

Hahoe — Where the river returns

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Friendship (Korean-American Friendship Association) Vol. 16, No. 2, 1989

Way back in the tenth century a man whose name was Hō made his decision. He would bring his family across that low ridge to the west and settle on the pleasant pouch of land formed by the hairpin turn in the Nakdong River.

The first days were discouraging. If they tried to set a post on a stone footing the footing crumbled into dust. No matter where they dug a well the water came out foul. The food they had brought with them was devoured by mysterious creatures in the night, and their oxen died of a disease they had never even heard of before.

But then one night a monk appeared to Hō in a dream. This monk told Hō that those who would inhabit this place must first earn the right by doing good works. So Hō led his people back across the ridge. He set them to making straw shoes, which they then gave to the very poor in the name of Buddha. When they came back across the ridge and tried again stone footings did not crumble, and the water was pure and tasted good.

At some point in the murky history of undocumented times, fact begins to distinguish itself from legend. We can surmise, for instance, that the Hōs came to Hahoe before the eleventh century, because archeologists and art historians estimate the wooden “Hahoe masks” used in the peasants’ “mask dance” to have been carved in the eleventh century. We know for fact that the Ahns came after the Hōs, and that the Ryus followed the Ahns. “And these are the sacrificial vessels Ryu prepared inside the gate that Ahn built on the foundation that Hō laid...” The Hōs established the village, the Ahns developed it, and the Ryus gave it prominence.

And we know that, within a hundred years of the arrival of the Ryus, the Hōs and the Ahns were gone from the village. The Ryus, with their servants, were now its sole occupants.

It is because of the Ryus that any twentieth century Korean high school student who has done his homework associates this hidden hamlet with the Pungsan Ryu clan, though many these days refer to this clan as the “Hahoe Ryus.” The Ryu clan can trace its origin back to the twelfth century. They came from Pungsan, a larger village about eight kilometers to the east, in the seventh generation of their clan. Ryu Jong-hye, a deputy minister in the court of Yi Sōng-gye, founder of the Chosun dynasty, moved the family to Hahoe in the late fourteenth century.

It was most likely Ryu Jong-hye that established Yangjindang, the oldest existing structure in Hahoe. The design of the house is from the late Koryō dynasty, predecessor to the Chosun. He did not erect the imposing structure that we see in the twentieth century; the house was expanded gradually over the next few centuries to the three buildings and fourteen rooms (not including several kitchens and utility rooms) it has today.

The wood pillars and floors and the door and window frames in Yangjindang are not finished with varnish or paint, and their austerity whispers to the visitor of a sophisticated feeling in the fifteenth century for nature’s raw beauty. It is also easy to sense in this house (along with all the other major residences in Hahoe) the strong influence which neo-Confucianism had on Korean life. The house is clearly divided between the men’s quarters in front, near the main gate, and the women’s quarters in back—out of sight—with the kitchen and sheds and pump and chickens.

The wall which surrounds this manor is a compressed mixture of clay and straw, coated with another layer of finer clay, and topped by tiles extending out over the wall to protect its coating. The capping tiles match those of the roofs on the buildings inside, and are arranged in very much the same way as they are on the roof, giving a grand harmony to the whole compound.

In the first half of the sixteenth century Ryu Jung-yōng left Yangjindang for Seoul, to sit for the higher civil service examination. He had been studying the Confucian classics, composition, poetry, and calligraphy for several years, and it was now time to join the other young *yangban* gentry who would try to be among the standard number of thirty-three finally selected for government service. He passed the exam, and eventually became magistrate of his native province. And during these years he fathered two sons.

The eldest, Un-ryong, shunned the higher exam and government service; he eventually became a noted Confucian scholar. As the eldest son of eldest sons from the beginning of the Pungsan Ryu clan, he became master of Yangjindang, then and now the clan’s main house. At that time, too, over a century after its erection, it was still a modest structure. In fact, it did not even have a formal name yet—this would have to wait a couple more generations.

Un-ryong had another place just for his own use. Pinyōn Chōngsa (which he had built in 1583), a one-room structure in its own walled compound, was his study. One room was not all that small; like any other traditional dwelling, there was also a *maru*, an unheated floor of wood planks which was attached to the house but wide open to the courtyard on at least one side. One feature of Pinyōn Chōngsa which may interest the Western visitor, besides the fact that a simple one-room structure could deserve its own walled compound, is the gate in the wall: even a gate for a building as humble as this one has a name. Traditionally almost any gate to any building of any significance is given a name.

Pinyōn Chōngsa is in the village, very close to the Un-ryong’s home. When he wanted to get away from the distractions of village life, he could just walk the two hundred meters to the river at the north end of the village, where he would come upon a grove of pines. Here in Mansongjōng (Grove of Ten Thou-

sand Pines), about fifty meters deep and bordering the lazy Nakdong's broad sandy beach for a couple hundred meters, he would find utter stillness, except for the gentle murmur of the river, a distant laugh from some kids on the beach, the chatter between a couple magpie.

Then he would get on the flat-bottomed ferry and cross the placid Nakdong to the foot of Buyongdae, a granite, pine-studded cliff towering sixty meters above the river.

Where the cliff drops off at its west end into a grove of elm, persimmon and pine is a two-room structure with a panoramic view of the village. Un-ryong used this *chôngsa* to study and write, counsel a student, or pass the day splitting Confucianist hairs with his literati friends. After his death, this retreat was given his pen name, and became Kyömam Chôngsa. Un-ryong later built a *södang* a couple kilometers to the east. A *cheongsa* was a private study and a *södang* was actually a school, where a few students in their teens or early twenties received formal lessons in the Confucian classics.

Both Un-ryong and his younger brother Söng-ryong were students of the revered philosopher Yi Hwang (Yi Toe-gye). Though the terms student and teacher are used rather loosely in the history books—the relationship was more often an informal one of a student occasionally receiving counsel from an older literati—the relationship between Söng-ryong and Yi Hwang seems to have been quite close; the scholar once referred to Söng-ryong as “a gift from Heaven.”

Söng-ryong grew up in Yangjindang, but, in accordance with the customs of the time, left Yangjindang to his elder brother, now head of the clan, and established his own household across the path. While Chunghyodang is now the main house of the family branch established by Söng-ryong, he never saw this house. Though his wife was of royal blood, the daughter of one of King Sejong's sons, the two lived in a much more humble house, which oral tradition says was on the same site as Chunghyodang.

Like his brother Un-ryong, Söng-ryong had two compounds just for his study and writing. Wönji Chôngsa, the one in the village, is a couple hundred meters from his home. It has its own raised pavillion almost as big as the one-room main building. But why a house *and* pavillion for his study, when the family residence was so humble? Just as the other major structures in Hahoe grew to their present size only gradually over many generations, this *chôngsa* probably got its pavillion much later.

He had this *chôngsa* built in 1576, when he had already attained ministerial rank in the royal court. One might ask where he could get the time to devote to his studies while he was attending to his duties in Seoul. It is explained that some of his positions were closely related to scholastics. And he, like many other gentry of the time, left a government post as soon as he could, to get out of Seoul and return to the more reflective life of the countryside literati. This attitude was common among the Confucian gentry, who preferred intellectual over material advancement and professed disdain for politics.

Söng-ryong, like all literati, had an abiding concern for intellectual development in the young. In

Pungsan, where the Ryus had come from, was Pung'ak Södang. It is said to have been established in the late Koryö dynasty in a quiet place on the outskirts of Pungsan. But Pungsan had grown over the last two centuries, and the bustle of the town was now distracting the students from their study.

Söng-ryong recommended that this *södang* be relocated to a quieter place. It was moved in 1572 to the foot of a high hill on the broad banks of the Nakdong, four kilometers around the bend from Hahoe. Since it was closer to Hahoe, Söng-ryong was able to devote more time to the young people studying there.

Söng-ryong's other retreat for his studies and writing was across the river at the east end of the same cliff which rises above his brother's retreat. It is set in a secluded niche in the cliff, surrounded by tall trees deciduous and conifer. Below it rests a trapped pool in the river, of such translucent beauty it is called Okyön, “the river's jade pool.”

But Söng-ryong could not just up and build this retreat of his. This minister in the royal court, with all the authority he had in Seoul, was still only a poor country scholar when it came to funds for himself. He could not afford to build a retreat here by Okyön with his own resources. Now however, just as in the legend of the founding of Hahoe centuries before, a Buddhist monk came to the rescue.

Throughout much of the Chosun dynasty the Confucianists, who occupied positions of power in the government, suppressed Buddhism. Söng-ryong and his brother Un-ryong consistently refused to participate in this suppression; they knew it was motivated mainly by political self-interest. In fact, the brothers had often protected the Buddhists at personal risk, both in their own province and in Seoul.

Now one of those Buddhists, a friend called Tanhong, learned of Söng-ryong's desire. He set out begging far and wide for the funds required to build Söng-ryong his study. And ten years later, in 1586, Söng-ryong had his own retreat, which he christened Okyön Chôngsa.

If Söng-ryong climbed the gentle slope in back of his *cheongsa* he came to the summit of the cliff Buyongdae. From there he had an inspiring view of the broad Nakdong bordered by high hills, coiling around Hahoe and on through its environs, like the seam of the two nestling commas in the symbol of the taegük, “the great ultimate” unity of yin and yang. It may very well have been the scholar Söng-ryong who first described this view as “mountain taegük, taegük river.”

In 1592, with Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea, Söng-ryong was appointed supreme military commander and, in the following year, chief minister of the government. During his years as chief minister he tried to establish reforms based on the underlying principle that the purpose of both philosophy and government is to serve the people. Some historians see in his attempts and in his related writings the seed of the later *silhak* (loosely translated as “the pragmatic school”), the movement which arose a century later and ultimately contributed to the modernization of Korea.

Two books which contain his writings are preserved in Chunghyodang, along with some of his personal effects and others of his documents. One interesting document is a letter from the King's secretariat rejecting Sǒng-ryong's request to resign from his position as chief minister. Yi Sun-shin, in the twentieth century the most revered figure in Korean history next to King Sejong, owed his position as admiral of the fleet to Sǒng-ryong. Yi Sun-shin's deputy commander, covetous of Yi's position, accused Yi of having ignored important intelligence on Japanese troop movements. (The details of these accusations were later proven to be fabricated.) The admiral was arrested and would have been executed had the deputy commander's faction at court had their way. Sǒng-ryong did not have enough power to defend the admiral, and so, as a last resort, he tried to resign to register his protest. (Later, Sǒng-ryong was finally able to arrange for Yi Sun-shin's release and eventually even got him reinstated.)

Ryu Sǒng-ryong himself then became the next victim of calumny, and with this lost his position at court. One can picture him chuckling all the way back to the village he had always been trying so hard to return to. But, as the story goes, almost as soon as he got back the usually placid Nakdong flooded its banks and wiped out many of the smaller homes in Hahoe, including Sǒng-ryong's. It seems that even the pension provided by King Sǒnjo was not enough for Sǒng-ryong to build himself another house, because he accepted the offer of a small cottage a few kilometers from Hahoe. He never did return to settle in the beloved village he had longed for over so many years in Seoul.

In 1607 at the age of 66 scholar and statesman Ryu Sǒng-ryong died in that humble cottage. King Sǒnjo announced a national mourning period of three days, and sent his court geomancer to select a site for Sǒng-ryong's grave.

And in 1613 Sǒng-ryong's prominent former students and some other Confucianists built a shrine to Sǒng-ryong within the walls of his sǒdang, thereby raising it to the status of a sǒwǒn; with its dedication to Sǒng-ryong its name was changed to Byǒngsan Sǒwǒn. As a sǒwǒn it was now no longer just a school for young students, but more a place where accomplished literati would gather to discuss the Confucian classics and inevitably quarrel over how many bows should be made to one of a certain rank at his memorial rite or how many days a certain king should be mourned. Memories of the Western scholastics.

When Sǒng-ryong died, King Sǒnjo appointed the court geomancer to select a site for Sǒng-ryong's grave. Within a few years villagers from the area formed a hamlet at the base of the hill which held Sǒng-ryong's grave, whether in devotion to the occupant of the grave or in an attempt to share in the benefits of a site considered auspicious enough for a favorite of the King, or both. Years later Sǒng-ryong's grandson Wǒn-ji, a scholar-statesman renowned for his skill in geomancy, began to fret over the wisdom of the court geomancer's selection, and finally had Sǒng-ryong's remains moved to another site. It was not long before those same villagers who

had set up their hamlet at the original site moved, household by household, to the second site.

Ryu Wǒn-ji can also be thanked for Chunghyodang, to this day the main house of Sǒng-ryong's branch of the Pungsan Ryu clan. Wǒn-ji built this house and dedicated it to his grandfather Sǒng-ryong. Just as Yangjindang was not built in a day, Chunghyodang has also grown to its present size section by section, not only through the efforts of succeeding generations of the Ryu family but also with contributions from Confucian organizations.

One of Wǒn-ji's sons was Ryu Man-ha. He was not the eldest son and he therefore left Chunghyodang to set up his own household just in back. He built a modest house which, like the other major residences in Hahoe, grew only later to its present size. One of those who added to it was his son Hu-chang, a prominent scholar who also held high positions in the government. After he died, in 1706, the house's status was elevated when it was given Ryu Hu-jang's pen name, Juiljae.

Over the next two centuries Hahoe continued to grow in population, but not much in political representation and certainly not in wealth. Not many Ryus appeared on the national scene during these years, mostly because the Andong Kim faction had a tenacious and exclusive hold on all the high positions in the royal court. Hahoe remained a village of small farms and never developed into an industrial or commercial town, most likely because of the disdain the gentry Ryu family had for material wealth and their corresponding pride in their scholarly ancestors. This is thought the most likely explanation why Hahoe has preserved its Chosun dynasty character till now.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the king ruled only at the pleasure of the faction currently in power at court. Factions were constantly vying to get that power, and this hindered development the nation's development and security. Now, though, a child had assumed the throne, and his father, regarded by the ruling faction as malleable, was appointed regent Regent. Contrary to their plans, however, the Regent Hǔng-seon Taewǒn'gun showed more mettle than they could handle, and the Regent was soon exercising all the control of a tyrant. To consolidate this control and pull the country together he had to retrieve control of the government from the factions. At this time there were almost 700 sǒwǒns throughout the land, and in these sǒwǒns the literati squabbled as much over politics as they did over philosophy and rites. They also meddled in national politics with their petitions and their delegations to Seoul. The factions used these sǒwǒns in their battles for power in the court.

So the Regent decided to deprive the factions of one source of their power. And this he did, with a decree abolishing the sǒwǒns. The sǒwǒn dedicated to Ryu Sǒng-ryong's brother, on the slope in back of the cliff Buyongdae, was degraded to a sǒdang and much of it ordered dismantled. Sǒng-ryong's Byǒngsan Sǒwǒn, though, and the sǒwǒns dedicated to a few others who had made outstanding contributions to the nation—like Yi Hwang—were left untouched.

A few decades later Korea and Hahoe entered the twentieth century. Over five centuries Yangjindang had begot Chunghyodang, Chunghyodang begot Juiljae... And now, with the turn of this century, Ryu Tae-woo, second son, moved out of Juiljae and into the house just across the path. It has a few rooms, arranged in the same Confucian tradition as the other homes in Hahoe. During the next few years Ryu T'ai-woo advanced to the post of magistrate of another township. And during these years he had two sons.

His second son, Si-dong, remembers way back to when he was a little kid in primary school. Hahoe primary school was a large school for such a small village of only three hundred households. It had to accommodate the kids from other villages, which were not allowed schools. At that time the Japanese occupation government needed close control of education for more effective sway over the "hearts and minds" of the Koreans. So they prohibited the establishment of schools outside the cities and largest towns, where they had control. At the same time they wanted to avoid unnecessary trouble. They knew that Hahoe, a village of some prominence in spite of its negligible size—it was already becoming known internationally as a preserve of ancient Korea—was a village they had better handle very delicately.

One day back in the 1920's, as Ryu Si-dong recalls, the Japanese Governor General of Korea and his retinue arrived from Seoul, after a two-day drive over two rough mountain ranges, in a big cloud of dust. These were the first automobiles Si-dong had ever seen. And that is when Si-dong got his first inkling of the importance of Hahoe in twentieth-century Korea.

Then one day five decades later another car arrived in Hahoe, in another cloud of dust, practically the only thing stirring in this quiet village. This time Ryu Si-dong, now in his 60's, was not outside looking at the car, he was inside his own car looking, with a big smile, at his village. He and his two companions (KAFA Executive Vice President Mr. Chang Yun-göl and this writer) had come the comfortable four-hour ride from Seoul over two gorgeous mountain ranges. Ryu Si-dong, descendent of "grandfather" Ryu Song-ryong, was back home again, to show these people around.

He had certainly had enough practice. He had already put up Claude Levi-Strauss and his team of twenty Western scholars in Chunghyodang, and he had given the one-day tour to an American ambassador, a British ambassador, and scholars from several other European and American universities.

"Thirty years ago I bought a piece of land here, and one day soon I'm going to build my own house—a nice house for my family." So he will establish one more branch in the genealogy of Yangjindang. And his home will carry on the Korean tradition of hospitality, because it will have two or three rooms for guests from abroad.

It will be in the traditional style, of course, because no other architectural style is allowed inside

Hahoe. In fact, no additions or structural alterations of any kind are allowed on the original houses. Only repairs are permitted—at government expense, but also only with government approval. Ryu Si-dong's house, though built according to orthodox style, will be a new one, and he will be permitted to equip it with the comforts of the modern age.

At the village entrance the first thing to catch our eye is the two new houses going up there. These houses are being built by Ryus who left Hahoe years before to make their fortune in Seoul, and are now returning to their "real" home for their remaining years. They must be well off, since these days a traditional Korean house, with its thick wood pillars and beams and the expert craftsmanship it requires, costs much more to build than a house of modern design.

All the money in the world, though, cannot dictate authenticity, and Mr. Ryu winces at the round pillars in one of the new houses. This is a violation of tradition: round pillars were used only by those few honored with appointments by the King. "But then they do say these days that money is King."

Fifty meters down the path I peek through the gate of one of the really old compounds and see a spanking new car in a courtyard of sixteenth-century Korea. Peeking is not really necessary, though; the visitor who knows how to say, "Do you mind if we look?" can walk in and look around. Fifty meters farther, on the right, another, less timid peek through the wall's gate discovers an elderly gentleman relaxing on the *maru* on a lawn chair straight from a suburb of Los Angeles or Detroit.

In this village walls border every path. These walls, over a foot thick and taller than a tall man, surround even the humblest thatch-roof hut. This is an intriguing feature for a village of one family. Though the basic form of the village's walls is identical throughout, there is a great variety of materials used in them, from the clay and straw compound to clay wattle to coated or uncoated random-coursed rock to split roof tiles arranged in the mortar in all sorts of patterns—all resulting in an array of patterns a design artist could lose himself in for days. The walls will be capped with either Yangjindang's elaborate arrangement of roof tiles or a neatly laid thatch, depending on the scale of the house they enclose. The wall here is certainly regarded more a work of art than a shield for privacy.

Down one of these side paths is Juiljae, of special concern to Mr. Ryu since his father was born here. The house today, except for the motorbike in the courtyard, a plastic mat under drying red peppers, and a plastic water dipper on the *maru*, is seventeenth-century Korea. But there is that vegetable patch—would that have been allowed inside the compound's walls when yangban lived there?

On the way back to the main road are a couple more ancient houses, with corn growing in their front yards. What on earth is a peasant's corn patch doing right smack in front of an exalted yangban residence? They would never allow something like this in a preserved residence in Seoul.

And now we come to the next shock, Yangjindang, grand old main house of the Pungsan Ryu clan

since the fifteenth century. The outer walls are no more than the clay and straw compound surrounding the humblest thatch roof home. One would expect at least some of that white facing on a wall surrounding the center of such a proud history. Another blow is the main gate, through which many grand figures in Korea's history have passed. Once inside, I discover that the gate's right wall is the wall of a stable for lowly oxen or pigs, and can hear an oink in reply to an announcement of the arrival of the King's minister.

There are at least two explanations for this bare-bones simplicity. One is that the people of that age had some special affinity with nature, and felt neither the need nor the desire to separate themselves from nature or embellish what nature provided. Another is their "austere interpretation of Neo-Confucian philosophy, which viewed the world in strictly utilitarian terms."

In the reception hall this sense of the real thing, of ages and ages past, is transferred through stockings feet from the smooth thick wood planks of the maru, and its soft gleam of centuries of natural polishing. The fire extinguisher on the wall does not enhance this sense of age, though it does provide a feeling of reality.

At the top and the sides of many of the door frames, and on the walls in some of the rooms, are those eerie black-on-white Chinese character invocations posted to ward off malicious spirits and beckon benign ones. These are pasted up at the beginning of the lunar spring (usually toward the beginning of February on the Western calendar). Along with the shaman shrines around the village, these invocations are evidence of the peaceful coexistence of a primitive shamanism with the sophisticated systems of Confucianism and Buddhism.

To the left of the main entrance, through a small gate, is the women's quarters. Mr. Ryu wonders where "Grandmother" is—she lives here during months of clement weather, and moves back to Seoul in the winter, when this house would be too cold for a softy of modern times. As in the other grand residences of Hahoe, another family, not Ryus, lives here year round, maintaining the place in exchange for rent. They will also help prepare table for the four memorial rites each year, which the family has been holding over the centuries for Ryu Jung-yeong, his wife, their first son Un-ryong (Sŏng-ryong's elder brother), and his wife.

Across the path is Chunghyodang, well kept as the show place of this village, probably because it is the house dedicated to *the* most eminent resident of this village. One length of the manor's outer wall is the primitive clay-straw compound, another is random-course rock, and yet another length is an elegant herring-bone pattern of split roof tiles in a white-faced clay mortar. The entire wall, of course, is capped with roof tiles. Then there is a long structure the length of the main house's compound, which is both a wall and a string of utility rooms. This is separated from the main house by a lawn, rather than the usual expanse of bare earth. Everything is spic and span.

A gentleman in his fifties, in traditional clothing, is reading a book on the floor of the room off the maru at the entrance to the house. He is the consecutive eldest son since the sixteenth century, which makes him head of Ryu Sŏng-ryong's branch of the Pungsan Ryu clan. So he is responsible for conducting the two memorial rites held here each year, one for Sŏng-ryong and one for Sŏng-ryong's wife. He was a high school teacher until he retired and came back home to live in Chunghyodang.

He invites his guests in and provides some orange juice, not green tea. Though our host is the head of the clan, Ryu Si-dong is his uncle, so our host speaks to Mr. Ryu in honorific speech, while Mr. Ryu uses familiar speech.

Ryu Sŏng-ryong's writings and personal effects are housed in this compound, in a building whose newness and bright pastel trimmings and painted concrete walls clash with the rest of this village. Maybe this can be explained by the fact that it was President Park who ordered it built, in 1966, and had it enlarged and remodeled in 1975, in a period of transition when the money to restore and preserve had finally become available but tastes still reflected the preceding decades of hardship. If it were done again today, it would probably be in the natural colors of natural materials.

A group of soldiers from a nearby unit have unlaced their boots and, in a properly respectful hush, are viewing the displays inside. Some of Sŏng-ryong's letters and poems are written in an exciting bold cursive calligraphy, its free-spirited vitality making the admirer wonder whether it was not considered provocatively unorthodox in the age it was written. Personal effects on display amount to his steel helmet and leather-slat corselet, from his days as Minister of Defense during Hideyoshi's invasion, his horsehair hat, a belt, and a few other things. On a later visit to Hahoe, my companion remarked on the small number of few personal effects and furnishings we can find both here and in other museums in Korea, compared with what we find in museums in Europe, and ventured that it supports what we hear so often about old Korea having been a very non-materialistic culture.

Just outside Chunghyodang's sprawling compound is a small thatch roof house, uninhabited it seems, preserved nevertheless. It also has a wall, but covering this one, like those walls surrounding the village's smaller dwellings, is thatch rather than tiles. There are several of these more rustic houses in the village which are unoccupied now, and some vacant lots. It is difficult these days to keep them down on the farm, with Seoul beckoning, and the number of households is down to around one hundred and fifty, less than half of what it was when our host Ryu Si-dong was young. He, too, left Hahoe for high school in Daegu, went on to Seoul to make his livelihood, and never returned to live in Hahoe for any duration.

Mr. Ryus son, Ki-ha, is of the first generation not born in Hahoe. He was born in Seoul, and spent a lot more time in graduate school in the United States than he has in Hahoe. Unlike his father, who spends a lot of his leisure researching the history of Hahoe and its residents, Ki-ha devotes all his time to the

company he founded three years ago, upon his return from the States.

But Ryu Ki-ha has Hahoe in his bones. Maybe he wanted to put a new lustre on the name of this big small village when he named his company “Hahoe Corporation.” He may just do that, in his way—in just three short years the company is already dealing in imports, exports, and insurance, and is now expanding its scope of trade and is building a manufacturing plant.

Further on from Chunghyodang is Wŏnji Chŏngsa, closed, and Pinyŏn Chŏngsa, closed. But the ubiquitous Ministry of Culture explanatory signboard is there to tell the visitor about what he cannot go in to see for himself. Weeds and loose door fixtures and unpolished beams speak of benign neglect, so much more appreciated than the distorting trimmings of modern tampering. This is the value of Hahoe: in this village, except for the exterior of Chunghyodang’s museum, we are not misled by the brightly painted eaves and mowed lawns of most other preservations of historical structures.

We turn away from the closed cheongsa with a slight sense of disappointment, but this is soon dispelled by the grand sprawling pine tree four centuries old, in front of the primary school. How can those twisting limbs stretch out those ten meters or so the way they do without breaking off, especially with the school kids climbing them? In this village they do not forbid their kids this inviolable right of youth. If the tree loses a limb, it probably has a few more centuries to grow another.

And there, along the placid Nakdong, is Mansongjŏng, “Grove of Ten Thousand Pines,” with its floor of brown needles providing a cushion over the yellow ground. Here, as in Yangjindang, the stillness tells us to hush up and listen, for a laugh from the children swimming in the river, the call of a distant egret, the breeze in the pines. What a place to pitch a tent—which, in fact, is permitted.

Buyongdae looks down on us from across the Nakdong; Un-ryong’s Kyŏm’am Chŏngsa and Sŏng-ryong’s Okyŏn Chŏngsa at each end of the cliff are hiding themselves behind the thick foliage. The ferry—but for its new coat of paint, it has got to be the same one Sŏng-ryong used—takes us across to the base of the cliff, and then it is only a short walk up a narrow path along the face of the cliff to Sŏng-ryong’s retreat.

The low, crowned gate of the random-course rock outer wall of Okyŏn Chŏngsa frames another, smaller gnarled pine. In the yellow-earth courtyard is that stillness of the ages again. Oaks and maples and persimmons filter the sun into a light which induces the richest tones of old wood beams and roof tiles and stucco walls—no wonder Sŏng-ryong did not want to be in Seoul. A lilting spate of chatter drifts over from the small house just outside the compound, where a family, not Ryus, lives under the same arrangement others not of the Ryu clan do in the village.

A narrow path out the east gate winds up the heavily wooded back slope to the crest of Buyongdae. Mr. Ryu gingerly leads his panting companions along, till a sudden burst of clear sky announces

their arrival at the summit. Hahoe nestles far below, mellow in the early evening sun. The blue Nakdong curls protectively around the village, and is itself sheltered by mountains gently rising to pointed peaks. At the base of one of these mountains, around another bend farther downriver, is Byŏngsan Sŏwŏn.

The sŏwŏn is a four-kilometer ride along one of those bumpy one-lane dirt roads we old-timers used to endure, but which now, since they have all but disappeared, bring fond memories of a time now gone for good. At the end of this road we come to a solitary stand of six pines on the Nakdong’s bank, which were already there before this sŏwŏn was even a Sŏdang. And there, to the right, the buildings of the sŏwŏn step slowly up the gradual slope of a low mountain.

Right at the entrance to it all is a pleasant surprise—an open pavillion set just back of the main gate, extending the full forty-meter width of the sŏwŏn’s compound. A wide banner announces that a corporation is holding a weekend seminar here for its junior employees. They are taking a break now, but no one is smoking in the sŏwŏn, and the talk and laughter are whispers and chuckles.

Once inside the compound we make a beeline for that pavillion. We take off our shoes, climb the steps, and look out upon the Nakdong and the mountains on its other side. The story is that the original Sŏdang was moved way out here to escape the distractions of the expanding Pungsan; but this stunning scenery could only have been an even greater distraction.

Further into the sŏwŏn are small buildings of a couple tiny rooms each, one on each side of the courtyard. In the old days the resident and visiting literati lived in these rooms. Black smoke traces on the back wall above the fire holes indicate that the rooms are being used even now, probably by the seminar students. In the store room next to Sŏng-ryong’s shrine is the equipment for his annual memorial rite. This sŏwŏn is alive.

In the first half of this century, though, it was a different story. Times changed with the Japanese occupation and industrialization; old Korea and the yangbans and the literati faded from the scene. So this sŏwŏn, along with those others the Taewŏn’gun abolished, fell into neglect. When the nation finally recovered from the Korean War and the government found the wherewithal in the 1960’s to resurrect the sŏwŏn, the historians and craftsmen had only about twenty meters of its original wall and the dried out corpses of the buildings and a few other hints to figure out how to restore it to its original appearance.

Ryu Sŏng-ryong’s grave is several kilometers away from Hahoe, but it is as much a part of the village as Byŏngsan Sŏwŏn. Five or ten bumpy, dusty kilometers off the main road to Andong, at the foot of the grave’s hill, is a village where much of modern Korea has not yet arrived. There is no running water, no toilets inside these cramped cottages. The sunken kitchen and the maru are not heated, and firewood is still burned to heat the cottages’ one or two rooms.

But the lady we meet in one of these cottages does have a double-deck tape player. And she also has a nice fat watermelon, which is in our mouths before we have time to say, “That’s very kind of you, but...” As we talk with her she assiduously scrapes clean each strand of hemp that will go into the very popular—and very dear—Andong hempcloth.

The grave itself, a ten-minute walk up the hill in back of the village, is a large mound. Standing guard in front, to the right and left, are a couple weather-worn life-sized figures of ministers of the court, placed there to signify Sǒng-ryong’s rank as chief minister. A granite stele blackened by the elements tells us that Sǒng-ryong’s wife is buried there with him. Other than this, there is little evidence of the former stature of the man resting here.

Mr. Ryu and Mr. Chang spend a few minutes pulling the more visible weeds from the grave mound, then come around to the front. They treat themselves to a look at the valley and the surrounding hills. All is heavily wooded, thanks to an effective reforestation policy started in the 1960’s. Twenty years ago, even ten years ago, we old-timers here did not see a lot of hills with trees on them, but now, with every trip into the countryside, we find ourselves *oo-ing* and *ah-ing* at the land’s green splendor. It must have been just like this way back in Sǒng-ryong’s...but wouldn’t you know it, a church steeple is there to wrench us back to the present.

The two gentlemen turn back to the grave. There is a low granite table at the foot of the mound for the vessels of rice and wine offered in the memorial rite. First Mr. Ryu gets down on both knees in front of the table and makes two full bows, head to the earth. Then Mr. Chang takes his turn. If they were here

today for the memorial rite, they would do what others have been doing ever since who-knows-when at this rite—they would eat the rest of the rice and side dishes, have some good conversation over the wine, and then bow again and go back down.

On the way back to Andong we pass Andong Middle and High School. Mr. Ryus elder brother, Ryu Si-seong, who lived and died in genteel poverty in Hahoe, gave all the fields and paddies of Byǒngsan Sǒwǒn to a foundation which he founded to establish this school. Then he turned over operation of the foundation to the school. The twenty or so genuine sǒwǒns remaining after Hǔng-son Taewǒn’gun’s attack had fallen into disuse, and were now serving no other purpose than to commemorate those enshrined in them. It was Ryu Si-seong’s intention that this sǒwǒn, at least, would again serve learning, the original purpose of its establishment.

It must be this same family tradition of devotion to learning and to the more generous aspects of Confucian principles that first gave Hahoe a name, and then carried that name all the way into our time. Any of the Ryus could have moved to Seoul at any time over the last few centuries to acquire political or financial power. If they had, Hahoe today would amount to no more than any one of today’s prosaic villages, where land reform or ambition impelled the yangban to sell his lands and manor and move on to another kind of life with other values.

Back in Seoul, though, I come to my senses and realize this explanation is too simple, too romantic. Hahoe’s homes, its paths, its walls, its river, its residents past and present must have conspired to work some spell over me. Don’t let them work it on you when you visit “where the river returns.”