea and have little economic value, might seem exotic. But for those Koreans who have never forgiven Japan for its brutal occupation of their country and who continue to measure success against Japanese competitors, the dispute over what the South Koreans call Dokdo and Japan calls Takeshima is very real, and very emotional.

Both countries trace their claim back over centuries. Japan says it reconfirmed its right to Takeshima in 1905, during its war with Russia. For Koreans, however, that was an annexation that marked the prelude to Japan’s colonial rule, from 1910 to 1945, a period during which they were banned from using their language and many women were lured or forced into sexual slavery in front-line brothels for Japan’s Imperial Army.

The postwar peace treaty between a defeated Japan and the Allied powers did not resolve sovereignty over the islets, and since the 1950s, South Korea has maintained a police garrison here. Japan repeatedly urged South Korea to take the issue to the International Court of Justice, and South Korea repeatedly declined, arguing that there was nothing to discuss.

Then, in 2005, members of the prefectural assembly in Shimane, on Japan’s western coast, declared Feb. 22 — the 100th anniversary of the day the Japanese took over the islets — to be Takeshima Day, to highlight the Japanese claim.

Their resolution set off a firestorm in South Korea.

“If the Japanese try to take this island from us, we will fight to the end,” said Kwak Young-hwan, captain of the 5,000-ton Sambong, the South Korean Coast Guard’s largest patrol boat, which prowls the waters around Dokdo. “If we run out of firepower, we will ram our ship against the intruders! Our national pride is at stake.”

The dispute heated up again this year, with the two countries engaging in a tit-for-tat struggle that, at one point, dragged in the United States — an ally of both nations.

In July, the Japanese Ministry of Education issued a new manual for teachers and textbook publishers urging them to instruct Japanese students that the islets rightfully belong to Japan.

South Korea responded by recalling its ambassador to Tokyo for three weeks. South Korean citizens chimed in, with a small group of protesters decapitating peacocks — Japan’s national bird — in front of the Japanese Embassy in central Seoul. The administrators of the Seoul subway system removed a Japanese company’s condom advertisements.

Even North Korea, still technically at war with the South, criticized Japan. Rodong Sinmun, North Korea’s main state-run newspaper, said that Japan’s new educational manual on Dokdo was “a militarist racket for territorial expansion” and that it could “ignite a war around the Korean Peninsula.”

In July, in the midst of the uproar, the United States Board on Geographic Names changed the island’s status from “South Korean” to “undesignated sovereignty,” outraged South Koreans, many of whom saw it as yet another instance of their nation’s fate being arbitrarily decided by a bigger power.

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In front of his concrete home, at the foot of a bluff, seven South Korean flags whipped in the wind.
KOREAN STAR’S SUICIDE REIGNITES DEBATE ON WEB REGULATION

BY CHOE SANG-HUN

Seoul — Choi Jin-sil, a movie star, was the closest thing South Korea had to a national sweetheart.

So when Ms. Choi, 39, was found dead in her apartment on Oct. 2 in what the police concluded was a suicide, her grief-stricken homeland sought an answer to why the actress had chosen to end her life.

The police, the media and members of Parliament immediately pointed fingers at the Internet. Malicious online rumors led to Ms. Choi’s suicide, the police said, after studying memos found at her home and interviewing friends and relatives.

Those online accusations claimed that Ms. Choi, who once won a government medal for her savings habits, was a loan shark. They asserted that a fellow actor, Ahn Jae-bwan, was driven to suicide because Ms. Choi had relentlessly pressed him to repay a $2 million debt.

Public outrage over Ms. Choi’s suicide gave ammunition to the government of President Lee Myung-bak, which has long sought to regulate cyberspace, a major avenue for antigovernment protests in South Korea.

Earlier this year, the Lee government was reeling after weeks of protests against beef imports from the United States. Vicious antigovernment postings and online rumors on the dangers of lifting the ban on American beef fueled the political upheaval, which forced the entire cabinet to resign.

In a monthlong crackdown on online defamation, 900 agents from the government’s Cyber Terror Response Center are scouring blogs and online discussion boards to identify and arrest those who “habitually post slander and instigate cyber bullying.”

In the National Assembly, Ms. Choi’s suicide set the country’s rival parties on a collision course over how to regulate the Web. The governing Grand National Party is promoting a law to punish online insults; the opposition parties accuse the government of trying to “rule cyberspace with martial law.”

The opposition says that cyberspace violence is already dealt with under existing laws against slander and public insults. But the government says that a tougher, separate law is necessary to punish online abuse, which it says inflict quicker and wider damage on victims.

To battle online harassment, the government’s Communications Commission last year ordered Web portals with more than 300,000 visitors a day to require its users to submit their names and matching Social Security numbers before posting comments. The police reported 10,028 cases of online libel last year, up from 3,667 reported in 2004.

Harassment in cyberspace has been blamed for a string of highly publicized suicides. Ms. Choi made headlines when she married a baseball player, Cho Sung Min, in 2000. But tabloids and Web bloggers were relentless in criticizing her when the marriage soured and she fought for custody of her two children.

TV producers and commercial sponsors dropped her. The general sentiment was that her career was over. But in 2005, she made a comeback with a hugely popular soap opera called “My Rosy Life,” in which she played a kick-ass wife who successfully beat her errant husband, but reconciles with him when she learns he has terminal cancer.

In a monthlong crackdown on online defamation, 900 agents from the government’s Cyber Terror Response Center are scouring blogs and online discussion boards to identify and arrest those who “habitually post slander and instigate cyber bullying.”

In an interview with MBC-TV in July, which was broadcast after her death, she said she “dreaded” the Internet, where posters had insulted her for being a single, divorced mother. The police said she had been taking antidepressants since her divorce.

In South Korea, volunteer counselors troll the Internet to discourage people from using the Web to trade tips on how to commit suicide and, in some cases, how to form suicide pacts.

“We have seen a sudden rise in copycat suicides following a celebrity death,” said Jeon Jun-hee, an official at the Seoul Metropolitan Mental Health Center, which runs a suicide prevention hot line. “Mr. Jeon said the hot line had received 90 calls a day, or twice the usual number, since Ms. Choi’s suicide.”
SOUTH KOREA JOINS LUCRATIVE PRACTICE OF INVITING MEDICAL TOURISTS TO ITS HOSPITALS

BY CHOE SANG-HUN

In this city’s Apgujeong district, famous for its high-end boutiques and plastic surgeons, tourist buses unload Chinese and Japanese visitors looking for a nip and tuck as part of their packaged tour.

On the resort island of Jeju, the government is building Health Care Town, a 370-acre complex of medical clinics and upscale apartments surrounded by 18-hole golf courses and scenic beaches, to lure foreigners in need of medical care.

West of Seoul, on the muddy beaches of Inchon where American troops splashed ashore 58 years ago to fight in the Korean War, a new steel-and-glass town is rising to attract foreign visitors, including medical tourists.

South Korea has joined Thailand, Singapore, India and other Asian nations in the lucrative business of medical tourism. Heart bypasses, spinal surgery, hip-joint replacements, cosmetic surgery — procedures that may cost tens of thousands of dollars in the United States — can often be done for one-third or even one-tenth of the cost in Asia, with much shorter waiting times and by specialists often trained in the West.

Americans fleeing the high cost of medicine at home have spurred the trend. Last year, 750,000 Americans sought cheaper treatment abroad, a figure projected to reach 6 million by 2010, according to a recent study by the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions, a consultancy. Asian nations are also wooing wealthy Middle Eastern patients who have found it more difficult to get a visa to enter the United States since the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The number of foreigners coming to South Korea for medical care is still a fraction of those getting treatment in India, Thailand and Singapore, industry officials said. But clinics and the South Korean government are trying hard to attract these tourists, who not only bring in money for cash-strapped hospitals but also help the economy by staying on to shop and sightsee after their procedure is over.

The government has revised immigration rules to allow foreign patients and their families to get long-term medical visas and altered laws to permit local hospitals to form joint ventures with foreign hospitals in some cases.

Soon they were checking into the Woordul Spine Hospital so Ms. Abdulla could have surgery for her chronic back and leg pain.

Mr. Abdulla found his wife’s hospital room — furnished with a television, broadband Internet access, private bathroom, sofas and an extra bed — so comfortable that he decided to stay with her rather than go to a hotel.

Ms. Abdulla had all her pre-surgical tests the day she arrived. The next day, she was on an operating table.

“I feel very good,” she said five days after her surgery. “I can walk and shop now.”

Mr. Abdulla said he and his wife were now eager to visit the stores and museums in Seoul, “probably spending more on shopping than in the medical center.”

Woordul Spine Hospital said it expected to draw about 1,000 foreign patients and $1 million in revenue from their treatments in 2008, its third year of wooing foreigners. It said its patients hailed from 47 countries, with about a third from the United States.
Wooridul plans to build a hospital branch, apartments, a concert hall and an art museum on the Jeju island as part of its medical tourism offerings, in addition to the golf course it has already built, said Lee Mi–jeong, a Wooridul spokeswoman.

“We believe this is a major future industry for our island,” said Kim Kyung–taeg, head of the government–run Jeju Development Center. “The town will specialize in medical checkups, long–term convalescence and procedures Korean doctors do well and cheaply, such as plastic surgery and dentistry.”

No government records are available on how many medical tourists come to South Korea. But a survey of 29 hospitals showed that they treated 38,822 uninsured foreign patients — excluding certain categories like long–term Korean expatriates — between January and August, compared with 15,680 in 2007, according to the government–financed Korea Health Industry Development Institute.

It said 25 percent of those patients were from the United States, and 10 percent each were from China and Japan.

Medical fees are strictly controlled by the government as part of a national health insurance program, but hospitals like Wooridul can negotiate fees with foreign patients without interference from insurance authorities.

Gregory Kellstrom, a civilian forklift operator at the American military base in Seoul, decided to go to Wooridul recently to get spinal scans and medication for his back and hip problems instead of returning to the United States.

“For me personally, this is not about money,” said Mr. Kellstrom, 42, who paid out of his own pocket but planned to apply for reimbursement from his American insurer.

“In the States, it will probably take easily six months just to get the treatment I have here in one day,” he said.

Baalinova Dariakul, 49, the wife of a wealthy businessman in Kyrgyzstan, said she came to Wooridul for treatment for her spinal tumor because it was unavailable at home. Fumiko Yamada, 75, a Tokyo resident who recently had a back operation at Wooridul, said she would have had to wait years to get an appointment with a leading Japanese surgeon who performs the same operation.

Some Koreans fear that social inequality will grow if medical resources and skilled workers migrate from public health care to better–paying jobs that cater to foreigners, said Dr. Yoon Dae–hyun, a psychiatrist at the Healthcare System Gangnam Center at Seoul National University Hospital. But he added that the effort to attract foreigners could inspire more local hospitals to upgrade their services.

“There isn’t much of a gap anymore between the good hospitals in Asia and the United States,” he said.

His center plans to open a marketing office in Los Angeles, and hopes to attract medical tourists from the pool of two million Korean–Americans. Foreigners who can document Korean ancestry can qualify for the South Korean national health insurance.

Sally Im, a Korean–American from Honolulu, recently traveled to Wooridul for back surgery. After her husband paid two months’ worth of premiums — about $90 — on their arrival, a portion of Ms. Im’s medical bill was covered by the South Korean government.

“Fighting overseas versus defecating national pride.”

The Ims, meanwhile, were happy that they had an alternative to the American medical system.

“We met a good doctor and had good surgery,” said Ms. Im’s husband, Stan. “We feel very lucky.”
SEUL, South Korea

The Ministry of National Defense has demanded that the Rhee passage be rewritten to say, “He did his best to contain Communism.” According to the Kumsung textbook, Park Chung-hee — who seized power in a coup in 1961 and tortured political dissidents, while mobilizing the nation for export-driven economic growth — was “a president who contributed to the nation’s modernization.”

For the “sunshine policy” of engagement with North Korea espoused by President Kim Dae-jung, whose inauguration in 1998 ousted the conservative establishment and brought many former dissidents into positions of power, the Ministry of Unification now suggests that this term be replaced in textbooks with the official, drier “policy of reconciliation and cooperation.”

Mr. Park, the conservative scholar, said that in the past decade students were inculcated with a “left leaning” nationalism from the new textbooks and a younger generation of teachers who had no memory of the 1950–53 Korean War and who were prepared to reconcile with the Communist North.

They came of age amid other formative experiences. Many were students during campus protests against Chun Doo-hwan, who took power after the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979. Mr. Chun deployed forces in 1980 that killed hundreds of pro-democracy protesters in Gwangju, a southern city.

When the United States, which technically had commanded the combined American–South Korean forces, did not prevent Mr. Chun’s junta from unleashing troops against its own people, students turned against Washington. If the division of the peninsula engendered a mistrust of big powers, Gwangju helped shape views of the United States, historians say.

That resentment persists and surfaced in the huge demonstrations against American beef imports this year. Younger South Koreans’ view of their history was best summarized by the previous president, Roh Moo-hyun, who inherited the liberal government from Mr. Kim in 2003. That year, the same year the new textbooks were distributed to schools, Mr. Roh said, “Our modern history is a painful one, in which justice was defeated and opportunism gained the upper hand.”

Conservatives seethed as the Kim and Roh administrations delved into long-hidden aspects of the recent past — collaboration with Japanese colonialists (Park Chung-hee was an officer in the Japanese Imperial Army), mass killings of civilians during the Korean War and the abuse of political dissidents.

They contended that these liberals ignored the difficult choices faced by earlier South Korean leaders. “In the turbulent era we lived through, no one could be completely innocent, no one could live by law alone,” Cho Gap-je, 63, a conservative columnist, said to the cheers of elderly South Koreans who gathered recently to denounce liberal teachers. “When necessary, we shed blood, sweat and tears so that our children no longer have to shed tears.”

In the months since Mr. Lee assumed the presidency, the swing back to the right has been palpable, and not just in textbook complaints.

In July, the Defense Ministry banned what it called 23 “seditionist books” from military barracks on the grounds that the country’s security was threatened by “pro–North Korea, antigovernment, anti–American and anticapitalism” works, including two by the American linguist and left-wing intellectual Noam Chomsky. After the list was leaked to the news media, sales of the banned books soared. The military was further embarrassed on Oct. 22, when seven of its own lawyers appealed to the Constitutional Court, saying the book ban violated soldiers’ basic rights.

Even Mr. Chomsky chimed in. “Perhaps, for the sake of honesty, it should be renamed Ministry of Defense Against Freedom and Democracy,” he offered in an interview with the Seditionous Books Club, a new Web site created to discuss the banned books.
## THE LIST OF 2008

The New York Times articles on Korean Culture

This is the complete list of The New York Times articles on Korean Culture in 2008 according to our research at time of publication.

Not all articles on the list were selected for this booklet. The articles that are included in this booklet will be in **BOLD**.

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Korean Cultural Service New York is a branch of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Korea. Since our inauguration in 1979, we have worked to promote cultural exchange and stimulate interest in Korean culture through our programs.

**INFORMATION ON KOREA**
The Korean Information Center contains over 16,000 volumes of literatures on Korea and Korea-related subjects; such as culture, history, politics, economy and more. We also have a wide collection of Korean Films on DVD available to be checked out by our patrons. Hanbok (Korean traditional costume) and Korean instruments are also available for check out.

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Two Korean Films are screened each month by the Korean Cultural Service New York: A Night at the Movies and Korean Film Screening & Discussion. Discussions after film screenings allow audience members an opportunity to share their knowledge, opinions and comments on the screened feature, as the discussions are led by Korean film professionals.

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The elegance in Korean culture can be experienced through the Cultural Arts Events. In addition to our own events, including classical music concerts, jazz concerts, literature readings, culinary tasting events; we collaborate with many of the city’s finest cultural organizations.
THE KOREAN WAVE AS VIEWED THROUGH THE PAGES OF THE NEW YORK TIMES IN 2008 THE KOREAN WAVE
Through the course of the year 2008, we have watched the Korean Wave as it surged from pop music to complex international political issues, lifting an ever–wider array of commentators, performers, and travelers in its energy field. As I arrive here at the close of this Introduction, I realize in a way I have become part of the Wave. And I might add at the very end, So have you, Dear Reader, so have you!

David R. McCann
The Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Literature in the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations
Director of the Korea Institute at Harvard University