

# A GLIMPSE OF SEOUL

**Korea — kimchi pots, snake wine and ondol floors  
The national anthem at 5:00 p.m. and an air raid drill each month**

by Mary Hutchings

*Mary and David Hutchings have just returned from a two-year posting to Seoul, Korea.*

Korea. What comes to mind? "Mash", KAL 007, "Pony", "Nike", the 1988 Olympics or perhaps Reverend Moon? Little known or understood, Korea was indeed "The Hermit Kingdom" and "The Land of Morning Calm". One of the last Asian countries to open its doors to the outside world, Korea has retained much of its distinctive Korean character despite the inevitable Westernization in recent years as a result of its lightening economic expansion and progress.

In the metropolis of Seoul, capital of Korea, with a population of approximately 10 000 000, the tourist who ventures out of his luxurious hotel away from the modern skyscrapered centre and allows himself to be swept along by the tide of pedestrians finds himself in a maze of streets and alleys where he is immediately bombarded with images, smells and sounds typically Korean. Dignified elderly Koreans in their graceful traditional clothing stand out among the business people in their Western suits. Women, balancing a load of groceries wrapped in a kerchief on their heads and often a baby tied to their backs with a colourful quilted cloth, move nonchalantly through the jostling crowd. Men hunch forward under the strain of a load of market produce carried in a wooden A-frame on their backs. Pedestrians hurriedly move aside to avoid being run down by cyclists with their back carriers stacked precariously high with cartons of eggs, cases of bottles, cages of chickens, puppies or hamsters. The more affluent motorcyclists are loaded down with charcoal



briquettes, market produce or even small refrigerators. In the streets, a cacophony of motorcycles, trucks, taxis, buses and cars all vying aggressively to get ahead in non-existent lanes can be heard. Traffic is snarled further by the occasional little man dangerously maneuvering his two-wheeled cart straight down the middle of the street.

Only after getting used to the hustle and bustle is it possible to focus on the shops. Near the big hotels, there are fancy underground shopping arcades with expensive jewelry, handbags, custom-made clothing and reproductions of antique celadon porcelain, Korean chests, screens and brush paintings. More exotic, however, are the local markets with their hundreds of small stalls squeezed together along the alleyways and clusters of shoppers all haggling with the merchants to get the best possible price.

In the display windows of traditional Korean medicine shops, deer antlers, ginseng roots, dried insects, reptiles as well as jars of roots, seeds and liquids are featured.

Small restaurants, tearooms and drinking houses border the markets. Men often gather after work in drinking houses to sip rice wine, a Korean Riesling-type wine, potato wine, ginseng wine, snake wine or draft beer, along with some munchies such as raw oysters, clams, squid, octopus, bean curd or bean pancakes. Women and students gravitate toward tearooms for tea, coffee or soft drinks and a snack. Restaurants, often specializing in one main dish, display plastic maquettes of this dish in the window. Westerners usually prefer the Barbecue Meat Restaurant although the more adventurous might enter a Ginseng Chicken Restaurant, a Dumplings Restaurant, a Noodles Restaurant or a Raw Fish Restaurant. The Dog Meat Soup Restaurant is disappearing (at least from the city centre) as a result of government moves to ban them for fear of offending foreigners. No matter which restaurant one chooses, the two mainstays of the Korean diet—kimchi, (cabbage or white radish hotly spiced with red pepper, garlic and pickled in brine) and rice are always served. Those who want to eat on the run can catch a bite at roadside canopied carts which magically appear at lunchtime and in the evening to serve fried chicken, pork, steamed mussels, clams or a bean flour and egg pancake filled with vegetables and meat.

Bordering the busy commercial area are crowded residential alleys. In the more affluent areas, newer brick homes and apart-



ment buildings are dispersed among the older traditional Korean homes with their gently curved ceramic tiled roofs. If the house gate is open, one can sneak a peek inside the courtyard. Shoes line the step up into the house. It would be the supreme insult to step upon the "ondol" (under-floor heat system) floors with street shoes. Coal briquettes which are burned to supply the heat for the ondol floors are piled in the yard. A dozen or so variously sized dark brown earthenware kimchi jars are buried in the yard or put on the rooftops or patios of modern apartment buildings to keep the kimchi from fermenting inside the house in winter. Pre-schoolers, often unsupervised, play in the yard and sometimes venture dangerously close to the busy street. On the 15th of the month, there is a 20 minute air raid drill forcing people to take shelter in the nearest building. Occasionally, SR 71 U.S. Military reconnaissance planes, headed to the Demilitarized Zone, break the sound barrier. At 5:00 p.m., the National Anthem can be heard blaring from loudspeakers as pedestrians halt and stand at attention to sing along.

When the hustle and bustle in the streets becomes overpowering, the peace and calm of a Buddhist temple or a palace garden offers a welcome retreat. Contemplating the skyline dotted with ultra-modern skyscrapers and skeletons of skyscrapers under construction, one wonders how long it will be before Seoul becomes just another big cosmopolitan metropolis. Progress just might spell the end to traditional Korean clothing, kimchi pots, ondol floors, snake wine, dog meat soup...