

The Girl in the White Hat

It has been almost a half-century since my winter arrival in Uijeongbu-si, South Korea; a palpably distant past; susurrations *calmly* reserved and comfortably relaxing: arctic air outside contrasting sharply with warm, aromatically-laced air inside, universally infused with the mildly acidulous aromas of Kimchee, rice, fish, and Korean wine. It was wondrously exotic.

Mornings were quiet. No, that's not quite right; mornings were hushed, like those of a snow blanketed forest, hence the sobriquet: Land of the Morning Calm. There wasn't a peep until sunrise; everyone delighting in their ondol enriched slumbers awakening only when an old man, pulling a two-wheeled cart, plodding along the back alleys between walled houses, huge scissors in hand—a device from time immemorial—summoned one and all with his slow, methodical appeal, clanging those big scissors antiphonally with each step taken, “Cong Namul, Cong Namul Yo, Cong Namul, Sodi-oat!” *Bean Sprouts; Bean Sprouts, hey; Bean Sprouts, for sale!*



Kim Chun Cha, 1969, Uijeongbu-si, Korea



Chun Cha in her Ondol Kitchen

That ageless refrain, soothingly pleasant, heard in villages' country-wide, summoned one and all to the new day. Slowly then from Cheju-do to the DMZ, from east to west, the Land of the Morning Calm began to stir. Soon there was an effervescent industriousness so pervasively remarkable that it had to be seen to be believed: explosive activity, relentless, bearing the promise of unimaginable prosperity to come. I was on hand to witness it, and recognized, too, that this was then Korea incarnate.

I also remember the feeble lighting of the single 40-watt bulb dangling from the ceiling in each room of our four-room house. There were no other electrical outlets except for a lone transformer box that was used intermittently to power a steady light when the ceiling lights flickered, which was not an uncommon occurrence. There was no hot and cold running water, no flushing toilet, no telephone, no clothes washer, no drying machine, no dish washer, no oven, no electric or gas stove, no toaster, no food processor, no table or floor lamps, no vacuum cleaner, no power tools, no iron, and none of those other conveniences taken for granted today. Clothing to be washed? Yes, but only undergarments and socks, and these on a wash board lying in a galvanized steel tub, scrubbed by hand and hung out to dry on a clothes line.

Yes, Chun Cha and her neighbors had fresh water, but only at the home's hand-pump located outside the main house. Again, No flushing toilets.



The Author at Home, 1971, Uijeongbu-si

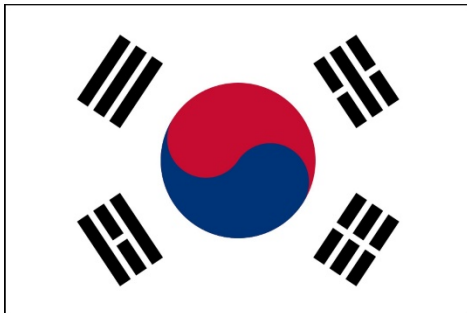


Chun Cha, outside her brick home. 1971

Water had to be heated in a large pot manually via ondol, the coal-fired home heating and cooking source, the only source, situated in the home's kitchen, generally a tiny dirt floor room abutting the sleeping quarters (coal had to be stoked and rotated nightly). Ondol warms the home by transferring heat via under-floor flues, or passages from a central fire source. This made the floors warm, sometimes too warm to lay on, so quilting was used, not western style bedding. Ondol was also the main cooking source, one that has been used for almost 3,000 years. Houses were not heated throughout unless, of course, you were among the few fortunate enough (rich enough) to own an auxiliary kerosene stove. There were no residential telephones because there were few central telephone office exchanges in Korea, and those that existed were still well beyond the fiscal reach of most citizens. There were no showers; no inside bathtubs or indoor plumbing whatsoever, not even sinks with drains: pots and pans were the only recourse. Residents used the unheated outhouse; one with a hole in the floor over the ubiquitous 'honeypot,' which was pumped out only when filled to capacity. Refrigerators, even very compact models, were rarely seen. In short, almost every modern convenience we have all come to expect as a matter of fact was absent. Comfort and cooking depended wholly on the ubiquitous single ondol coal source (carbon monoxide was guarded against): coal dust from the countless ondol stoves laced the winter skies with visibly blackish smog layers of varying hues. It was a world few people would wish to revisit no matter their provenance.

But... Chun Cha never complained. She was content with the world as she found it.

This essay, *The Girl in the White Hat*, traces Kim Chun Cha's life from her birth in Japanese occupied Korea through the savageness of the Korean War; her father's death six months after that war's cease-fire; her abandonment by the pitiless father of her first child; her subsequent marriage and life with the author, and the Christian faith that carried her through it all.



She was born at 429 Kalsan-dong, Inchon-bu, Korea on the tenth of February. Her birth was reported by her father on January 5, 1948. Her Korean Family Register, akin to the western birth certificate, fixed her year of birth as 1941. She passed away nearly seventy years later in Hawaii. Under normal circumstances, her birth date and all those calculations related to it would be considered accurate and reliable. They are not.

The rampaging Imperial Japanese Army annexed the Korean peninsula (today's North and South Korea) decades prior to her birth, disrupting everything. That didn't change until August 15, 1945, the end of World War II. Reliably accurate civil record keeping in a country occupied by an unfriendly force is deferred, delayed, or simply left undone. In fact, according to her mother, Chun Cha was born in 1940, not 1941, and she was born on the twenty-third of May, not the tenth of February, so she was older at the time of her death than recorded. Like so many Koreans of her generation, her records proved unreliable.



In summary, Imperial Japan gained control of Formosa and the Ryukyu Islands following an 1874 dispute with China. The Sino-Japanese War followed, ending in mid-April 1895. Japan won. In 1898, America arrived in the Western Pacific, took control of the Philippines, and rapidly made her presence known—a result of the Spanish-American War. The Japanese viewed America's arrival with distrust because their national interests were diametrically opposed. She made plans accordingly. Then, serendipitously for Japan, an Anglo-Japanese alliance was signed by which England recognized Japan's special relationship with Korea, forcing the Russians to remove troops previously stationed in Manchuria, grudgingly giving up their earlier declared "sphere of influence." The year was 1902. Regional tensions continued apace until the assassination of Japanese prince Hirobumi Ito in Manchuria by a Korean national. This led to Japan's formal annexation of Korea in August of 1910—Korea having been a Japanese protectorate since 1905. World War I soon followed. Germany's loss was Japan's gain. The Kaiser's former Far Eastern colonies were given to Japan (whetting her appetite for more). Then, in 1931 Japan seized Manchuria and subsequently annexed China's northern Jehol province, halting just short of Peking, incorporating it into their puppet state of Manchukuo, and so on and so forth until their 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and the savage, Pacific-wide fighting that continued until Japan's ultimate defeat at the end of World War II.

This was the world in which Chun Cha was born and reared.

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