

## CHUSEOK, KOREA'S THANKSGIVING DAY

[Observance of Chuseok Holiday, 2008. will be September 13-15]

**August 15th of the lunar calendar is when the entire Korean population head for their hometowns to celebrate Chuseok, or Full Moon Harvest.**

Chuseok is one of the two biggest holidays in Korea. It is considered the Korean equivalent of Thanksgiving, and a time to honor ancestors with newly harvested grains and fruits.

People from all parts of the country visit their hometowns. They hold ancestral memorial services with traditional foods. Chuseok goes by other names such as Chochunil, Chungchujeol, Gabae and Hangawi, all of which means a great day.

The main drawback to Chuseok is the horrendous traffic. The trip back home can take more than 10 hours by car, but people don't seem to mind the inconvenience. Instead, they look forward to seeing their families and friends. Kids dress up in new hanbok, or traditional Korean dress, that are picked out especially for the occasion.



### songpyeon

In the old days, Chuseok was also a time when people changed their clothing for autumn. Preparing new clothes for the holidays stems from that tradition.

Chuseok's history dates back about two thousand years old to the time of Silla King Euri, who ruled during the legendary period of the Three Kingdoms. He wanted to help the weaving industry grow so he organized a national weaving contest. The losers had to prepare certain foods for the winners. This was the origin of Chuseok, a holiday which later spread throughout the peninsula.

Chuseok spans three days according to the lunar calendar. The first event on Chuseok day is the ancestral rite. Offerings prepared days in advance are set on the altar for the ritual.

A family gathering in Korea means hearty eating. Once the ancestral rite is over, the entire family takes part in a grand feast. Unlike the lunar New Year's Day when tteokguk, or rice cake soup, is prepared, Chuseok features newly harvested rice used to brew rice wine and rice cakes. One popular dish eaten during the holidays is the soup toran, or beef broth with the starchy rootstock taro.

People also prepare holiday foods such as songpyeon, or full moon rice cakes stuffed with sesame, beans, chestnuts, rice flour and newly harvested grains.

### People visit ancestral graves.

A visit to ancestral graves comes after the big breakfast. The graves are cleared up days before Chuseok, with grass mowed and weeds plucked out. People take great care in maintaining their family graves, as an unkempt grave is seen as violating filial piety.



After the rituals, people play traditional games such as neolttwigi, or seesaw. Seesaws are found in children's playgrounds everywhere, but the traditional seesaw is a long thick wooden stick on which people step on to be sprung up and down.

Koreans nowadays prefer going to movie theaters or watching television instead of playing traditional games. There are, however, certain games and entertainment enjoyed during the holidays.

Ganggangsullae, a circle dance under the bright moon, is one of the most popular forms of Chuseok folk entertainment. Traditionally, village women assembled in a large circle, held hands, and went round and round while chanting a song under the full moon.

The dance begins slowly and gradually picks up speed as the song quickens. The lead singer starts the song and the rest of the women answer by chanting "ganggangsullae" or "ganggangsullae."



### **ganggangsullae, a circle dance under the full moon**

The origin of the dance dates back hundreds of years. The Japanese attacked the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910), but the Korean soldiers were too few in number to fight the larger Japanese army. Legendary Korean Admiral Yi Sun-shin then suggested that all the ladies in a town get together and make a circle.

Then he asked them to go up to the mountains under the bright full moon and spin around. The Japanese saw the dancing women and thought that there were so many Korean soldiers that they ran away. After the war, Koreans performed the dance every year to commemorate the victory.

And so Koreans gather under the bright moon, a symbol of peace and wealth, to share the rewards of a bumper crop and to wish for a life as fulfilling as the moon.

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