

Thanksgiving... Korean Style

By Hannah Kim, GS'10

Korea's own version of Thanksgiving is *chuseok*, which is the fall harvest festival. Most Korean holidays are based on the lunar calendar and this year *chuseok* falls on the 3rd of October. *Chuseok* is one of the most important national holidays, second only to the Korean New Year (*seolnal*). As a result, the days before and after the official date of *chuseok* are combined to form a three-day holiday in which all Koreans, young and old, return to their hometowns. This time of family togetherness has become especially important in the contemporary Korean society because the fast paced

lifestyle of the 21st century has become the norm and such a time of togetherness is increasingly rare.

Chuseok is rich in symbolism for the Korean culture. *Chuseok* celebrates its extensive two thousand years plus history dating back to the Silla dynasty of 57 B.C. - 935 A.D by emulating the *gabae* event of the Silla dynasty. *Gabae* was a month long weaving contest in which the winning team would be treated to a great feast. *Chuseok* is also reminiscent of the ancient shamanist rituals of old, in which new harvests would be offered in thanks to

continued on pg 2



Arrangements such as the one pictured above are used for ancestral worship rituals that usually precede large family feasts.

About the Weatherhead East Asian Institute:

Since its establishment in 1949, Columbia University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute has been a Major center for research, teaching, and publishing on modern and contemporary Asia. The Institute's mission is to train new generations of experts in the Asian humanities, social sciences, and the professions and to enhance understanding of East Asia in the wider community.

Are You American, or America?

By Christine E. Kwon, CC '10

I suppose he meant it as a compliment, but I couldn't help but feel a bit affronted when the cheery Chinese professor in Chengdu told me I spoke English just like an American. How could I not? It was almost as if I had unexpectedly performed some magic trick, and in doing so, both mildly surprised and impressed him. "I thought you were her guide," the professor continued smilingly, indicating to my travel companion Alice, who is an American of Western European descent. "But you sound so American."

"She IS American," declared Alice, firmly.

The idea that I am American by my birth and citizenship, despite my phenotypical characteristics, is not easily transmitted.

This August, I traveled across Asia, from China to

Tibet, crossing over China's "Wild West" into the Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and some version of this exchange was repeated multiple times in each place. Previously, when traveling in Europe, my interlocutors have all too often spoken to me as if a proxy of the US; I become America, and as such, criticisms directed at my country are uttered with the personal pronoun 'you,' in effect phrasing them as personal attacks. Being American can carry a heavy burden, but when foreigners go as far as to doubt your citizenship, you may find

continued on pg 3

Thanksgiving... Korean style

continued from pg 1

the harvest moon, local deities and family ancestors. All three were believed to influence the harvest and the predominantly agrarian Silla culture placed great importance in this ceremony of giving thanks to ensure continued prosperity.

Such cultural beliefs are still prevalent and one of the most important aspects of modern chuseok is paying respects to the ancestors. Ancestral worship rituals are performed early in the morning by visiting the burial sites of ancestors. Family patriarchs lead the homage ceremony of tomb maintenance (trim plants and cleaning surrounding area) as well as offer sacrifices of food, drink and crops. Historically, Korean culture has always been influenced by neighboring China, and similarly emphasizes filial piety as a society's core. Filial piety extends past death and the ancestors' blessings are believed to facilitate prosperity.

Chuseok festivities include eating a wealth of delicious traditional foods and fun games involving the whole extended family. One special food eaten

during *chuseok* is *songpyeon*, a half-moon shaped rice cake stuffed with sweet sesame seeds or chestnuts and steamed over a bed of pine needles. Steaming *songpyeon* this way infuses each rice cake with the fresh essence of pine and most Koreans associate the scent of pine trees with this particular treat. Tug of war, wrestling (*ssireum*), archery, cockfighting, a dance tribute to the moon (*gang gang sullan*) and traditional folk music of the farmers (*pungmul*) are some of the interesting events that can be enjoyed during this holiday.

Just as Americans observe Thanksgiving in a time of family togetherness and thanksgiving, the Korean *Chuseok* is a joyous time of reflection and camaraderie.

This year, chuseok falls on October 3. The Korean Produce Association hosted its 27th Annual Harvest & Folklore Festival on the weekend of September 26th, 2009. It was held at the Citifield Stadium in Queens, New York, and the expected turnout was to exceed 150,000 people for the two day festival.



A Korean couple was married at last weekend's *Chuseok* Festival in Flushing, Queens, complete with traditional Korean garb, *hansok*, pictured above.

Waste Not: A Lingerin Lesson from the Cultural Revolution

By Ellen Liu, BC '11

During my time as a museum buff and hardcore college student, I've come to realize that museum hopping is best when you've got no purpose at all. There is something about lazy summer weekends that makes wandering in cool cavernous museums especially appealing. This summer, I made my annual foray into the giant halls of the MoMA, expecting

It is perhaps from this experience that she draws her instinct to collect—her house was full of odds and ends, a remnant of the Cultural Revolutionary principle of frugality in daily life.

medicine, a tower of suitcases, stacks of newspapers and four gramophones were among the hundreds of thousands of items that were packed neatly into the atrium space. At the center of the installation was the wood frame of Song Dong's mother's house as it was in the early half of the 20th century.

On the one hand, this installation was a comment on the lingering effects of China's cultural revolution. Born in 1938, Mr. Song's mother, Zhao Xiangyuan lived through the cultural revolution, experiencing the destructive effects it had on material wealth—her family was considerably wealthy until one of her family members was jailed on suspicions as an anti-Communist spy. It is perhaps from this experience that she draws the instinct to collect—her house was full of odds and ends, a remnant of the Cultural Revolutionary principle of frugality in daily life.

the same old paintings on the walls and perhaps a new exhibit of contemporary paintings that would confuse me more than inspire me.

After spending hours meandering from top down, I finally made it to the center atrium of the building, where Chinese artist Song Dong's installation, *Waste Not*, was located. Words cannot begin to explain the image of this installation. Put in the most basic terms, the installation was a compilation and organization of all the items that were packed into his mother's house: hundreds of plastic soda bottles, several dozen pairs of shoes, a shelf of herbal

On the other hand, the installation, seen in immaculate surroundings and located on a bustling midtown street, can be read as a comment on the rapid development of the international sphere. Wandering amongst the piles in this atrium is like being stuck in a time capsule of sorts—small children's shoes are laid out right next to adult sized shoes, tubes devoid of toothpaste are laid side by side, a testament to a time passed.

The story of how the exhibit came about is equally inspiring. Born on the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Song Dong grew up in this tiny wooden house in Beijing. His

continued on pg 4

Are You American, or America?



The Potala Palace in Lhasa where Christine and Alice were able to enter unaccompanied.

continued from pg 1

yourself longing for some sort of recognition, negative or otherwise.

I am initially usually just flummoxed: what is it about me that keeps people from looking beyond the color of my skin and hair to see my t-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops, the English-language Lonely Planet in my hand, the wide-brimmed BUZZ-OFF! safari hat with a chin strap that my mother made me promise to wear as protection against the sun, and possibly not realize I am at least foreign, if not American? None of the countries I visited have homogeneous populations, and China, in particular, prides itself on its multi-nationalism. Besides, I am not a particularly subtle traveler: I roamed the streets of Lhasa with my apparently more clearly foreign friend conversing in perfectly fluent English, and yet, people simply could not accept that I was American.

Usually people will accept that I reside in the US, but this is inevitably followed by something like, “No, no. Where are you from?” This, I understand, is an inquiry not of my citizenship but of my ethnicity, and

sometimes, I am agreeable. I explained to a monk in Lhasa that I was born in the US but my parents were Korean, but there are times I grow tired of the charade and refuse to comply. When, during a ten-hour taxi ride, our Kyrgyz driver, who careened dangerously quickly around hairpin turns with the same freneticism of his bad Russian techno, jabbed a finger into his own chest and declared “Kyrgyz,” and then pointed in my direction asking “Japan?” “Korea?” “China?” I repeatedly insisted, “America, America, AMERICA.”

I’ll admit, blending in does have its own advantages. Access to any place in Lhasa is ostensibly highly restricted to foreigners, as they are to be escorted at all times by a licensed guide, but perhaps because I was assumed to be Alice’s guide, we were left alone to freely wander the alleyways, to circumambulate the pilgrimage circuits, and explore temples. We were even able to enter unaccompanied at the Potala Palace, a place with airport-style security (I had my water bottle confiscated) and access so restricted that one has to purchase the day before visitation a slip of paper bearing an appointment time, at which time

one may then purchase a ticket. Beyond the particular difficulties of being a tourist in Lhasa, I was also largely spared the staring and touching to which poor Alice was subjected. Children latched onto her arm in the Lhasa streets, and on an overnight train ride out of Tibet, she awoke to a stranger’s face staring into hers, his gaze unwavering for hours thereafter.

I suppose it should not surprise me that the idea that I am American by my birth and citizenship, despite my phenotypical characteristics, is not necessarily something easily transmitted. To many in some parts of the world, Alice may still be recognized as American, but the girl who looks like her Chinese guide is not. I admit I am quick to judge this as a form of cultural obtuseness,

When traveling in Europe, my interlocutors have all too often spoken to me as if a proxy of the US; I become American, and as such, criticisms directed at my country are uttered with the personal pronoun ‘you,’ in effect phrasing them as personal attacks.

but in what ways are we not the same in our imaginings of other foreigners? I know that there is a sizable Korean population in Russia, for example, but still, a name like ‘Vladimir Kim’ still strikes me as incongruous and out of the ordinary. How do we both relate and differentiate between nationality and ethnicity? These are big questions not answerable in travelogue-y musings, I realize, and perhaps not an issue to argue over with kindly inquisitive strangers. I should possibly have responded to the professor with a smile and “Thank You.” It is true, after all, that I speak English just like an American.

Waste Not: A Lingering Lesson from the Cultural Revolution



continued from pg 2

mother was constantly conserving, filling every nook and cranny of the house with daily items that we would not think twice about tossing today. For almost sixty years, she lived in this house with her husband and children. After her husband's death in 2002, she became even more determined to conserve, sometimes going to lengths to bring more into the house, as if to fill a void left by his death. It was an endless cycle with no end in sight. In 2005, Mr. Song reached a compromise with his mother—they would turn her hoardings into an exhibit in such a way that nothing would be wasted. With her help, they slowly dismantled and laid out and grouped each little item that was packed away in the

small house. Sadly, she was not able to see her life work come to fruition—she passed away last spring in a final act of conservation: she fell from a step ladder trying to save a bird from a tree.

It is not often that you come across something so meaningful, so historical and so personal, in a museum setting. To really understand the meaning and depth of this installation really requires the viewer to unpack (pardon the pun) Song Dong's life story, to understand the lasting implications of a historical event such as the Cultural Revolution. *Waste Not* provides a refreshing look into a life and a livelihood that is often overlooked in the hustle and bustle of Fifth Avenue.



Upcoming Events at the Weatherhead Institute

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6

Modern Tibetan Studies Program Film Screening “Chingji Sihan” (Genghis Khan)

Fathers of the Nation:

Chinese views of Mongolian heroes

Directed by Wang Wenjie

7:10 PM - 9:30 PM, Kent Hall, Rm. 522D

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 9

“New Media and Global Transformation” Conference

10:00 AM - 5:00 PM

Jerome Greene Hall, JG 104, Columbia University

Co-sponsored by the Shanghai Jiefang Daily Group and Columbia Law School's Centre for Chinese Legal Studies

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 10

WEAI Undergraduate Photography Exhibition

Featuring recent photographs taken by Columbia University undergraduate students in East and Southeast Asia

On exhibit until Friday, October 30, 2009

SIPA, 4th Floor Mezzanine

MONDAY, OCTOBER 12

Lecture Series: “The Global Financial Crisis: Responses from East and Southeast Asia”

“Korea's Exit Strategy”

Doowon Lee, Professor, School of Economics,

Yonsei University, WEAI Visiting Scholar

12:00 PM - 1:30 PM, IAB 918

ABOUT SOUNDINGS

Published monthly by the Weatherhead Undergraduate Council, Soundings is edited by Ellen Liu. If you have any questions or comments, or would like to contribute, you can contact her at EL2375@columbia.edu.