The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/12/world/asia/south-korea-missing-person-fliers.html

His Daughter Went Missing in 1999. He Couldn't Let It Go.

A father's 25-year search for his missing daughter in South Korea made him a tragic national symbol of unwavering parental devotion.

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By John Yoon
Reporting from Seoul

Dec. 12, 2024

The blue-and-yellow banners fluttering across South Korea showed a 17-year-old girl with gentle eyes and a neat bob, her smile frozen in time. The red letters beside her portrait cried out with an urgency that never dimmed for a quarter century.

"Please help me find Song Hye-hee!"

After she vanished on a winter night in 1999, her father, Song Gil-yong, made looking for her his life's work. As he traveled the country putting up banners and replacing ones that had faded in the sun and rain, his face became deeply creased and tanned.

The banners, each roughly the length of a car, stretched across sidewalks as office workers hurried past. After dark, they caught the glow of streetlights and neon signs.

"He was always hopeful that she was out there somewhere," said Na Joo-bong, 67, the chairman of a national organization for missing children in South Korea and one of Mr. Song's closest confidants. "He had one wish: to hold her hand one day."

Song Gil-yong in his apartment in 2013, looking at pictures of his wife and his missing daughter. Na Joo-bong

The banners made Mr. Song a symbol of parental devotion in his country. But he paid enormous personal costs. His wife took her own life. His relationship with his eldest daughter splintered. His savings dwindled with each new banner he bought and each mile he drove in his small white truck.

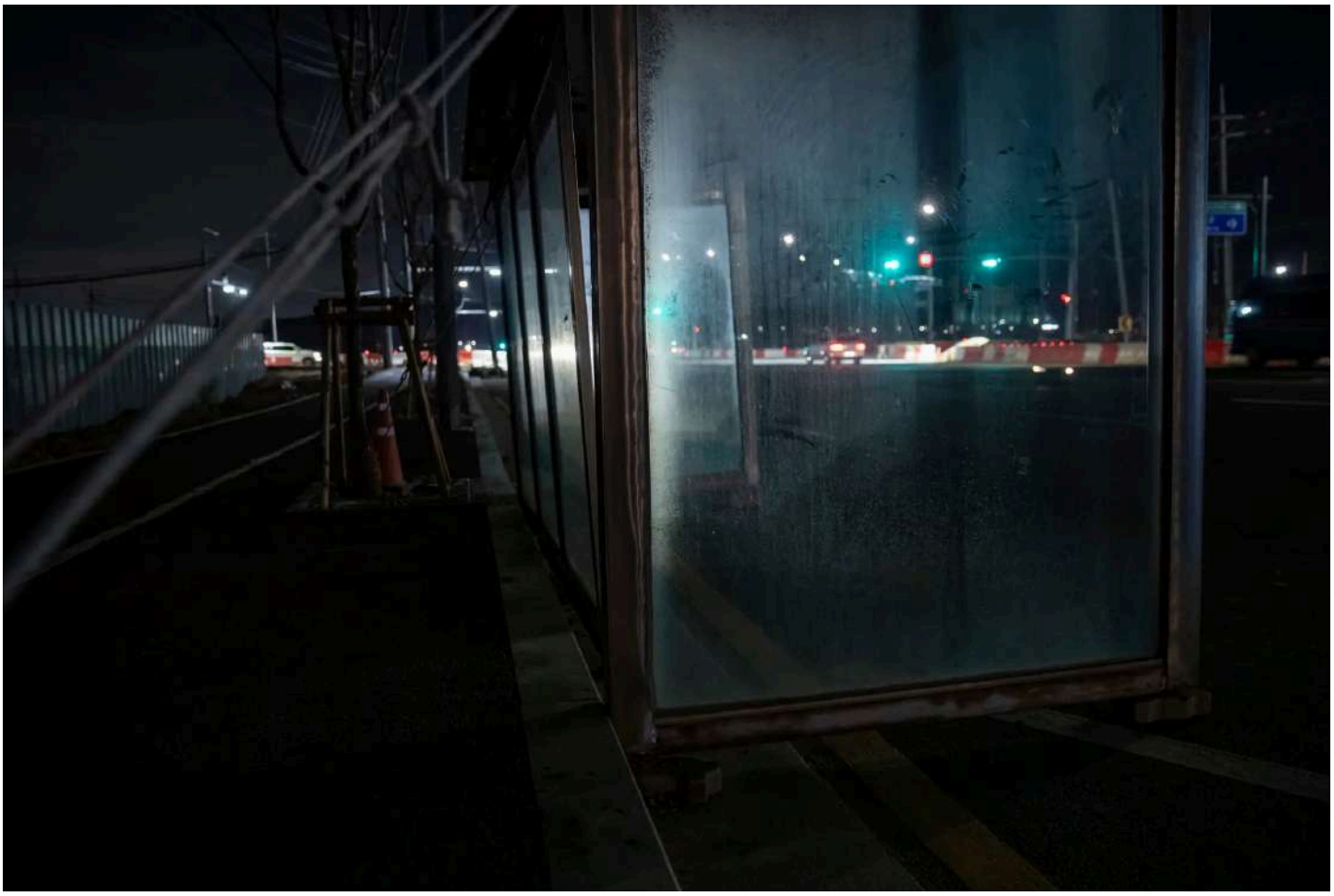
This summer, lying gaunt and exhausted on a hospital bed, he wondered if he would ever see Hye-hee again.

Song Hye-hee, a sophomore at Songtan Girls' High School in Pyeongtaek, a city south of Seoul, had dinner with friends and boarded a bus home on Feb. 13, 1999. She never arrived.

The bus driver told Mr. Song, then 45, that she had gotten off at the last stop, just over a mile from home, along with a man in his 30s who smelled like alcohol. The family home was in a poorly lit part of town with unpaved roads.

The police classified Hye-hee as a runaway because South Korean law only considered children missing if they were under 8. That threshold would later be raised. But the initial police response forced Mr. Song and his wife to look for her on their own.

Days after she went missing, Mr. Song pleaded for help and the police began investigating Hye-hee's case as a potential kidnapping. But they found no trace of her.



A bus stop in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, near a place where Hye-hee was last seen. Woohae Cho for The New York Times

The search became the singular focus of her parents’ lives. They sold their dog-breeding business and emptied their savings to buy banners and fliers. As they traveled the country hanging banners on roadside trees and utility poles, they subsisted on soju, cigarettes and instant ramen noodles.

Mr. Song’s wife helped him hand out fliers until her fingers were raw, he said in television interviews. Together, they would retrieve fliers from bathroom trash bins and hand them out again.

“I’ve never spent a day without thinking about Hye-hee,” he told a television interviewer in 2013. “I don’t think anybody can live comfortably after losing a child.”

The emotional weight of the search proved too much for Mr. Song’s wife, who Mr. Song said was an orphan. She died by suicide a few years after their daughter disappeared, he said. He found his wife lying on the floor, hugging a pile of fliers with photographs of Hye-hee.

His wife’s death prompted him to try taking his own life several times until his eldest daughter, Eun-ju, convinced him not to.

“She said she’d also become an orphan if I died,” he said in a television interview.

When he resumed his campaign, he worked alone. He usually left his state-subsidized studio apartment in his truck at dawn and returned after sundown. On some days, he took ferries to remote islands off South Korea’s coastline, where he handed out fliers on the off chance that Hye-hee might be living there.

Mr. Song funded his daily essentials and his campaign with the income he earned from working on construction sites and selling cardboard waste. He turned impatient as his body weakened and his family grew uncomfortable with the publicity he received.

“He wondered how much longer he could continue doing what he did,” said Ma Myong-nak, 59, who ran a sign factory in Pyeongtaek and printed more than a thousand banners for Mr. Song over the past decade.

But he couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

The Song family home in Pyeongtaek is now abandoned. Woohae Cho for The New York Times

In his Pyeongtaek apartment, Mr. Song taped pictures of Hye-hee and his wife on the wall near his pillow. He couldn’t fall asleep without seeing their faces, Mr. Na said.

“He felt sick if he didn’t go out looking for her,” said Choi Jong-hyun, 43, the manager of a highway rest stop west of Pyeongtaek where Mr. Song often handed out fliers to travelers. “His sense of guilt was so great that he couldn’t lead a normal life.”

Mr. Song's hopes were raised over the years by strangers who reached him by the phone number printed on his banners, saying they knew where his daughter was.

In 2012, he was with a television producer in his apartment when he received a text message from a man who claimed to have seen Hye-hee in a nearby town. Mr. Song ran outside, jumped into his truck and started driving.

He burst into the police station where the caller had agreed to meet. But the man's description of the woman he had seen did not match a computer-generated image of 30-year-old Hye-hee. Mr. Song wept on the drive home.

The statute of limitations for prosecuting suspects in Hye-hee's case expired in 2014, and the physical demands of the search were catching up with Mr. Song. He fell several times from a ladder he climbed to hang up the banners, suffering a herniated disk and a severe brain injury.

But the search continued.

At a Presbyterian church he attended in his neighborhood, people described him as socially withdrawn. He would stay for lunch after Sunday services before spending the rest of the day hanging banners. "He had a broken heart," said Lee Jae-il, a member of the congregation.

Na Joo-bong, the chairman of a national organization for missing children in South Korea, said he had promised to continue looking for Mr. Song's missing daughter. Woohae Cho for The New York Times

Mr. Song’s quest alienated his elder daughter, who struggled with the constant public attention and her in-laws’ gossip, Mr. Na said. In 2018, she scrapped his truck, which she had lent him, hoping to end what she saw as a self-destructive obsession, Mr. Na said. She did not respond to a request for an interview.

Mr. Song purchased another truck with money he received from an anonymous donor. But another blow came in 2022, when his teenage granddaughter, Eun-ju’s eldest child, died by suicide, Mr. Na said.

“If my first daughter dies, too, I’ll have nothing left,” Mr. Na recalled him saying.

Mr. Song was starting to question in earnest whether Hye-hee was still alive, and grieving his shattered relationship with Eun-ju, Mr. Na said. Even then, his friends, afraid of hurting him, found it difficult to broach the idea of ending his search.

“It’s not easy to give up something you’ve been doing for 25 years,” said Kim Rye-yeong, 39, who befriended him in his final years. “Looking for his daughter gave him the strength to live on.”

By his own count, Mr. Song had driven about half a million miles, distributed three million leaflets and hung 2,500 banners by 2017.

“I feel happiest when I’m hanging banners and passing out fliers,” he said in a 2020 newspaper interview. “I don’t care if this seems like an obsession.”

The village where the Songs lived before Hye-hee went missing in 1999. Woohae Cho for The New York Times

Eventually his strength gave out. In August, Mr. Song was hospitalized with Covid-19 and heart disease.

Days later, at around noon on Aug. 26, he was driving in Pyeongtaek when he suffered a heart attack and his truck crossed the centerline, colliding with an oncoming vehicle. Mr. Song was pronounced dead in a hospital, according to Kim Byung-sik, a local police inspector. He was 71.

Since then, the banners that once dotted the country's landscape have largely disappeared. But Mr. Na, who promised Mr. Song that he would continue looking for Hye-hee, said he planned to put up the ones he left behind.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 in the United States to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline or visit SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources for a list of additional resources. In South Korea, call or text 109 for the Health Ministry's suicide prevention hotline.

John Yoon is a Times reporter based in Seoul who covers breaking and trending news.

The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/31/world/asia/south-korea-plane-crash-victims.html

He Didn't Know His Father Was on the Doomed Flight Until It Crashed

Oh Jaejin's father, 64, had not told Mr. Oh he was flying, because he didn't want his son to worry. They had been looking forward to his becoming a grandfather.

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By John Yoon
Reporting from Muan International Airport in South Korea

Dec. 31, 2024

Days before setting off on a vacation from which he would never return, Oh Jaejin's father had been overjoyed at the prospect of becoming a grandfather after Mr. Oh told him that his wife was pregnant.

"He said he was about to cry," said Mr. Oh, 37, tears welling as he recalled his father's response to the news earlier this month. On Sunday, Mr. Oh's father was killed along with 178 other people when the plane they were on, Jeju Air Flight 7C2216, left Bangkok and crash-landed at an airport in southwestern South Korea.

The accident, the world's deadliest plane crash in recent years, turned the airport in Muan County into a place of colossal grief and shock for the hundreds of victims' relatives who had rushed there. On Tuesday, that sadness swelled as officials slowly led families to a temporary morgue set up at the airport hangar, outside the terminal, to identify bodies that had been recovered from the charred and mangled wreckage.

The work of piecing together hundreds of body parts has been painstaking, but the authorities said that by Tuesday morning 170 bodies had been identified, and four were turned over to their families. The crash was so devastating that only two people onboard survived — crew members who have since been hospitalized in Seoul. At the Muan airport, a memorial altar was being set up on the first floor on Tuesday for relatives and visitors to lay flowers.

The victims included toddlers and grandparents, entire families, groups of friends and couples. To those who waited anxiously at the airport this week, they were their sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers and children.

Families of the crash victims waiting for updates at Muan International Airport in Muan on Tuesday. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Many of the relatives lived close by. People in the coastal region have traditionally fished or farmed rice, though many have also worked in petrochemical, steel and shipbuilding plants since the country modernized in the 1960s.

South Jeolla Province — which is home to the airport, the only international airport in the region — has the oldest population in the country, with many young people moving to Seoul for better job opportunities.

One man said that he had lost his nephew who had traveled to Thailand with his whole family, including his wife, two children and mother-in-law. Another said that he had lost both of his parents.

Mr. Oh’s father, who was 64, had been on vacation in Bangkok with seven childhood friends from Mokpo, a nearby city. In recent years, he often played golf with them in their free time, Mr. Oh said.

Mr. Oh had last seen his father, who owned a small store near Mokpo, on Christmas when he and his wife brought him some kimchi. He had told his father just this month that his wife was expecting, and that the baby would be a girl. Mr. Oh’s father was last in touch with his family when Mr. Oh’s mother messaged him to check on him on Saturday night. He had responded that it was too loud where he was and couldn’t speak on the phone.

Mr. Oh, a bank teller also in Mokpo, said that his father had not even told him that he was going to Thailand, because he had not wanted his children to worry. He learned that his father was on the doomed flight only after the crash, when his father's friends called to tell him. Mr. Oh jumped in his car with his wife and drove to the airport. As he got close, he could see the tail of the aircraft sticking out in the horizon.

The crash site on Tuesday. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

His mother, who arrived separately, was initially in denial. "Is this real?" he recalled her saying. "I can't believe what's happening." But the reality slowly sank in, and it shattered her.

Officials confirmed on Sunday night that Mr. Oh's father was among the dead.

But confusion followed, Mr. Oh said. Transportation officials arranged shuttles to take the families of the victims whose identities had been confirmed from the terminal to the temporary morgue in the hangar. Mr. Oh arrived around midnight, anxious to see his father's body, and was told to wait for his turn.

Hours later, officials turned him away, saying they had made a mistake: The bodies were not ready for viewing. He returned home around 6 a.m.

On his second drive to the airport, after an hour of sleep, he noticed bodies scattered on the tarmac near the aircraft's tail. Officials finally allowed him to return to the morgue later that day.

"I was very worried — I heard that a lot of the bodies were charred," he said. "When I finally saw him, I was able to recognize his upper body, and he was fine."

He asked the officials about the rest of his body. They told him that it was elsewhere but recoverable. He said that gave him some measure of relief.

Firefighters and investigators retrieving a body from the Jeju Air plane. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

"It looked like it was probably an instant death," he said.

Later that day, Mr. Oh was told that it could take up to 10 days for all of the victims' bodies to be ready to be returned to their families. That clarity helped, he said. "It felt better to know how much longer things might take rather than having to wait endlessly," he said.

As he waited, Mr. Oh tried to handle his father's affairs. He would have to close his father's store. He was examining his assets and debts. He said he wondered how he would cremate his father when there were so many victims but so few crematories.

He was also planning out his father's funeral, which has been delayed. In South Korea, funerals typically take place right after the person's death and last three days. He had to try to inform all of his father's friends and acquaintances ahead of time, but didn't have

access to his father's cellphone contacts. He was taking time off from his job as a bank teller at a local agricultural cooperative.

"I'm not sure how I'll keep smiling at the customers at my job when everything's over and I get back to work," he said. "People are going to ask if I'm OK, and I'm going to have to say I'm fine."

Mr. Oh also said that Thursday was the annual memorial for his grandfather's death and his mother's birthday was this weekend. His wife was expected to give birth in July.

"Only good things were coming," he said. "But my dad is gone."

Mr. Oh said he planned to drive every day to the airport from his home in Mokpo, as if it were his daily commute, until he had his father's remains.

"I want my father back as soon as he's ready," he said.

Memorial flowers at the Muan airport on Tuesday. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

John Yoon is a Times reporter based in Seoul who covers breaking and trending news.

A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 9 of the New York edition with the headline: Only After the Crash Did He Learn His Father Was Aboard

Young Koreans, Seeing Democracy at Stake, Take to the Streets

South Korea's night of martial law was a jolt for some members of a generation accused of political apathy. They say they aren't going away.

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By John Yoon Photographs and Video by Chang W. Lee
Reporting from Seoul

Dec. 12, 2024

Lee Suyoon, a 20-year-old student, was at home just outside of Seoul on Dec. 3, sharing late-night fried chicken dinner with her mother when her phone started buzzing. A flurry of messages from her friends alerted her that martial law had been declared in South Korea and soldiers were breaking into the National Assembly.

Ms. Lee, who like others her age entered adulthood largely detached from politics, dismissed the notion that there could really be a military dictatorship, and she went to bed.

Everything changed the next day. As her Yonsei University classmates talked nonstop about what had happened, they shared videos of soldiers clashing with lawmakers, and news articles about military generals testifying before Parliament. After seeing that other campuses were galvanizing protesters, she felt compelled to act.

By Saturday, Ms. Lee had persuaded four friends to join her and tens of thousands of others to demand President Yoon Suk Yeol's removal outside the National Assembly, while a vote on an impeachment motion was underway inside.

"The martial law declaration has forced me to realize that democracy is important," she said after the protest, and that it is also fragile.


YONSEI UNIVERSITY

> “The laws and procedures that we have set up can be destroyed in an instant.”
>
> **Lee Suyoon**

Mr. Yoon’s attempt to suspend the country’s democracy has given rise to a new group of politically active South Koreans. They belong to a generation often criticized for its political apathy — one that hasn’t been exposed to the dark days of military rule before the late 1980s that the country’s older generation remembers all too well.

In the past week, the protest crowds have been younger than they often have been in recent years: People in their late teens and 20s joined people their parents’ and grandparents’ age, all spooked and angered by the president’s brazen action. They infused the street protests with energy, erupting in cheers when organizers blasted the latest pop songs. They waved their K-pop light sticks and made protest anthems go viral online.

Shin Yu-jin, 26, a landscape architect, was among the thousands of first-time demonstrators. She also had initially dismissed the martial law declaration. But seeing friends on Instagram who were out protesting that Saturday, she promptly set out to join them.

“It was my day off, and I didn’t have anything to do,” she said. “Yoon Suk Yeol made such a grave decision on his own to shake up the whole country for no valid reason, so I was furious.”

She was unprepared for the frigid temperatures: She only brought one hand warmer. But she was pleasantly surprised to see so many other women around her age.

As she watched some lawmakers leave the assembly floor instead of voting, saving Mr. Yoon from impeachment, she said she cried, overcome by a sense of betrayal.

> “I’ll definitely be there every Saturday until he’s impeached.”
>
> **Shin Yu-jin**

More experienced protesters in the past week noticed the demographic shift from the crowds that gathered eight years ago to demand the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye. While those were some of the largest demonstrations ever seen in South Korea, what’s at stake is different this time: democracy itself.

Choi Suk-hwan, 44, a volunteer leader at the protests in Seoul, said that he felt a kinship with those who were part of the pro-democracy struggle of the 1980s, an era from which he said much of South Korea’s protest culture originated. For him, the past week’s rallies were a chance to help pass on that tradition to younger people.

“Each generation teaches the next,” he said, after directing volunteers to hand out thousands of candles and fliers near City Hall.

Today’s teens and people in their 20s are contemporaries of the 250 students who died in the Sewol ferry disaster in 2014 and many of the nearly 160 people killed in the crowd crush in Itaewon around Halloween in 2022. Both tragedies might have galvanized them to join ensuing protests had they not been too young or too occupied with their studies to do so.

Instead, before last week, Ms. Lee and her university peers were wary of talking openly about politics. Neutrality was a virtue, so as not to start bitter arguments in a country where politics have become very polarized.

All that changed after six hours of martial law made her and her friends realize that the democracy hard-won by earlier generations was at risk. There was a consensus that it shouldn’t be allowed to happen again, she said.

Part of that consensus, she said, came from the fact that the country’s days of military rule had — until late last Tuesday — been consigned to the history books. The school curriculum includes lessons about the last time martial law was imposed, when paratroopers beat and killed as many as hundreds of pro-democracy protesters in the city of Gwangju in 1980.

Recent movies that depict the era of military rule — “A Taxi Driver,” “12.12: The Day,” “1987: When the Day Comes” — had helped teach her generation what her country had lived through before democracy.

Protesters waiting for lawmakers to meet and vote on Yoon Suk Yeol's impeachment near the National Assembly in Seoul on Saturday. Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

President Yoon's declaration of martial law was a traumatic echo, and Ms. Lee found herself glued to her phone, talking about the news with her friends in their group chat on KakaoTalk, a texting platform.

When news came last Thursday that a vote to impeach the president was scheduled for Saturday, she began planting seeds to convince her friends to attend a protest with her.

"This vote is happening on Saturday," she recalled telling her friends. "Shouldn't we be going?"

One of her classmates, Kwon Min-jae, 25, agreed and helped organize a group of five to go. She said that it was unlike him to be vocal about politics.

But the president's declaration of martial law was a turning point for him and many of his peers to become more politically involved. Mr. Kwon said that his recent experience in the army, into which he was drafted like all South Korean men, had made him wary of the risks of letting the military run civilian life.

"Once you're in that system, you have to follow orders, no matter what you think," he said.

> “I was terrified by the idea that the military could control not only the National Assembly but universities, city halls and other public spaces.”
>
> **Kwon Min-jae**

He convinced another classmate, Goh Hee-seung, 23, to join. Mr. Goh, who had voted for Mr. Yoon in the 2022 election, said that he was initially unsure about joining but decided he would regret staying on the sidelines.

“I thought it would be irresponsible not to go to a protest calling for the impeachment of a president I helped elect,” he said.

Mr. Goh said that attending the protest had given him a political identity crisis. After watching the lawmakers from the ruling People Power Party sit out the impeachment vote, he felt he could no longer support it.

“Something absurd has just happened, and something absurd is happening to back it,” he said.

> “I felt betrayed by the lawmakers who seemed more greedy to keep their power than they cared about the people of the country.”
>
> **Goh Hee-seung**

Mr. Goh added that he would likely vote for a third-party candidate in the next election, repeating a common sentiment: Many people favor neither Mr. Yoon nor Lee Jae-myung, the leader of the opposition Democratic Party who would be most likely to win if a presidential election were held now.

After news broke at around 9:30 p.m. that the impeachment effort on Saturday had failed, protesters began dispersing. The disappointed group of classmates huddled together, at a park near the National Assembly in the freezing cold, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Most agreed to go for drinks afterward and discuss their next move.

“After I finish a few exams,” Ms. Lee said, “I will continue to protest.”

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The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2024/03/19/world/asia/mlb-baseball-south-korea-fans.html

Get Ready to Scream': How to Be a Baseball Fan in South Korea

The country's raucous fan culture will be on display when Major League Baseball opens its season in Seoul. Here's how to cheer and what to eat.

By John Yoon Photographs by Jun Michael Park Videos by Shawn Paik
Reporting from Seoul

March 19, 2024

In the United States, many Major League Baseball games feature long periods of calm, punctuated by cheering when there's action on the field or the stadium organ plays a catchy tune.

But in South Korea, a baseball game is a sustained sensory overload. Each player has a fight song, and cheering squads — including drummers and dancers who stand on platforms near the dugouts facing the spectators — ensure that there is near-constant chanting. Imagine being at a ballpark where every player, even a rookie, gets the star treatment.

"You should get ready to scream," said Kim Seongjun, 26, a fan who attended an exhibition game in Seoul over the weekend. "It's fun to get on your feet and cheer."

Also, the food is on another level. Think of the ballpark as a giant buffet of Korean street food.

All of this awaits the Los Angeles Dodgers and the San Diego Padres when they open the M.L.B. season in Seoul this week. Here's a guide for visiting fans.

Get on your feet

Clockwise from top left, Kiwoom Heroes fans; Jung Jihoon, 22, drumming for the San Diego Padres; the South Korean national team's cheering squad; the Heroes' mascots, Teokdori and Dongguri.

Step into any South Korean ballpark and you'll be encouraged to get up and participate in cheering routines almost constantly from first pitch to last out. Fans typically watch their respective team's cheering squad and repeat the chants, songs and dances performed by its cheerleaders, drummers and their leader, the "cheer master."

The Korea Baseball Organization professionalized cheering squads in the early 2000s, partly to attract new fans. That has helped to make ballparks welcoming spaces in a country where many people work long hours and face immense societal pressures.

"Our huge cheering culture is part why baseball is such a popular sport here," said Jung Jihoon, 22, who led the drum section for the Padres' exhibition game on Sunday when they beat South Korea's national team, 1-0.

"It's fun to lose yourself in the atmosphere," Jung said, as he sat with his drum sticks and bass drum in front of where the Padres cheerleaders danced.

To fully immerse, follow the cheer master's lead. Among other duties, cheer masters write fight songs and chants, and shout them during games, even when their teams are losing badly.

When the Kiwoom Heroes played the Dodgers on Sunday, Kim Jung-suk, 39, the South Korean club's cheer master, yelled, "Home run ball! Home run ball!" Fans repeated that while rhythmically hitting empty plastic bottles and toy baseball bats together.

Whenever a batter hit the ball, the crack of his bat turned the chanting into a roar.

"Game-wise, everyone might be interested in the Dodgers," Kim said of the contest, in which the American team trounced his team 14-3. "But in terms of cheering, the Kiwoom Heroes won't be left behind."

Learn the fight songs



Clockwise from top left, Kim Soowon, 38, and her family; cheerleaders dancing on a dugout; taking a photo of a Dodgers pendant; Dodgers fans watching the game.

Customized fight songs are played whenever a player steps up to the plate. They typically feature the player's name and a short melody.

Local fans can sing them by heart.

Kim Soowon, 38, who attended the Heroes game with her husband and children, said the team's songs were so easy to learn that even her 2-year-old twins knew them.

"Here, baseball games are a great place for office workers to go after work to scream," she said.

For this week's games, cheer masters spent weeks crafting each M.L.B. player's fight song, adapted from widely recognized melodies used by South Korean teams.

Fight songs are sung when a player steps up to the plate. Then, as he squares off against the opposing pitcher, the cheer master leads chants that call for hits — or, if the team is down, a home run to turn the game around.

"Ohtani infield! Ohtani infield!" fans chanted in Korean when the beloved Dodger Shohei Ohtani was batting during the exhibition game on Sunday. He struck out twice.

Feel free to dance


Clockwise from top left, a cheering squad rehearses before a game; Kim Hana, a cheerleader for the Kiwoom Heroes; fans outside Gocheok Sky Dome; leading a cheer for South Korea's national team.

A dance goes with each song. Don't worry if you don't know the moves. Each team has a troupe of cheerleaders demonstrating them.

"I love the energy that we send and receive when the fans follow our movements," said Kim Hana, 25, a Heroes cheerleader. "We'll help you learn all of the dances."

The cheering, dancing and signing has attracted young fans to baseball who might otherwise find the sport boring. "In the age of YouTube and TikTok, it's hard to sit through a three-hour game," said Barney Yoo, the director of international operations at the K.B.O.

The rituals also strengthen the bond between the teams and their devoted crowds, said Bae Soohyun, 39, a cheerleader for South Korea's national team on Sunday.

"It's a ballpark experience that only South Korea can offer," she said.

Eat something new




Clockwise from top left, fans in San Diego Padres jerseys eating street food; a stand selling tteokbokki, or spicy rice cakes; fans watching a game at Gocheok Sky Dome; dumplings to go.

Baseball here can be a full-on dining experience that features Korean staples like deep-fried spicy rice cakes, braised pig's trotters and "chimaek," Korean slang for the pairing of fried chicken and beer. Many fans carry multicourse meals to their seats, and some stadiums have barbecue zones for those who want to grill.

Each South Korean ballpark also serves its own specialty dishes. Jamsil Baseball Stadium in Seoul is known for its spicy noodles in kimchi broth. In Suwon, south of the capital, fans rave about the dumplings and deep-fried whole chicken.

And at Gocheok Sky Dome, where the M.L.B. season openers will be played, hundreds line up for crispy fried shrimp covered in a mayonnaise-based sauce. If you're not afraid of spice, consider the "mala" sauce version for a tingly zing.

Stay for the end

There was some concern among officials planning this week's games that all the chanting might bother non-Korean players. But the exhibition games over the weekend were more subdued than a usual Korean game. That might have been because fans were not fervently rooting for a particular outcome.

After the Dodgers played on Sunday, the team's manager, Dave Roberts, told reporters that his players had not found the cheering distracting. On the contrary.

"The environment, the atmosphere was great," he said.

One aspect of Korean fan culture will be comforting to the losers in the M.L.B. games. While American fans might dejectedly file out early if their team seems too far behind to win, fans here typically stay put until the last out.

John Yoon is a Times reporter based in Seoul who covers breaking and trending news.

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The New York Times https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/23/world/asia/china-dissident-jet-ski-south-korea.html

After Escaping China by Sea, a Dissident Faces His Next Act

Kwon Pyong recounted for the first time the series of gambles that got him out of China by jet ski, and almost a year later, out of South Korea.

Listen to this article · 9:33 min Learn more

By John Yoon
Reporting from Incheon, South Korea

Published June 23, 2024 Updated June 24, 2024

The dissident's lone regret after his 200-mile escape across the Yellow Sea was not taking night vision goggles.

Nearing the end of his jet ski journey out of China last summer, Kwon Pyong peered through the darkness off the South Korean coast. As he approached the shore, sea gulls appeared to bob as if floating. He steered forward, then ran aground: The birds were sitting on mud.

"I had everything — sunscreen, backup batteries, a knife to cut buoy lines," he recalled in an interview. He was prepared to signal his location with a laser pen if he became stranded and to burn his notes with a lighter if he were captured. He also had a visa to enter South Korea, and had intended to arrive at a port of entry, he said, not strand himself on a mud flat.

It wasn't enough.

Mr. Kwon, 36 and an ethnic Korean, had mocked China's powerful leader and criticized how the ruling Communist Party was persecuting hundreds of pro-democracy activists at home and abroad. In response, he said, he faced an exit ban and years of detention, prison and surveillance.

But fleeing to South Korea did not offer the relief he expected. He was still hounded by the Chinese state, he said, and spent time in detention. Even after he was released, he was in legal limbo: neither wanted nor allowed to leave.

By The New York Times

It would take 10 more months for Mr. Kwon to be permitted to leave South Korea. Days before he flew out on Sunday, he returned to the mud flat where he haplessly came ashore off Incheon last summer and recounted for the first time publicly the details of his meticulously planned journey.

Court documents from his criminal case in South Korea, past interviews with his friends and family and a statement from the Incheon Coast Guard last year corroborated many of the details in his account.

On a Yamaha WaveRunner purchased with the equivalent of $25,000 in cash, withdrawn from several banks to avoid tipping off the police, Mr. Kwon set off on the morning of Aug. 16 from the foggy coast of the Shandong Peninsula.

A photo released by South Korea's Coast Guard showing Mr. Kwon's WaveRunner in Incheon in August 2023.
Korea Coast Guard, via Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

He said he wore a black life jacket and motorcycle helmet for the journey, where he crashed into 10-foot waves and dodged floating rice wine bottles. As his skin burned from the summer sun, he fell into the sea twice, losing his sunglasses.

He refueled using the five barrels of gas that he had tied to the WaveRunner. For himself, he had five bottles of water and five ham and tuna sandwiches. He navigated using a marine compass and a smartphone he had acquired from someone else.

His first glimpse of land came as the setting sun gave the islands off South Korea a warm glow. What was supposed to take eight hours turned to 14. By the time Mr. Kwon arrived in Incheon, the pink sky he had stopped to admire had faded to black.

He did not see any boats or ships on guard, he said, even as he entered a heavily militarized area that the navy monitors for activity, including defectors from North Korea.

Mr. Kwon — who speaks Chinese, English and some Korean — called the local police for help. For an hour, he waited while trying to fend off mosquitoes by walking around his watercraft in beige Crocs.

That night, he said, the Incheon Coast Guard and the South Korean Marine Corps rescued him, detained him and began investigating him along with the South Korean National Intelligence Service.

A view of the Yellow Sea from Shandong Province in China, from where Mr. Kwon began his journey. Costfoto/NurPhoto, via Getty Images

South Korea rarely accepts refugees, and the authorities served him a deportation order. But over the next months, he was also banned from leaving the country as he fought a criminal charge of unlawful entry, which can be punished with up to five years in prison.

He said that he wondered how things might have unfolded had his arrival gone as planned.

South Korean prosecutors did not lift the exit ban they imposed on Mr. Kwon until his criminal case was finished this month. He said he planned to apply for asylum in the United States or Canada. His flight on Sunday was bound for Newark.

"I want to live my own life," he said. "I want to live in peace for a while."

Mr. Kwon, whose Chinese name is Quan Ping, is from a city in the northeastern Chinese province of Jilin, near the border with North Korea. He has visited South Korea, his grandfather's birthplace, regularly since childhood. He spent his college years in the United States, where he went by Johnny, participated in Iowa State University's Army R.O.T.C. program and took flying lessons, he said.

He studied aerospace engineering at the university for a few years and returned in 2012 to China, where he ran an online clothing brand and traded cryptocurrencies. He continued traveling widely, touring Lebanon and Syria as an aspiring photojournalist, he said.

He first drew the ire of the Chinese authorities when he began criticizing the Communist Party online. In 2016, he posted on social media about antigovernment protests he had attended in Hong Kong, a Chinese territory. He wore a T-shirt calling China's leader, Xi Jinping, "Xitler."

A compass that Mr. Kwon carried on his 200-mile trip. Woohae Cho for The New York Times

Chinese authorities arrested Mr. Kwon that year and sentenced him in 2017 to 18 months in prison for "inciting subversion of state power," a charge frequently leveled against dissidents and human rights lawyers.

After his release in 2018, the police tapped his communications, tracked his movements and periodically interrogated him, he said. State agents, he added, were alarmed by his contact with the leaders of the 1989 Tiananmen Square uprising, including Wang Dan,

once one of China's most wanted men.

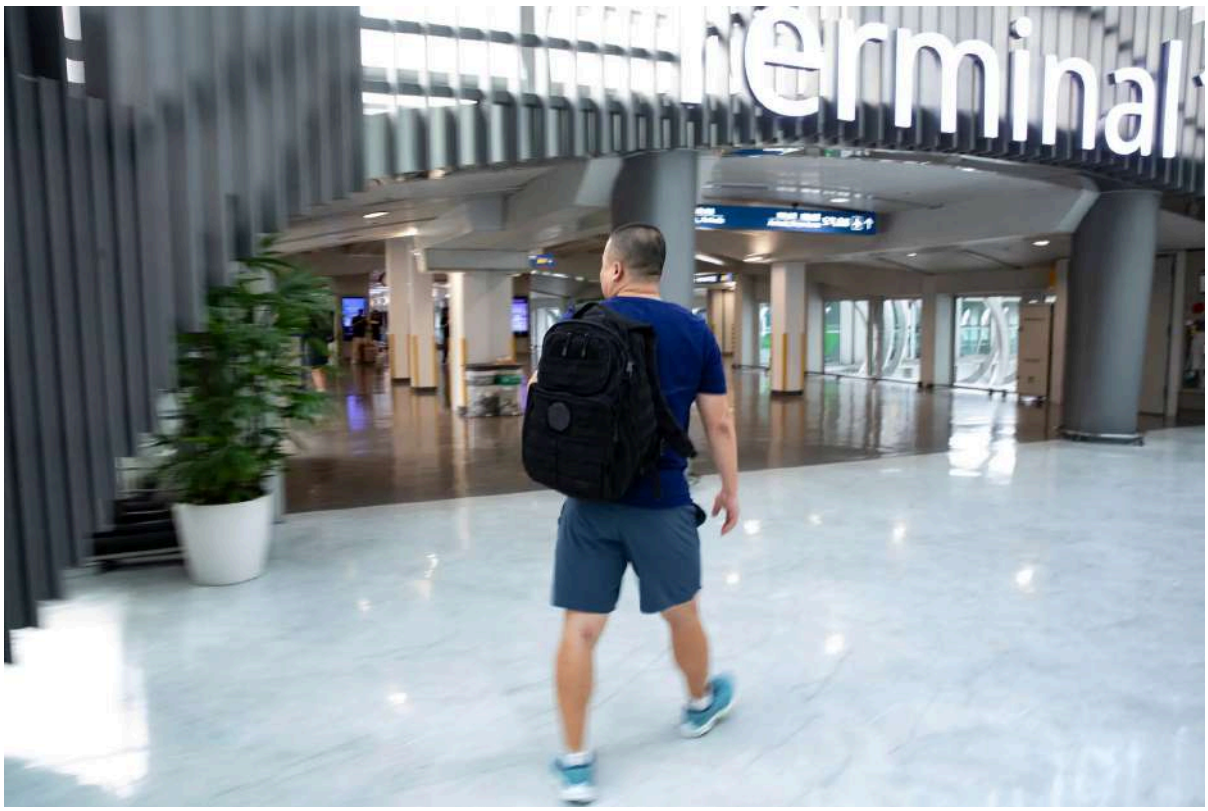
"I couldn't live a normal life," he said.

China's Ministry of Public Security did not respond to a request for comment.

Mr. Kwon grew desperate to leave as the police investigated his family and friends. He said his plans to leave China by sea were inspired in part by the 1994 movie "The Shawshank Redemption" and by Lindsay Warner, an explorer who circumnavigated Australia on a Jet Ski. He decided South Korea was his only viable option.

He left behind his e-commerce and crypto operations, as well as his friends, family members and a girlfriend.

After the rescue from the mud flat, Mr. Kwon said, investigators seemed baffled by his story and interrogated him, threatened to torture him and denied his request for a lawyer. The Incheon Coast Guard, which led the investigation, said in a statement that "there were no human rights violations" during the investigation.



Mr. Kwon at Incheon Airport, South Korea, on Sunday. He said he planned to apply for asylum in the United States or Canada. Woohae Cho for The New York Times

In court, Mr. Kwon argued that he was a political refugee and had intended to arrive legally at the Incheon Port, less than a mile from the mud flat, with a tourist visa. A judge found him guilty of unlawful entry in November, handing down a suspended one-year prison sentence with a two-year probationary period.

The verdict released Mr. Kwon from custody but not from legal limbo. Immigration officials imposed an exit ban as prosecutors appealed the judge's decision.

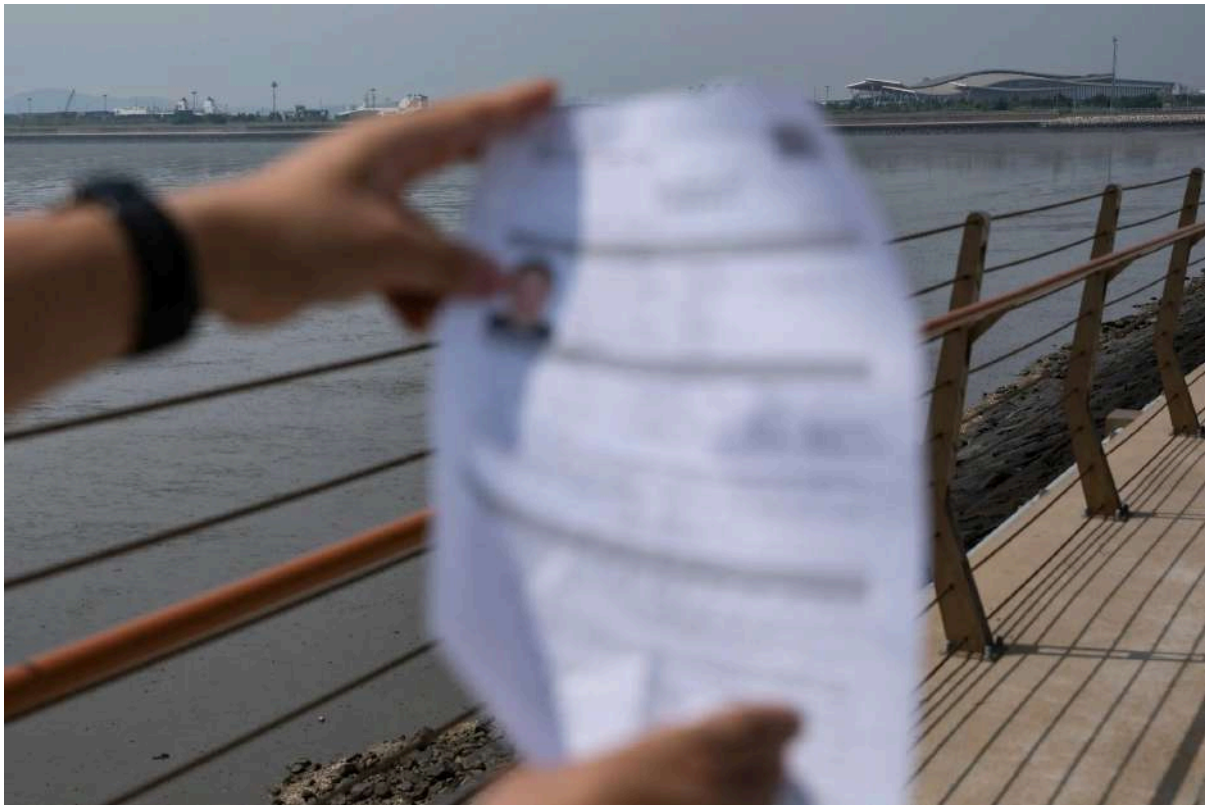
While living in his parents' house in Ansan, south of Seoul, Mr. Kwon went to the gym, read books about crypto trading and volunteered at an English language school for adults. He said he also befriended a group of Nigerian refugees by joining their soccer club.

But he didn't let his guard down. He stuck to the routines he had developed in China: constantly checking for security cameras, and using encrypted texting apps and signal-blocking Faraday bags.

Lee Dae-seon, a South Korean activist who has helped Mr. Kwon, said that he has warned Mr. Kwon of the dangers of China's overseas police effort, known as Operation Fox Hunt, in which Chinese dissidents living abroad have been forcibly repatriated.

South Korea's National Intelligence Service confirmed with Mr. Lee that he and Mr. Kwon were targets of the operation, Mr. Lee said. The N.I.S. did not respond to a request for comment.

"It is not safe for him to continue living in South Korea," Mr. Lee said.



Mr. Kwon, near where he arrived in South Korea, showing the South Korean tourist visa he had obtained. The legal port of entry he was aiming for is seen at the top right. Woohae Cho for The New York Times

In May, an appeals court dismissed prosecutors' appeal, as well as Mr. Kwon's lawyers' efforts to have his sentence reduced. Mr. Kwon decided not to pursue the case further so that he could leave the country quickly, and prosecutors lifted the travel ban, said Sejin Kim, his lawyer.

At the mud flat, Mr. Kwon said he was looking forward to leaving and starting a new business venture. He said some of his friends and relatives live in the United States and Canada. He is traveling to the United States on a visa for visitors.

“I want to start my second life,” he said.

An immigration law specialist said that while a case for seeking asylum in the United States appeared to be strong, a decision could take years. Mr. Kwon would also have to demonstrate a “well-founded fear” of additional persecution should he be deported to China, said the specialist, Yael Schacher, of Refugees International, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C.

At Incheon Airport on Sunday, he said goodbye to his parents and friends in South Korea, where he would be barred from returning for five years because of his criminal record.

He disappeared into the security line, a ticket for seat 17A in hand, and with his Chinese passport and his South Korean deportation order in the black tactical backpack he had brought on his escape from China. He confirmed that he had boarded his plane by telephone.

“I’m happy, sad,” he said minutes before his flight was set to take off. “And angry,” he added, “that it took me so long to leave South Korea.”

At shortly before 10 p.m., the flight status display showed that his plane had departed.

John Liu contributed reporting.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 4 of the New York edition with the headline: After Escaping China by Jet Ski, a Dissident Faces His Next Act