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Homecoming

Caleb Y. Lee

“There’s not many families left that do this,” he said. “We are one of the last.”

If we were indeed among the few remaining, then 혁희 삼촌, Uncle Hyeokhee, is the last of the last.

As the current elected representative head of the family, Uncle Hyeokhee carried the torch for the tasks at hand, directing others where to go, which burial mounds to see and how to navigate through the thick pine branches. In the moment, I imagine it’s the suit jacket he’s wearing that signals this position, the chestnut seedlings and thorns from the morning hike stuck like insignias to his back. He used to be a Korean Army colonel, or so I’ve heard, and his aura befits this rank.

“So you see, all the relatives that gathered today are 50 or 60,” he called out to me over his shoulder. “There are few young people that come these days.”

He’s 63, eight years older than the guess I gave him as we weaved our way down the southern side of the mountain. Luckily for me, he spoke English with relative ease, having worked at an American company in the past. At 22, I was not the youngest present that day—my second cousin Eunseo had that honor as a middle schooler—but Uncle Hyeokhee was right; after us 젊은 사람, or younger people, there was a conspicuous age gap of almost 25 years.

We were to trek through the woods of 추화산, or Chuhwa Mountain—sometimes up, sometimes down and never in a straight line. This was the backyard of three brothers that grew up together: my grandfather, his brother two years his elder and the youngest by seven years. I couldn’t help but note how similar the gaps were to that of me and my own brothers.

It was 243 meters to the peak of Chuhwa, which overlooked the small village of 밀양, Miryang, the family hometown. A distant relative I had met that morning handed me a pack filled with the ceremonial provisions for the day. We were to set these at the foot

of the family burial mounds—but first, we had to set out an offering and bow to the spirits thought to be protecting these parts.

Kowtowing to ghosts would have been a laughable proposition a few months ago. But when you find out that you are a part of the 31st official generation of a family branch whose history can easily be traced back over a thousand years, and you ask yourself whether this supposed mountain spirit has done its job... You’d probably bow too.

While we ascended the mountain early in the morning, persimmon trees and squash patches gave way to pine trees and a thick needle underfoot that gave a satisfying scrunch under the weight each step. Save for one main route, these were not oft-traveled paths through the mountainside, and safe footing was hard to come by.

We had already passed a handful of nondescript mounds lining the path that could have passed for abandoned dirt piles. But these three in the clearing were different—neatly lined up, half-buried stone markers at their feet. Almost two centuries separated us and the ancestors buried here, Uncle Hyeokhee explained, as the others began to set up the first offering at the furthest mound.

We opened the plastic carton, unwrapping the 떡, Korean rice cakes, and laid out the dried fish and squid on a rectangular Styrofoam plate, waving at the flies that had immediately descended. Apples, chestnuts, persimmons and tangerines were left in the plastic and set on the stone along with the other dishes, accompanied by a small paper cup that would soon be filled with plum wine. An incense stick stuck out of the grass.

We were ready.

Uncle Hyeokhee was the first to bow. Two hands placed on his forehead, he knelt and bent his face to the ground in supplication, briefly pausing before rising to his feet for another split second. Then he repeated the same action, but this second time he remained on his knees after the bow. One bow for someone alive, two to honor those who have passed, and four to a king, one of my second uncles whispered in Korean for my benefit.

Another relative knelt on the ground directly to Uncle Hyeokhee's right and poured the plum wine with both hands into the paper cup Uncle Hyeokhee gingerly held with two hands. Hovering the half-full cup above the gravestone, he silently drew four circles in the air with his libation before dousing the front side of the stone with the liquid.

Next, he filled the cup again, this time to the brim, and then placed the libation at the head of the tombstone marker before reading from a piece of parchment produced from his jacket pocket. This grave belonged to the mother of a male ancestor who had lived eight generations earlier and came from Gyeonggi, a region not far from modern-day Seoul. Each paper contained identifiers specific to the occupant of each burial mound, but the words printed in the second half of the message were always the same:

계절이 바뀌어 서리와 찬 이슬이
내렸나이다. 묘역을 성소하오니 추모의
마음 간절하와 삼가 정결한 찬수로
시사를 드리오니 잡수시옵소서.

*As the seasons change and the forest frost
descends, we clean this burial site, recording
your name in remembrance of your passing
and leaving food behind for you to eat. Please
accept our sincere offering.*

The last syllable echoed through the trees as we remained kneeling, pausing for the ancestor to spiritually consume the meal. I imagined the fall breeze to be her voice of approval.

At last, Hyeokhee reached for the cup of wine and drank half of it before dousing the rest on the front side of the stone once again. He stood up, but we weren't finished—a few of the other men repeated the same process, following Hyeokhee once he rose.

“일동 재배,” everyone bow twice, he said firmly, and we followed his lead. Thus ended the first of the day's many ritual ceremonies.

To me, the spiritual legacy of the November air felt particularly strong that day, and Uncle Hyeokhee asked me how much I knew of Korea's religious history

as we navigated underbrush to our next gravesite. Thanks to East Asian Studies courses I took in college, I was able to respond adequately: the dominant Korean religion transitioned from Buddhism to Confucianism with the advent of the Joseon dynasty in the late 14th century.

Six hundred years later, the tendrils of the state religion still weaved their way through this mountain like roots beneath the earth. Except for Eunseo, all 20 of us going up the mountain were male descendants of the same Lee family patriarch born some centuries prior. The women had joined us for the early morning meal—an 8:30a.m. combination of 갈치, spicy cutlass fish, with boiled radish and spicy soft tofu, shellfish and vegetable stew and 반찬—an array of colorful side dishes.

From what I could gather, the women born into the Lee family were not present for these annual rites either—it seemed to be the male duty to march up the mountain. There was a lack of questioning of roles that seemed to be conspicuous only to me; the women seemed to know their expected place—there was no question of right or wrong, of discrimination or prejudice. There was simply a grounded acceptance of what is and what has always been.



But it is difficult to fully convey the ephemeral, almost spiritual experience of kneeling in front of a few mounds of dirt to a generation that deliberately eschews the past in favor of pursuing an independent future.

The logic of this Confucian-grounded tradition stretched beyond gendered roles, however. Uncle Hyeokhee, age 63, was the first to bow at our first gravesite of the day despite the presence of my grandfather's younger brother, age 79.

Having noticed my confused expression, Hyeokhee had explained that he was the elder son of a firstborn ancestor, thus bestowing the highest bowing position upon him despite the presence of older relatives. His tone was matter-of-fact; there was no doubt or hesitation as to the correct order.

Such is the result of tradition neatly passed down by generations. What was once a relatively gender-equal and largely Buddhist region transitioned to the new patriarchal Confucian society, which then rooted itself deeply over the next six-plus centuries. New ideas were expressed as doctrine, doctrine developed into rituals and these rituals crystallized the spiritual doctrine into facts of life.

Over the years, my frustration of the many aspects of Korea that Westerners might call "backwardness"—such as persistent gender inequality, gendered roles and age hierarchy—has migrated

towards a begrudging understanding of their source. Certainly not acceptance, but not a complete rejection either.

To invalidate the old way of life would be to deny the validity of six centuries of ancestors. To attack it with only a modern lens would be to forfeit a key piece of knowledge and understanding of the family history. And so I bowed to ancestors that day, pushing aside conflicting thoughts and exchanging them for an open mind. This was not the time for looking back, I thought to myself, even as we connected with the past.

Simultaneously avoiding thorn brambles and low-hanging branches, I pulled bits and pieces of our history from Uncle Hyeokhee, using both English and Korean to frame my questions as precisely as I could to overcome the language barrier.

"Even five or ten years ago when we did this, many more people would attend," Uncle Hyeokhee reflected, wiping the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. "But now there are fewer and fewer of them."

Many in the family had become extremely successful—a former MBC

television chief executive here, head of a design firm here, executive of one of the largest Korean banks there. But even for them, the ones still in Korea, the past in Miryang is fading as quickly as the ink calligraphy hanging over the threshold of the family's ancestral home.

"These days, young people don't feel like they owe their ancestors debt—debt is the right word, isn't it?" Uncle Hyeokhee sighed. "They are so busy—even Uncle Sanghee had to drive here all night after work as a reporter. 많이 고생했네요—He went through a lot just to get here."

Time is a commodity, running dry like a weak stream that was once a pulsing river. Families, jobs and other life obligations of the now push the past further from memory. Even the burial mounds become tougher to find with each passing year; one was completely obstructed by a farmer's field and another took a 30-minute hike to find. Eventually, they will all fade into the mountainside, grassy mounds dotting a forested mountain, remembered by few and visited by fewer.

I am one of the fortunate ones able to experience the dwindling legacy of the mountain overlooking Miryang. But it is difficult to fully convey the ephemeral, almost spiritual experience of kneeling

in front of a few mounds of dirt to a generation that deliberately eschews the past in favor of pursuing an independent future. Even tougher still when what was once our home is but a small dot that appears on fewer and fewer maps each passing year.

Yet the small hill overlooking our insignificant town keeps my outlook rooted in a deeper past. It is a reminder for humility, for my life is but one on a chain of dozens that will someday stretch as far into the future as it now does into the past.

Before trekking up the mountain that morning, I had thought I was visiting Miryang as a part of a filial duty to my extended family. But as I craned my neck over the backseat of the car to catch a glimpse of the short peak one last time, I knew that I could not be separated from the history permeating this place any more than I could remove the Korean-ness from my blood.

I am one of them, from the others visiting the village that morning to the ancestors buried on the hill, and no citizenship document, language barrier or ocean between us will change that fact.

Caleb Y. Lee is a 2017-2018 ETA at Youngsaeng High School in Jeonju, Jeollabuk-do.

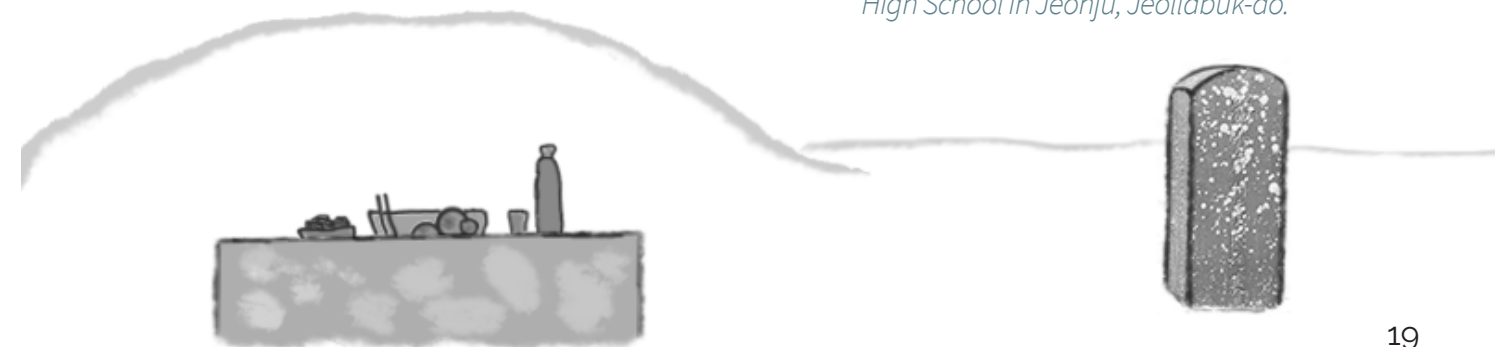


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