

6-29-05

Dear Oisin,

Halmoni and haraboji left Korea for the first time about 45 years ago. They were going to study in the US, as I did myself many years later. As you can imagine, many things were quite different then. I don't think just anyone could have made telephone calls from the US to Korea, for example. Most communication would have been by regular mail, like we've been using this summer, except it would have been much slower. The airplanes in fact were also much slower. They couldn't carry as much fuel as they can now, so the plane had to make frequent stops on islands in the Pacific.

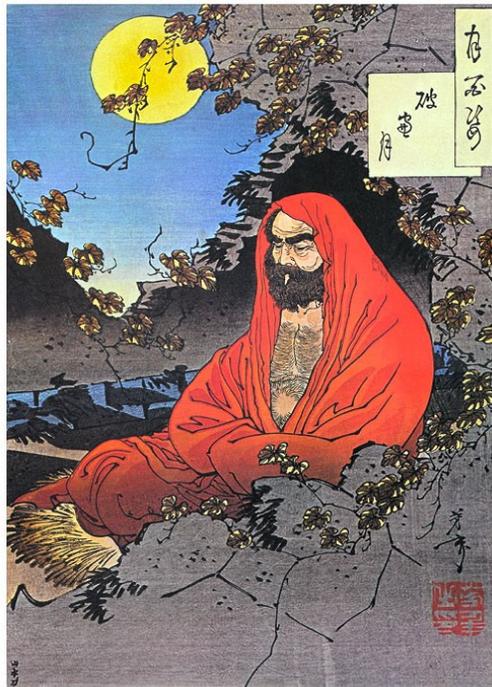
Haraboji tells me it took them three days by plane when they first traveled to the US. The airfare was much more expensive, I think something like a full year's wages for someone from Korea. Haraboji's mother saved money for a long time to help him pay for it. There was much fanfare when a person left. The second time haraboji went to the US to work was after I was born, so I remember it a bit. The whole family went to see him off, including halmoni and all my brothers and sisters, of course, but also haraboji's parents and grandmother and sister and nieces (so this would be Komo-halmoni's family) and halmoni's mother. The airport in Seoul then was not the neat modern building you see now. It was still big for those days, but quite simple. People went out onto a balcony to wave goodbye to the passengers, and there wasn't all this concern about security. Most Koreans weren't too used to sitting in chairs then, so you could see many families who had brought their own straw mats sitting on the airport floor together eating kimbap out of lunch-boxes or splitting open a watermelon. That is to say, the airport rather resembled a fairground. In

the DVD we bought at the Louvre about the middle-ages made by the historian Marguerite Gonon, she gives similar descriptions of medieval cathedrals. She says that they were often not the solemn places that we see now. There were merchants from the village, performers of all sorts, beggars, and madmen present in addition to all those who were there for religious purposes. So you see airports as well have become much more tidy and business-like in Korea compared to when I was young. One thing I remember halmoni saying about her early years in America is how she felt sad each time she saw an airplane. For all the reasons I mentioned above, it really was impossible to make casual trips back and forth. By the time I went to study, travel was much easier. Many Koreans went through rituals not very different from the old days however, with a large group of family, friends, and relatives seeing off each departure. Still you could see old folks crying to see their grandchildren leave to such a faraway land. After all that drama, it was almost embarrassing when students came back for summer vacation after just one year.

In many ways, travel is becoming more and more convenient. The train to the Frankfurt airport from Bonn took nearly two hours for me, but there is apparently a very fast train from Cologne (which needs to go even farther) that takes just one hour. I've heard that some airlines are going to make supersonic (faster than sound) flights available again, shortening transatlantic flights by several hours.

I am on the plane now, bound for home. This letter will be delivered by hand.

We discussed a while ago the amazing amount people traveled even in the days when all the means of transportation were much more primitive. It's obvious when you read the history of Europe, but even in East Asia before the European middle ages, there were monks who went on foot from Japan or Korea all the way to India and back several times. They were often on pilgrimages, to bring back books with the teachings of the Buddha, or to meet a famous teacher. Then there were people who went the other way, like the famous Bodhidharma, who traveled to China to teach them about Zen Buddhism. This is the kind of Buddhism that emphasizes those funny stories we read together, like the one about the monk with one eye. A favorite Zen riddle is 'Why did the Bodhidharma travel east?' If you figure out the answer, I think you will be enlightened. After meeting the emperor of China, he is supposed to have spent nine years sitting in a cave staring at a stone wall. This was in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, maybe around the time of King Arthur in Britain.



*Bodhidharma, by Yoshitoshi*

For my last day in Bonn, I finally went to the exhibition hall near the site of the former West German government. They had three exhibits going on simultaneously, including one related to women's cloisters in medieval times, entitled 'crown and veil,' and an exhibit of recent archaeological finds from Jordan. But the only one I had time to see was 'Genghis Khan and his legacy.' This was a very interesting exhibit outlining the history of the great Mongol conquests in the 1200's and their effect on the big Eurasian continent. The Mongols belong to a grand tradition of nomadic steppe people. Roughly speaking, these are the people who lived in the deserts and highlands spanning the center of the continent, such as modern day Mongolia, or the central Asian republics like Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan.



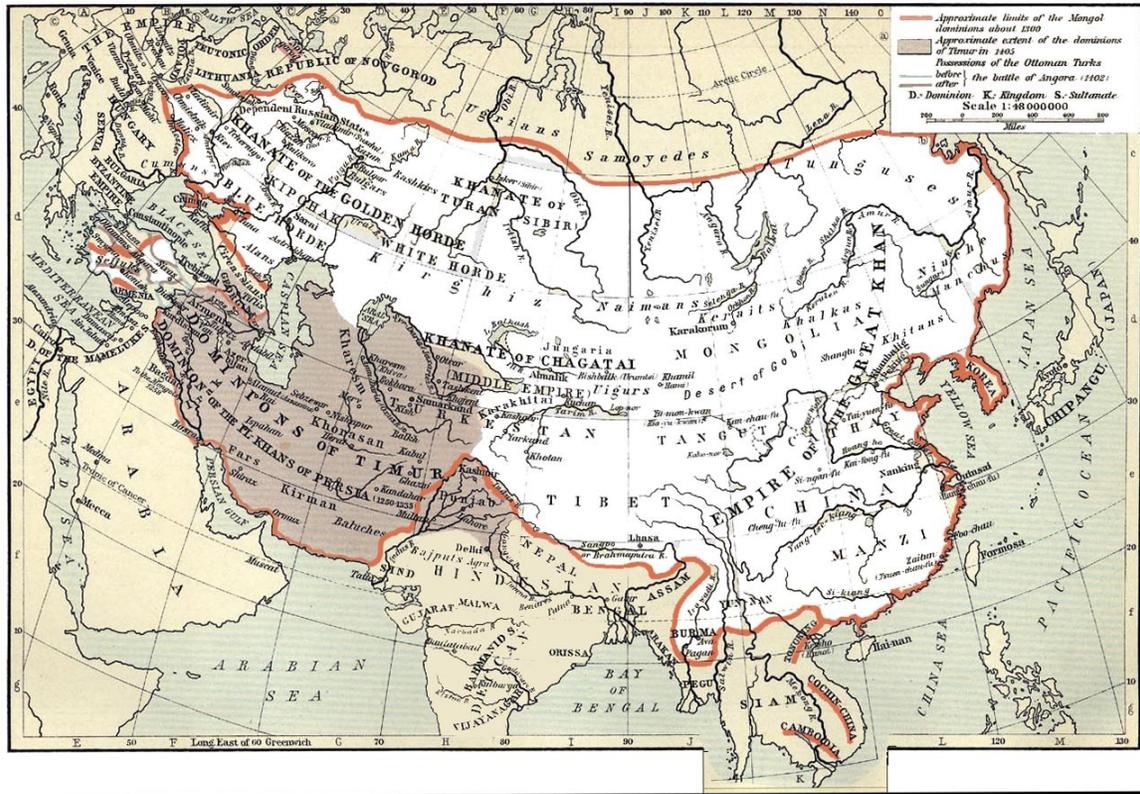
*Nomads*

Their life was usually quite different from that of the civilizations that developed closer to the

coasts. For the most part, they were not fond of the comforts of city life or sedentary farming. They had a very mobile life-style, living in temporary structures like tents and moving around with their goats and yaks and horses throughout the year in search of good grazing ground. I know next to nothing about it, but the organization of nomadic economies seems to have been very elaborate, involving many different schemes for using the land and animals effectively. I might mention also that a certain tension between such nomads and people who preferred farming goes back to very ancient times, even before recorded history. Many historians think that in the early days of farming, it was common for the practice to be looked down upon by the hunter-gatherers or the nomads. For example, there is a story in the bible about the two sons of Adam, Cain and Abel. Cain offers grains to God that he farmed off the land while Abel, a shepherd, offers a goat. God prefers Abel's offering and this leads to considerable jealousy between the brothers. This story is supposed to symbolize the conflict between nomads and farmers in early (pre-)history. In the exhibit, they outline the comings and goings of the great nomadic nations that developed north of China and across the continent, such as the Hsiung-nu, the ancient Turks, and the Uighur. But none of them made as big an impact as the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors. They really ruled for a short while the biggest empire the world has ever seen, bigger even than the Roman Empire or Alexander's empire. As with the other cases, this was often a brutal affair. In Europe and in Arabic countries, many legends are handed down over generations of the terrifying power of Mongol invasions. But, also in parallel to other empires, when they were done, they made a lot of trade and exchange of goods and ideas between very remote regions possible. The historian Mr. McNeill refers

to their achievement as the 'closure of the Eurasian ecumene' whereby every small part of the continent had to be at least vaguely aware of the goings on in the whole, forever thereafter.

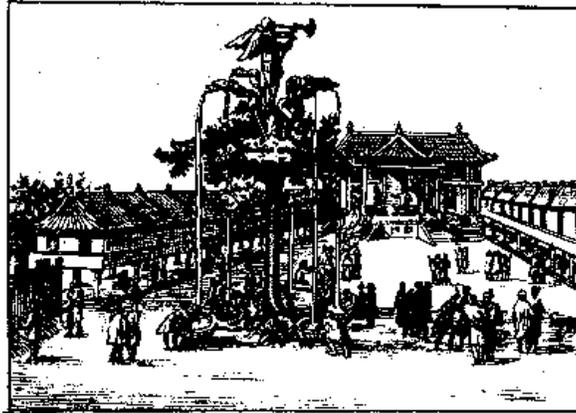
92 The Mongol Dominions, 1300-1405.



### Mongol Empire

The peace across a great expanse created by the Mongols was what made possible Marco Polo's journey from Venice all the way to China. There was a Flemish missionary whose name I forget (William something) that traveled to the Mongol capital of Karakorum during the reign of Genghis Khan's son Ogedei. He describes a really cosmopolitan court of Mongols mixing in with Chinese, Russians, Armenians, and French. There was a very famous tree in this court made entirely of silver. It was supposedly designed by a French goldsmith. In the exhibit, there is an imagined rendition of it by a

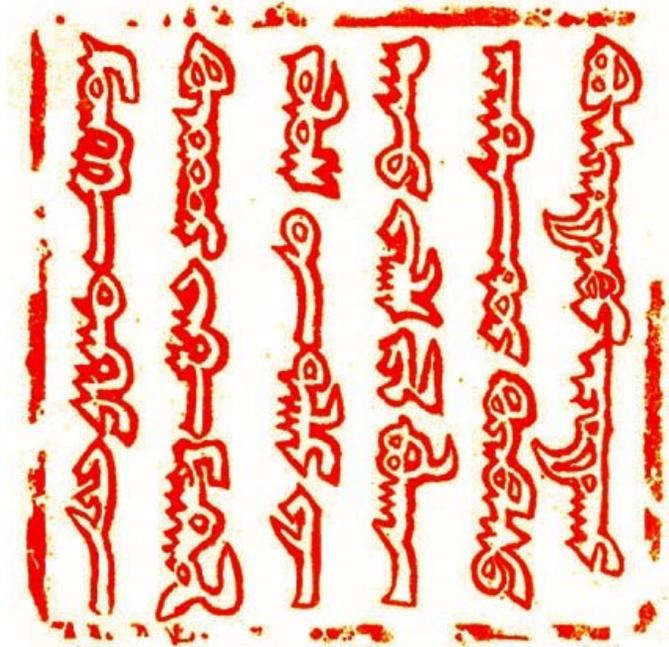
16th century European painter, showing the tree in the center of a courtyard awash with goat-milk and honey that was supposed to have flowed from its branches.



*Silver tree at Karakorum*

There were too many other interesting things there for me to even attempt to describe, especially since my computer is running low on battery. But I will mention a glass display case with a letter sent by Pope Innocent IV to Guyuk, Genghis Khan's grandson, begging him to stop attacking Christians, apparently delivered by a French monk all the way from Lyon to Karakorum. The reply is also there, asking the Pope to visit the Mongol court himself if he wants to discuss diplomacy, and pointing out how Mongol envoys were also killed by Russians and other Christians. It's hard to know now the details of his rationale, but Guyuk does appear to have been actually quite favorable to Christians in his court. The letters are written in beautiful script on very old parchment. The reply, in particular, is in Persian, as this was a language that the Mongols surmised could be understood in Western Europe. The overall picture of the free nomadic life you get from the exhibit is very impressive. Again, one can only wonder what it might have been like to travel so far in those days, over very rugged terrain,

battling the elements, fatigue, and hunger, as there frequently must have been. But then, after all that, they were politically on top of the world for a while, reflecting the actual altitude of their homeland.



*Stamp of Guyuk khan*

It's still not easy to be very far from your loved ones, no matter how convenient travel has become. As you and I have experienced, you can get used to it in little bits, but the basic feeling of coming apart is probably not that different from when the old Koreans sent off their children. There is always an uncertainty associated with long distances and the lack of physical presence can be difficult even for a short period.

Over the past month, we've talked about many people who traveled, Beethoven, Heine, Alexander, Mongol conquerors, Korean monks, ... Just this morning, I saw an article about people these days who try to reproduce the famous medieval route of pilgrimage

from somewhere in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, where the body of St. James is supposed to be. In the Europe of the middle-ages and the Renaissance, there was a period of travel that followed a young person's years of study in some craft, say, wood carving, working at the mills, or sculpture and painting. In German this period is called the 'Wanderjahre', simply, years of wandering. Having received the basic training necessary to work, they were supposed to see the world and gain experience, so that they could eventually figure out their places in it. I think I told you that it goes on even now for young mathematicians. The basic training is called a 'Ph.D.' a term I've already used many times without explanation. Some people don't consider it very basic because it comes after all the years of schooling that you receive while growing up and even after the first four years at the university. The first four years are sometimes called 'undergraduate education' and consists of really basic things. The mathematics you learn as an undergraduate is almost like just learning to read. At the end of that, if you have a mind to, you go to graduate school, which can continue for another 4 or 5 or 6 years. (In the case of Komo, she spent 10 years on this at Cambridge, much to her chagrin. But imagine how much she must have learned in that time!) You learn more difficult things at that point. If you complete that course successfully, than you receive this certificate called a Ph.D. This word originally is an abbreviations of Doctor of Philosophy (written in Latin), since, as we know, all learning is philosophy. After that comes the Wanderjahre. I mentioned in an earlier letter about how Annette Werner and her husband went through quite a long period of it before settling down. When I was going to the black forest, I met at the train station another young lady named Nicole working now at the Max-Planck institute. She

had received her Ph.D. just a year ago. So she was just beginning her Wanderjahre, the Max-Planck institute being just the first stop. As a result, she was very concerned about where she would have to go next. I tried to encourage her a bit and told her to apply for a position at the University of Arizona. I think this made her feel a bit better, but it is oftentimes quite scary at that stage. Mostly, I think she wasn't too sure what she would be capable of doing herself that could contribute to our understanding of the mathematical world in a substantial way. This, of course, everyone thinks about now and then, even after becoming older. This makes them want to settle down quickly, so that they can at least feel secure about making a living.

For myself, I sometimes feel like my Wanderjahre never stopped. I left halmoni and haraboji in Korea 20 years ago to begin my training in the US. Even now, when we go back to Korea, I feel sad to see halmoni and haraboji living in that big house by themselves. They bought that house when I was quite grown up, wanting enough space for all their children. But we all left within just a few years. Actually, I had already known for many years that I would be leaving in exactly that way. After receiving my Ph.D. (during which I already wandered quite a bit through several universities), I had maybe an official Wanderjahre of 5 years, through Boston and New York. And then I settled in Arizona. Now I look back on it, I think I can say fairly honestly that I never felt too afraid even then about the future. The reason was not that I was particularly more brave than Nicole. It was rather that, I never expected the Wanderjahre to stop. After all, I had made up my mind to leave my home in order to learn about the world. Of course I expected to be wandering for a long time! Maybe one of these years I would end up going back like the

monks who brought the scriptures back to Korea from India. But in the meanwhile, I knew that I would in any case be going from one place to another looking for new things to learn. This didn't mean, of course, that I didn't want a home where I could keep my books and return to most of the year. But I don't think I was particularly afraid of being unable to settle down.



*The wanderer over the sea of fog, by Caspar David Friedrichs*

Of course things are different now, since I have you and Niall and mommy to take care of. It's not just a question of going on pilgrimages whenever I can. But isn't it also a wonderful thing now that we can go through a whole lifetime of Wanderjahre together? As you and Niall grow older, it will be just more and more fun, I think, in a very deep way. And you both have to prepare for it already by studying and making yourself healthy and learning all kinds of patience. By the way, I should emphasize that the Wanderjahre refer not only to physical process of actually moving from one place to another. For example, Schubert traveled through the musical world all his life, even if he lived only in Vienna. I don't think Socrates ever left Athens except during the war with Sparta. And then, you can explore Plato's world sitting at your desk anywhere most of the time. That is to say, I think of the Wanderjahre more like a migration of the soul, as Plato describes the time between death and rebirth. What does one learn then, when the spirit is soaring through the universe encountering new worlds and galaxies all the time? Of course we are very excited therefore when we are born, having all these things to tell our parents concerning our travel. That's maybe why a baby cries so much. You cried more than most babies, so maybe you even went to another universe and back before you dropped into our world. But the journey's not over when you're born. Whether one lives in the same house in the same valley all of one's life, conquers vast territories, or makes endless pilgrimages to holy places, the journey goes on, for each person in the way that most suits him or her. It is a fact that we are always traveling, in life, in death, and in between.



*Migration*

But I'm coming home now for the time being. Of course I can't wait to snuggle up together tonight. Maybe I'll read you this letter, or we'll look through one of the history books I'm bringing from Germany. There are a few animals that I can't wait to give to Niall including a camel made in Mongolia. Then there is this chess set in the shape of Roman soldiers. Maybe we can read this poem together:

Midwinter spring is its own season  
Sempiternal though sodden towards sundown,  
Suspended in time, between pole and tropic.  
When the short day is brightest, with frost and  
fire,  
The brief sun flames the ice, on pond and ditches,  
In windless cold that is the heart's heat,  
Reflecting in a watery mirror  
A glare that is blindness in the early afternoon.  
And glow more intense than blaze of branch, or  
brazier,  
Stirs the dumb spirit: no wind, but pentecostal  
fire  
In the dark time of the year. Between melting and  
freezing

The soul's sap quivers. There is no earth smell  
Or smell of living thing. This is the spring time  
But not in time's covenant. Now the hedgerow  
Is blanched for an hour with transitory blossom  
Of snow, a bloom more sudden  
Than that of summer, neither budding nor fading,  
Not in the scheme of generation.  
Where is the summer, the unimaginable  
Zero summer?

Do you see that this segment contains an answer to  
a question I asked in an earlier letter? If we are  
patient, we can try to go all the way to the end:

What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning.  
The end is where we start from. And every phrase  
And sentence that is right (where every word is at  
home,  
Taking its place to support the others,  
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,  
An easy commerce of the old and the new,  
The common word exact without vulgarity,  
The formal word precise but not pedantic,  
The complete consort dancing together)  
Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a  
beginning,  
Every poem an epitaph. And any action  
Is a step to the block, to the fire, down the sea's  
throat  
Or to an illegible stone: and that is where we  
start.  
We die with the dying:  
See, they depart, and we go with them.  
We are born with the dead:  
See, they return, and bring us with them.  
The moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-  
tree  
Are of equal duration. A people without history  
Is not redeemed from time, for history is a pattern

Of timeless moments. So, while the light fails  
On a winter's afternoon, in a secluded chapel  
History is now and England.

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this  
Calling

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
Through the unknown, unremembered gate  
When the last of earth left to discover  
Is that which was the beginning;  
At the source of the longest river  
The voice of the hidden waterfall  
And the children in the apple-tree  
Not known, because not looked for  
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness  
Between two waves of the sea.  
Quick now, here, now, always—  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

And then finally say, in person,

Good Night Mr. O.

Mr. D.



*Return of Odysseus, by Claude Lorrain*