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Daejeon event highlights flair of Korean falconers

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Master falconer Park Yong-soon displays a golden eagle during a rare falconry demonstration on Feb. 7. / Courtesy of Robert Neff

By Robert Neff

Falconry in Korea has a long history that goes back to at least the Goguryeo (37 B.C. — 668 A.D) period. It was a popular form of entertainment for noblemen and remained so up until the fall of the Joseon Kingdom (1392-1910). Under Japanese occupation (1910-1945), falconry was one of the few ways Koreans could hunt as they were forbidden to own guns. The falconers were extremely skilled; one man claimed to bag 20-30 pheasants daily.

Modernization has taken a toll on Korean culture but efforts are being made to protect it including the listing of Korean falconry as an UNESCO intangible heritage. Efforts are also being made to educate the public.

On Saturday afternoon in Daejeon, a large crowd of adults and children — some of them having traveled from Jeju Island — watched a rare demonstration of Korean falconry by master falconer Park Yong-soon.

Park learned falconry some 40 years ago as a boy and was named an intangible cultural asset of Daejeon in 2000. Park, assisted by a couple of licensed and apprentice falconers, displayed a number of raptors including northern goshawks, a Siberian peregrine falcon, a Harris hawk and a golden eagle.

Much to the delight of the crowd, the raptors demonstrated their prowess by seizing pieces of meat and lures thrown by Park. Only one bird, a peregrine falcon, seems to have been temporarily daunted by the size of the crowd and nearly let his prey, a pheasant, escape into a small cluster of houses and trees. In the end, the falcon was successful.



Choi Dong-gyu, the 10-year-old son of one of the hawk handlers, displays a northern goshawk. / Courtesy of Robert Neff



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Choi Dong-gyu, the 10-year-old son of one of the licensed falconers, stood at the back of the crowd proudly displaying a young northern goshawk with its red shi ch'i mi (owner's identification tag). A Korean idiom owes its origin to this tag. In the past, thieves would steal the birds and replace their tags with their own. Later, if they were caught, they would claim they did not know the bird had been owned thus shi ch'i mi tte da (remove the tag) means to feign ignorance. Choi's youth and the beauty of the bird made them very popular with the crowd including the handful of foreigners.

John Mathews and Pieter Muller drove from Geoje Island to witness the event after learning about it on Facebook. Mathews was especially interested and sent text messages and pictures to his older brother (a licensed falconer) in the United States.

According to Mathews: "The masters and licensed falconers at the event have similar practices as those in America, but Korean falconers adorn themselves with a traditional honor that isn't present in the West. The methods have been passed down for generations and it is rich with cultural tradition. I loved seeing the cultural flair that the Korean falconers put into their appearances. Their hats and tunics paid tribute to their roots."

Falconry in the United States is heavily regulated and potential falconers must apprentice for two years under a licensed falconer, pass a written test and may possess only one bird. Obtaining a falconry license in Korea is much more difficult.

Jang Seong-gap has been fascinated by hawks since he was very young and became one of Park's apprentices two years ago. He has one year remaining in his apprenticeship before he can take the licensing test given by the Korean Culture Heritage Administration. If he succeeds, he will join the small number of licensed falconers in Korea (presently there are only 10) and be allowed to raise his own raptor — perhaps one given to him from Master Park.

Holding a female goshawk tethered to his hand, Jang explained that females were preferred because they were larger than the males. The one he was holding had been captured 20 days earlier and would need a lot of training before she could hunt without a tether.

Isabella Bird Bishop — an Englishwoman who visited Korea in the late 1890s — described how raptors were captured and trained during the Joseon era:

"To obtain them three small birds are placed in a cylinder of loosely woven bamboo, mounted horizontally on a pole. On the peregrine alighting on this, a man who has been concealed throws a net over the whole. The bird is kept in a tight sleeve for three days. Then he is daily liberated in a room, and trained to follow a piece of meat pulled over the floor by a string. At the end of a week he is taken out on his master's wrist, and slipped when game is seen. He is not trained to return. The master rushes upon him and secures him before he has time to devour the bird."

Not all of Park's birds were captured. The golden eagle was presented to him after it was rescued from the southern part of the country where it was found disoriented and exhausted. It, like the art of falconry, has been rescued through the efforts of Master Park and Korean Culture Heritage Administration.

Robert Neff, a historian and columnist for *The Korea Times*, wrote this story with assistance from Jeon Dong-hun.





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