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STARS AND STRIPES.

Thursday, April 29, 2004

Korean cultural traditions taught to new generation at wooded haven in Seoul

By [Jeremy Kirk](#), Stars and Stripes
Pacific edition, Thursday, January 31, 2002

It used to be the site of a Chinese restaurant, a place where Korean politicians hashed out secret deals while enjoying fine drink and beverage, and beautiful women hosts, among ornate traditional housing structures.

The site — known as Samcheonggak — is a pristine, traditional development in a woody, mountainous area near Cheong Wa Dae, the South Korean presidential mansion.

Last year, the Seoul government purchased the property from a private owner and renovated the housing, making it a place to learn traditional Korean crafts and culture.

There are seven houses on the property, and the largest — called the "harmonious union" building — was the site for a dinner between South and North Korean officials during breakthrough talks in 1972.

Samcheonggak's position is prime: It's just minutes from downtown Seoul,



Jeremy Kirk / S&S

Renovations at Samcheonggak show the true beauty of traditional Korean architecture.



Jeremy Kirk / S&S

A traditional Korean lamp on display at Samcheonggak.

although the trees give it the impression of a secret place. You can glimpse a few of Seoul's taller buildings and even peer at the fortress walls that surround the presidential mansion. The parklike setting and quietness are comforting.

The new Samcheonggak opened in October. The renovations remained true to architectural styles from hundreds of years ago. Now, a host of classes are held there to pass on the arts to a younger generation.



Jeremy Kirk / S&S

Eom Sang-sup serves up puffed rice in the tea room at Samcheonggak.

The site, run in cooperation with the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts, offers classes in traditions such as the playing of the *kayagum*, a stringed, wooden instrument that when plucked sounds distinctly Asian.

The center has drawn people from the local community to teach the classes, offering expert instruction, said Choi In-soon, director of the Samcheonggak Culture Center.

One the goals is to show that Korean culture — even in crafts such as quilting — are distinct and unique, Choi said.

"Many young people think the Western style of quilting is more worthy than the traditional Korean [quilting]," Choi said. "I'm very proud of the many young people interested in this class."

A group of about 25 Korean women were recently being taught to make traditional square cloths called *pojagi*, used to ornamentally wrap items such as vases. The clothes were used in the past because they were cheaper to make than wood boxes or chests, and also took up less space.

It also was believed that good luck can be preserved inside the wrapping cloths, making them important in ceremonies.

The center offers many handicraft classes for women, who in the past made many items using needles and textiles in the home. It has a not-so-good root: During the Chosun dynasty, from 1392-1910, women lived a secluded life, rarely allowed to leave the home, Choi said.

The practice followed the Confucianism mode that promoted learning and

faithful devotion to family, a notion that remains in Korea today.

Classes can be a half-day or all day, and some run as long as four months. Classes can be taken in skills such as in *pansori*, traditional Korean singing; *minyo*, traditional folk vocals; and the *daegeum*, a large bamboo flute.

Special classes are held for foreigners, and some teachers conduct classes in English, Choi said.

For those who just want to enjoy the serene surroundings, the largest main building of Samcheonggak has a tearoom that overlooks the woods. They will serve you items such as wild ginseng tea or pine needle tea ranging from 5,000 (about \$3.80) to 9,000 won (about \$7).

The site also has two traditional Korean homes that can be rented for the night. You can sleep the old-fashioned way, on the floor with a pad and a buckwheat pillow.

There's a large house with two rooms for about 10 people that can be rented for one day for 600,000 won (about \$460). Smaller houses are available for can be rented for 200,000 (about \$150) and 350,000 won (about \$270).

To obtain a class schedule and arrange one in English, call 3676-3462. The center also hosts regular cultural performances and plays throughout the year.

Samcheonggak is probably best reached by taking a shuttle bus from the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts in Gwangwhamun. The center is across from the U.S. Embassy and can be reached by subway by getting off at the Gwangwhamun station.

Chon Hye-suk contributed to this report.

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