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## Yin-Yang Hahoe

by John Holstein

(A note about romanization: The name of the town Hahoe, which we have romanized here according to the rules of the official Ministry of Education system of romanization, is actually pronounced almost as if it were written hah-when in English. In many Koreans' speech the sound represented by oe is pronounced like the German unlauded o, as in Goethe, followed immediately by a short e sound as in bet.)

The old pine in the school yard is finally getting some peace. Peace finally, because the school yard is no longer a school yard. They just call it that out of habit. The school closed down recently because there were not enough students in Hahoe. This building, which at one time held over a hundred students, now houses the village's administrative offices. But why such a large administration building for a village of just over three hundred people?

Back around the beginning of this century, when the Japanese ruled Korea, Hahoe's primary school was a large school for such a small village. It had to accommodate the kids from other villages, which were not allowed schools. The occupation government prohibited the establishment of schools outside the cities and largest towns, where they had control over what was being taught. At the same time, they knew that Hahoe required special consideration. It was the village of the P'ungsan Yu clan and Yu Song-yong, revered scholar, statesman, and patriot of the sixteenth century. And the village was already becoming known internationally as a preserve of pre-twentieth-century Korea. It was a village they knew they had better handle very delicately. The Hahoe now about to enter the twenty-first century is still more important than its size. It is still regarded as a preserve of old Korea.

The village's fifteenth-century manors and commoners' dwellings and stone-walled earthen lanes and shrines to the village deity are intact, and its Yu-centered Confucian society is much what it always was. But the school has closed, and some of the residences are deserted. Then again, former residents are returning from Seoul to spend their remaining days, and the village is performing the ancient mask dance again. The rustic grand manor Yangjindang is showing its great age, but its magnificent little brother, Chunghyodang, across the path, is ornate and squeaky clean. What's going on here? Is the old Hahoe fading, or is it entering its prime? Is it a living village, or a museum?

Four hundred years ago Yu Songyong would climb the cliff above his study and gaze down on his village. He delighted in that panorama of the serene Nakdong River coiling around Hahoe and meandering on through high hills, like the seam of the two nestling commas in the symbol of the *t'aeguk*, "the great ultimate" unity of yin and yang. He saw here a "*t'aeguk* of river and mountain."

Hahoe is a product of the yin-yang which resides in this great ultimate. It remains the same and is changing, is a living community and a showplace. Architects, anthropologists, and historians have

great interest in Hahoe, the only place that we can see the Korea that existed before its colonizer Japan yanked the rest of the country out of its bucolic Choson-Dynasty way of life. The village has welcomed Claude Levi-Strauss and his team of twenty Western scholars, an American ambassador, a British ambassador, and scholars from several European and American universities.

The media also have interest in Hahoe: many of modern Korea's historical movies and television shows are shot here. It is not only for historical authenticity. With its river and old trees and its pine groves, its earthen paths bordered by old stone walls surrounding residential relics—all in nature's own array of hues and tones—the village delights both cinematographer and photographer.

For six centuries Hahoe has been the Yus' exclusive domain. It was the Huhs who first settled here, before the eleventh century. Then came the Ans, and soon after them the Yus. Then the Yus took over, and within a hundred years of the arrival of the Yus, the Huhs and the Ans were gone from the village. The Yu clan, with their servants, were now the village's sole occupants. And so the Hahoe we know today traces its character back to the first half of the fourteenth century, when Yu Jong-hye moved his family here.

This Yu Jong-hye, a deputy minister to the court of the founder of the Choson Dynasty, established Yangjindang, the older of Hahoe's two main structures. The manor has always been handed down to the first-born male in the direct line from Yu Jong-hye, and each new generation has added to the manor's late-Koryo Dynasty foundation a subtle new touch from Korea's architectural evolution.

In the sixteenth century Yu Song-yong, future chief minister of the royal court, was born in Yangjindang. In accordance with the customs of the time, when he married he left Yangjindang to his elder brother Un-yong and established his own household across the path. Chunghyodang is now the main house of the family branch established by Song-yong.

Every Yu in the long lineage of this clan has been expected to uphold both its Confucian gentry-scholar tradition and its reputation. And down through the centuries the Yu clan has tried to maintain the village as a preserve in which they could honor this duty.

Apparently these succeeding generations have done well in their efforts to sustain the character of both village and clan. Some has been lost for good, much recovered. Much of what has been preserved or recovered is original; some of it has undergone a facelift.

Social relations in this village are a major attraction to anthropologists. Professor Kim Song-kyun of Seoul City University says that in Hahoe “there is still a split between former gentry lineages and commoner lineages, and discrimination is normal between Yu and non-Yu families.” So an essential feature of Korea’s pre-twentieth century neo-Confucian social hierarchy and clan relations survives. A different Confucian feature is also evident: the gentry’s sense of noblesse oblige. A few years ago the Yu clan donated much of their land to a school they established outside Hahoe, with no restrictions on class or lineage.

Social attitudes from the Choson Dynasty may remain, but other elements are changing. Many of the Yus now live in Seoul. Figures from 1988 put Hahoe’s population at 322 in 125 households; 300 (in 113 households) of them were Yus. Now the proportion of Yus is decreasing, and this trend is expected to continue. Still, though Hahoe is not “current residence” for some Yus, it is “permanent residence” for all. The number of older clan returning to the roost is increasing.

Not only the Yu clan evince this sense of immutability in change. Village women still hope for male offspring to carry on the family name. They still visit the Samshindang (already referred to as “the old tree” four hundred years ago), and the primitive shaman structures in and near the village. But today’s shamans are not what they used to be. “It is impossible these days to mount a full-fledged version of the mask dance play (part of the ten-day *pyolsingut* rites to the village deity) because, above all else, there are no shamans qualified to officiate at the ritual,” says Lee Sang-ho, senior member of the Hahoe Pyolsingut Preservation Society. The shamans may not be qualified to do what the scholars would like, but they—and “the old tree”—still serve the villagers’ purposes.

As people change, so do the things they use. To the left of the main entrance to the grand old house Yangjindang is the women’s quarters. That is where we will find “Grandmother,” if she is in Hahoe. 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 Yus, lives here year round, maintaining the place in exchange for free rent. They will also help prepare table for the four memorial rites each year, which the family has been holding over the centuries for the progenitor of their line and his wife, and their first son Un-yong and his wife.

Another family who are not Yus lives at Yu Song-yong’s study in the glade across the river. The arrangement is that they maintain the building and are allowed to live in the house outside the compound and farm the fields. Most of the structures in Hahoe are maintained under similar arrangements.

But the Yus are coming back, too, the older ones anyway. Yu Si-dong, a direct descendent of Song-yong, left Hahoe after primary school and has made his livelihood in Seoul. “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 whole fam-

ily.” And his house 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.

Two new residences are going up right now. They are being built by Yus who left Hahoe years before to make their fortune in Seoul and are now returning to their “real” home to spend their remaining years. They must be well off, since these days a house in the traditional gentry style, with its thick wood pillars and beams and the expert craftsmanship it requires, costs much more to build than one of modern design.

All the money in the world, though, cannot dictate authenticity, and Mr. Yu Si-dong does not approve of the round pillars used in erecting the impressive main gate of one of the new houses. This is a violation of tradition: round pillars were used only by those honored with appointments by the king. “Well, they do say these days that money is king.”

Money may be revered, but no one is making much of it in Hahoe. There is no industry here. Few tourists come here, and they do not bring much money. You might pick up a simple souvenir in the small general store by the bus stop at the entrance to the village. Here we have just a few simple inns (at \$15 a night); many of the visitors camp out at “Grove of Ten Thousand Pines” on the shady, sandy banks of the Nakdong.

Visitors come here to see old Korea, but this village is not a museum. People live and make a living here, and this is what produces Hahoe’s apparent anachronisms. Behind the walls of one of the sixteenth-century compounds is parked a spanking new car. On the centuries-old porch of another impressive residence an elderly gentleman relaxes on an aluminum lawn chair done out in electric pink.

The great houses of the gentry are not here just for show. At Juliljae, seventeenth-century residence in every respect, the motorbike in the courtyard, the plastic mat under drying red peppers, the plastic water dipper on the old porch, the vegetable patch right inside the imposing main gate all form for us a living connection with the past.

But Hahoe’s yin-yang quality necessitates the other aspect of authenticity. The contrast between Yangjindang and Chunghyodang show us Hahoe’s blend of living authentic and museum authentic.

The outer walls of the grand old fifteenth-century main house Yangjindang are not in much better condition than those surrounding the village’s humblest thatch-roofed hovel. One would expect at least some white stucco on a wall surrounding the center of such a proud history, but it has no color other than what nature has given it in its compressed mixture of clay and straw.

In Yangjindang’s reception hall this sense of the real thing, of ages and ages past, is transferred through stockinged feet from the smooth thick wood planks of the reception room floor, and its soft gleam of centuries of stocking polishing. None of the wood pillars or floors or door and window frames in this building are finished with varnish or paint.

Across the path is Chunghyodang, spruced up in its usual finest as the showplace of this village. One length of the manor's outer wall is newly set random-course rock, and another length is an elegant herring-bone pattern of split roof tiles in a fresh white-faced clay mortar. Between the wall and the main house is a lawn, in contrast to Yangjindang's traditional yard of bare earth. Everything is spic and span.

But then, just when you are about to dismiss this manor as the showplace some meant it to be, reality manifests itself. A gentleman in his fifties, in well-worn traditional clothing, is sitting on the porch reading a yellowed document. He is another Yu returned to Hahoe to spend his remaining years. He is also the consecutive eldest son since the sixteenth century, which makes him head of the Chunghyodang branch of the clan. So he is responsible for conducting the two memorial rites held here each year, one for Song-yong and one for Song-yong's wife. He offers some orange juice to his guests, not green tea.

The academies which the two brothers established are as different as their founders' residences. Un-yong's, just across the river, is deserted and in disrepair. Song-yong's academy is flourishing. It is a four-kilometer ride along one of those bumpy dirt roads we endured all over the countryside just a few years ago, 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. These pines were here before this academy was built. A wide banner spanning the front gate to this acre-wide compound of several clean and trim structures announces that a corporation is holding a weekend seminar here for its junior employees.

One wonders how, with all the pressures and temptations of modern life, Hahoe has continued till this day as Korea's sole survivor of the Choson Dynasty.

Some point out its geographical features. Way back in the twelfth century Huh decided to establish his family in Hahoe because, with its dependable supply of water from the Nakdong and the protection mountains offered on three sides, the site would be good for agriculture. Indeed, the village has always been prosperous, and largely self-sufficient. Huh also saw security here. Hahoe was not easily accessible to outsiders, being sealed off by its river and mountains and the low range of hills which hid it from the main road running twenty kilometers to the north. Old-timers like to tell you that old saying about Hahoe being secure from fire, war, and starvation. Its self-sufficiency and its security provided the seclusion which allowed for the nurture of an idiosyncratic character.

A major part of this character is the Yu clan's mission. Prolonged concentration of power in this one clan resulted in the clan's total identification with the village; the fate of one necessarily determined the fate of the other. Out of this mentality developed a sense of righteous mission to preserve clan and village tradition and integrity. Any of the Yus could have sold his property and moved the whole family off to Seoul at any time over the last few centuries to acquire political or financial power. If some of the clan did leave Hahoe, it was never for good, and only in devotion to their mission. Otherwise, twentieth-century Hahoe would amount to no more than any one of today's prosaic villages, where land reform or ambition compelled the gentry to sell their lands and manors and move on to another kind of life with other values.

One question nags. Does this village show its past in the present, or its present in the past? Yu Song-yong winks, then whispers, "Yin-yang Hahoe... Get it?"

Asiana In-Flight Magazine, December 1992, Vol. 4,  
No. 12  
photos by Hyun Kwan-Uk



A view of Hahoe from across the river.



Park P'il-Sul, the 13<sup>th</sup>-generation mistress of the Yu family estate in Hahoe and author of *The Lore of a Renowned Family*, a book about the Yu family's philosophy and history.  
(above) A village gathering at the riverside.



(Immediately below) The architecture of Hahoe is all in the traditional style of the Choson Dynasty.



Hahoe is one of the few places in Korea where you can see a village scene that has changed little in more than a century.