

EDITOR'S PAGE



A Land Beyond Reach



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Korea is a fascinating country of contrasts. Modern beyond imagination, yet ancient. Vibrant in the south and unknowable in the north. On my many previous trips to Seoul, I travelled from the Incheon airport to the city, attended the Transcatheter Cardiovascular Therapeutics Angioplasty (TCTAP) conference, and went back to the airport. This time, it was different. The 20th anniversary of the highly-influential TCTAP meeting, directed by S. J. Park, was kind enough to bestow on me the honor of “Master of the Masters.” As much as this suggests my superannuated status, it was a great honor to be recognized by the current teachers of our profession in Asia. Many of the leaders in Asian interventional cardiology reflected on the early days when they attended our courses at Emory University. Quite surprising to me, I was presented with a bust of my own head. “It is better to be “headed” than to be “beheaded,” I opined. Their kindness also enabled me to expand my meager Incheon to Seoul and back experience with a 3-day tour of Korea preceding the meeting. I was accompanied on that tour by my daughter, which made it even more pleasurable. We explored Seoul, then travelled to the southeast to Gyeongju, the ancient capital of the Silla dynasty that ruled for 1,000 years until about a millennium ago. The well-preserved temples and tombs told a story of Buddhist tranquility and stability. Our travels also took us to the stark reality of the more recent Korean experience. The War Museum in Seoul is a massive display of Korean war planes, tanks, and ships outside, and a riveting depiction of the horrors of war on the inside. The images of the completely destroyed city contrasted with the modern mega metropolis that Seoul is today. The message of how quickly and easily the city was overrun cannot be escaped by the viewer, nor can the very disturbing human images of death and suffering. What is the message for the Koreans or for us? The next day we

travelled a few miles north to the border with North Korea, the demilitarized zone (DMZ). Here, the fact that the war never ended is on full display. The chain-linked and barbed wire fencing and frequently-spaced guard houses face the 4-km swathe of land that is the DMZ. Beyond lies the dark and unknowable north. Denuded hillsides expose raw clay ground stripped clear of trees to serve as firewood for the long and bitter winters. Between these two Koreas lies the negotiated DMZ that has, ironically, become the most pristine nature preserve in the world. It is a lesson of what would happen if all of us just left the world alone. There is a strong desire to embark on a hike through this primal paradise, but of course, it is beyond our reach. The one opportunity to enter the DMZ is underground. We walked through one of the tunnels cut by the North Koreans into the granite bedrock to enable a rapid invasion of the south. These tunnels, discovered from the 1970s through the 1990s, serve as a reminder of the need for vigilance, and they now serve tourists by allowing us to walk to the middle of the DMZ, although almost 80 m below the surface. Above ground on the southern side of the DMZ fence stands a railway station with a sign that reads, “To Pyongyang” (the capital of North Korea). On the fence, thousands of colored ribbons have been hung remembering friends and relatives who have been separated these many years. The station is small but modern, with unused tracks that extend through the DMZ on to Pyongyang and beyond. But, no train departs for the north from this outpost. A plaintive song of hope for reunification wafts over the land, and despite the enormity and possible futility of the effort, many South Koreans do not stop anticipating the opening of this rail line to Pyongyang and beyond, all the way to Paris.

As I stand looking over the DMZ toward the other side, I was reminded where I was last summer on the Normandy coast and the very different emotions

I had when I wrote in this space about “A Day at the Beach” (1). Today, “A Land Beyond Reach” seems a more appropriate title. Normandy is almost a celebration of sacrifice and victory, but the feeling here is quite different, because here the war is not over and vigilance is always required. The horrors of war on open display at the museum are sometimes too disturbing to look at, so looking away is easier. We do look away and return to the conference, where the quality of cardiovascular medicine on display is truly unexcelled. The cutting-edge investigative productivity in Korea is also reflected by the sixth largest number of submissions to *JACC: Cardiovascular Interventions*. Our last night in Korea was spent at a swanky garden party for the faculty of TCTAP20, and we gazed at the grandeur of the city across the Han River and listened to the songs of one of Korea’s hottest vocalists. Popular Korean music has swept through all of Asia faster than any invading army. It is easy to bask in the fruits of this modern successful

country, from Samsung to K-pop to medical miracles. The medical advances in Asia have transformed this 20-year old meeting from a Western faculty teaching Eastern students to the new wave of young students teaching the former “masters.” This is the exciting and enjoyable stuff. It is what we want to be doing. Thinking about a war that has never ended is not fun, but here it can be suppressed. For our colleagues at the other end of Asia, the separation from home and family caused by the wars there is even more heart wrenching. There it is impossible to look away. And, for those who long for unification with home, family, and loved ones on both ends of the continent, it is another day and land beyond reach. Hopefully it will not always be so.

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REFERENCE

1. King SB. A day at the beach. *J Am Coll Cardiol Intv* 2014;7:944-5.