

THE YEONGDEOK SNOW CRAB FESTIVAL:

CAUGHT IN THE CLAWS OF YEONGDEOK

A continued investigation towards discovering “true Korea.”

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We almost hadn't made it. "Hurry up, you wooly rat-bastard. That's our g—ddamn shuttle!" I had yelled to my advisor, Binx, as he emerged from the train station, looking bewildered as Punxsutawney Phil. We pushed our way inside the nondescript van, barely getting the door closed before the driver peeled away.

The fact was, I didn't truly know where this shuttle was going. Carnal instinct had taken over. I had gambled that this unmarked van would bring us to the 21st Annual Yeongdeok Snow Crab Festival. It was either that, or judging by its fuzzy, purple interior, we'd be singing karaoke with the clan of *ajummas* (old ladies) sitting behind us.

But we had indeed made it.

And now, just thirty minutes after our arrive, I had begun doubting the reality of leaving this festival unscathed. We walked down the narrow alley bordering the venue, passing restaurants tightly squeezed together, their signs blending in a hodgepodge of Korean characters. The overhangs jutted out in no particular order or color coordination—red, yellow, and brown. Storekeepers stood smoking cigarettes or sweeping—some just looking out at the morning crowd. A woman with black, permed hair and bent posture held a hose, water running from it, splashing off her red basket, and seeping down the pavement into our path. That's when I noticed them—crustaceans the size of wild boars, crawling up the sides of these restaurants.

"Holy hell, man! There're monster crabs scaling that building," I yelled. "Somebody, quick, call the authorities!"

"Please," Binx said, taking off his sunglasses with a look of annoyance.

"Spare me your do-good-nick thoughts and stick to the job, Mother Teresa. We have a festival to attend. And more importantly, I have crab to eat—hell, there's enough here to make King Taejo full."¹

And with that, he walked off.

"F—ck it," I said to myself.

The locals knew more about crab wrangling than I did. Their lives were out of my hands. >>

¹Taejo was the founder of Korea's Goryeo Dynasty and ruled from 918-943. He had six wives, and united the Later Three Kingdoms of Korea.

Across from the restaurants, dozens of dried squid hung, rope threaded through their beaks as they turned to jerky in the morning sun. The alley snaked around to a neighboring fish market. Rusted orange bars supported the metal roofing that stretched above the labyrinth of buckets containing the market's sea creatures. From the harbor behind, the sun shot through, cascading off these polychromatic buckets on the brown and green brick floor, light ripples dancing in all directions. White fish, sea cucumbers, eels, crabs—it was all here. It was a pescetarians wet dream and an anti-speciesist's hellscape.

After being chased off by some angry seagull wielding a butcher's knife, we backtracked to the information stand. The festival grounds had been set up in Hepalang Park—a giant concrete slab with tents and stages, three inflatable pools for crab fishing, and an obstacle course.

Patrons stood at a tent jockeying for position in line, hoping to sign up for a chance to compete in the crab wheelbarrow race. One of these men stood out from the others. He smiled at the woman behind the counter. Then, without missing a beat, he yelled at his wife and three daughters to hurry over. It could have been his knockoff Oakleys or his shaven head, but there was something slippery about this fellow.

"Bow to King Taejo," a voice boomed from behind us.

I spun around—and there, in traditional Korean attire, stood a group of 20-somethings. One of them, wearing baggy pants, gestured to another dressed in a *hanbok* (traditional robes) and a long hat.

"He is king. You must bow."

So I bowed and they burst into laughter.

"Where you from?" Baggy Pants asked.

"America," I said.

"Yo, yo! Do you know, B-boy? You dance like B-boy."

He threw up his hand for a side high-five.

I didn't respond immediately.

"I'm no dancer," I replied, giving him an underwhelming slap on the hand. "Just a journalist—nothing more than an average joe with sinister tendencies."

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"No dance? Ok, ok. He's B-boy."

He pointed to one of the guys with a mushroom haircut and stud in his ear. Mushroom Cut stepped forward and began breakdancing on the concrete. The others started beatboxing in what sounded like the onset of hyperventilation.

"Bizarre" was the word. It was the exact word. For f—cksakes, these fine lads may have been some of King Taejo's descendants. What would he have said about this soiling of the royal robes?

"Did you hear that, man?" I said, cutting through the exasperated rhythm.

It was faint, but unmistakable. In the distance was a clicking that could have only come from crab claws—millions of crab claws snapping together in a warning sign to any predator in close proximity. But we moved closer, drawn by the intrigue of the sight to be had, pulled by sheer wonderment and an investigative duty to crack open the essence of contemporary Korean culture—"true Korea" as I had dubbed it.

What we saw instead was an emcee squeezing a crab in one hand and waving it at the audience.

"Chil-man won (70,000 KRW)!" he shouted. "Chil-man, O-cheon won."

The clicking of claws fluttered around us, but these weren't crabs at all. This was a crab auction and the sound

came from plastic clappers given to the audience for bidding. The sinister bastards had designed this noise quirk on purpose. The Brainworms grew hungry, conjuring up an image in my mind of the smug organizers sitting around in a smoky backroom.

"You know what would really make the auction memorable?"

"What's that, Choi?"

"Crab-sound clappers."

They must have really patted themselves on the back for that one.

"They say some ideas are worth their weight in gold," I said.

Binx looked on, "Yeah, some ideas..."

The man with the shaven head had suited himself in waders and a red crab hat by the time we got to the wheelbarrow race. He was dancing around to some music, the way a crab would had it turned human. This overtly zealous behavior made him seem even more slippery. Beneath his smiling face and gregarious externalities lingered an overbearing soccer dad with helicopter-parent tendencies. He was the kind of SOB that would yell at the coaches during his kids' games and beat his wife to get off on the pure rush of adrenaline and power. He feared losing control and overcompensated to keep the fear hidden. It was speculation, sure, but not unfounded. >>

He and his opponent took their mark at the starting line. The referee counted down from three, and the competitors sprinted to the first pool. Shaved Head set down the wheelbarrow and hurried to an inflatable pool where two cylindrical, net traps had been dropped. He yanked one from the water. Reaching in, he wrestled the crab toward the opening. Its legs snagged in the net's holes causing Shaved Head to tug harder. It was only as loud as a snap of the fingers, but the leg gave way tearing from the body, and falling onto the ground. The man tossed it into his wheelbarrow, withdrew the second crab. Once he had removed it, he hurriedly pushed the wheelbarrow to the second pool, swept up a couple more crabs, and made a U-turn. He hurried back towards the finish line victoriously. The crowd cheered, his children hugged him, and his wife stood smiling.

Loose legs began piling up around the festival grounds. From the largest of the three pools, came the voice of another emcee.

"Do you know 'crab?' Crap is crab," said another emcee.

It was *ajaegaegu* (old-man humor). Binx and I stood near the crowd around the pool. People waited with primitive fishing poles in hand. He was buying time. But for what? And then, three foreigners appeared atop a ladder leading into the pool.

"Do you speak Korean?" he said laughing.

One of the girls gave the affirmative. But after being pressed, it became clear he knew more English than she knew Korean. The long faces of many members in the audience signaled that they had grown tired of waiting for the event to start. They had, had enough of the man's humor and most certainly enough of the pandering to the foreigners.

The foreigners climbed into the pool and began tossing crabs out towards the yelling "fishermen." Legs broke off mid-air, falling well short of the edges. Crabs landed upside-down only to be snagged by the nearest treble hook, hoisted to the surface, and chucked to the ground. One fisherman caught so many, I lost count. It all happened



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as quickly as a game of skeeball in an arcade. As soon as one crab was removed from the hook, it was on to next. The foreigners awkwardly slogged through the water, holding the crabs at arm's length as to not get pinched by a dangling claw. The number of crabs dwindled until the pool lay empty. The man counted his winnings and found that one of his catches carried the lucky tag. His prize?—a box of crabs.

This family event had become a game of "Follow the Leader" into a pit of speciesism. It undeniably masqueraded

as an indoctrination for the youth into a system to support turning the animal into a commodity, thus eliminating the intrinsic value of a crab and replacing it with a dollar sign. It all came down to a quick dollar (or KRW) and a deeper desire to sustain—be it monetarily or through consumption. Tens of thousands of red bodies stacked together across tabletops, in wheelbarrows, and crammed into fish aquariums outside crowded restaurant fronts. The livelihood of the Yeongdeok fishing village had been built on the shells of the snow crab. 