

COME TOGETHER



- **Name of Club:** Seoul Players
- **Location(s):** Itaewon, Seoul
- **Number of members:** 10 board members, plus an ever-expanding number of actors, musicians, artists, designers, writers, technicians and volunteers.
- **Started:** 2001

Who is it for? Anyone, foreign or Korean, with a passion for English theater.

What goes on? Professional quality performances and productions of English plays, ranging from crowd-pleasing musicals to thought-provoking productions of a more experimental nature, productions of established scripts as well as premieres of new works.

Plans for the future? 2011 will bring 6 exciting and varied projects to the audiences of Seoul, including a world-premier workshop in partnership with Savage Umbrella Theatre of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Seoul's own Workshop Division ("The Ravagers," March 5th and 6th) a thought-provoking dark comedy ("A Day in the Death of Joe Egg," March 18-20 and 25-27), summer and winter musicals ("Urinetown" and "The Full Monty"), a 24 hour theater festival, and a one-act play competition.

The company also plans to expand ties with the Korean theater community, laying the groundwork for mixed-language performances, subtitled productions, and opportunities for greater involvement with charitable organizations of Seoul.

How to join? Visit www.seoulplayers.com to join the mailing list and to learn more about the members, past productions, and current projects. To contact the group with specific requests or questions, write to seoulplayers@gmail.com.

Are there any membership fees? No

What is the highlight of the year for your club? Seoul Players feels the highlight of the upcoming season is the increased opportunity that will be offered to the artistic community, given the scale of the productions currently planned.

The Players are always on the look-out for volunteers with interests and talents that are in any way tied to theater: performers, directors, producers, technicians, designers, media-savvy writers, fund-raisers, managers and anyone else who has interesting talents and ideas to share.

Fermentation Celebration to offer feast in Seoul

Small-scale producers are to offer an array of locally fermented goods at a Seoul bar.

The city's first ever "Fermentation Celebration" is to introduce a variety of home-made produce including bread, cheese, beer and wine, as well as makgeolli and kimchi.

Organizers aim to introduce guests to small-scale fermenting projects that people are carrying out in their own homes around Seoul, and help to forge a community of home-brewers, bakers and makers.

The event will be held at Craftworks Taphouse and Bistro, Itaewon 2-dong, from 1 p.m. until 5 p.m. on Mar. 12, with an entrance fee of 8,000 won to be paid on the door.

A range of locally-brewed ales will also be on sale as usual at the bar, which is five minutes walk from Noksapyeong station's Exit 2.

More information is available at the events' Facebook page: <http://on.fb.me/hmigKQ>. (kirsty@heraldm.com)

Dreaming big, expats open hagwon chain

From humble beginnings, franchise grows to 47 schools in just 18 months

Hamish Boland-Rudder

INTERVIEW

The huge English-language education industry in Korea has inspired many expats to dream of opening their very own "hagwon," or private institute.

But for Jason and Yeonghwa Fowler, owning one hagwon wasn't enough. Almost 10 years after opening the Gwangju You and I Language School in 2000, they decided to take a step many thought impossible for non-Koreans — they franchised.

Within an 18-month period, their company, Whiz Education, has opened nearly 50 schools across 13 cities. They are also set to become the first franchise to begin teaching the TOEFL Junior program.

"(When) we started to look at the franchise industry, we thought there was a window there. It's still risky, but we thought that if there was a window there we should get in there," Jason said.

Their story began in familiar fashion. Yeonghwa had decided to spend a year teaching in Gwangju in 1997, exploring her heritage. Jason came to Korea for a year away from his studies, and was posted to a teaching job in Gwangju in the same year.

He soon met Yeonghwa and together they began thinking a little more critically about how English was being taught in schools, universities, and hagwon.

"We decided to stay one more year, then we decided to stay six more months — you've heard that story before, right?" Jason laughs. "I had been accepted to a dental school in New York, so at that point Yeonghwa moved back but I had I think six weeks left on my contract."

Left to his own devices, Jason started noticing openings in the language-teaching market.

After three weeks of discussing business ideas, Yeonghwa was back in Gwangju, Jason had put dental school on hold, and they opened a hagwon.

It wasn't easy. Despite her Korean ancestry, Yeonghwa had grown up in the United States and did not have Korean citizenship or speak Korean fluently. And both Jason and Yeonghwa, at 27 and 25 respectively, were considered young to be starting a business in an age-conscious society.

The one advantage they did have was being able to offer a completely foreign-owned school, with a strict approach to students, parents, teaching and learning. Rather than complying with parental requests for special treatment for their children, they made a decision that English education would be their top priority.

"Parents came to me, and my job was to make sure we teach excellent English. We can't really worry about the parents' role of determining what they are doing outside my class. All I can worry about is that the parents want me to do this, and do it well, then I have to do it well."

To supplement this straightforward approach, teaching was standardized to ensure consistency in every classroom, and emphasis was on conversational English skills, rather than grammar.

By the end of their opening month in 2000 they had 64 students, a number that nearly doubled after two months of classes, before reaching a peak of about 600 students. You and I Language School quickly became one of the biggest hagwon in northern Gwangju.

But in 2009, after running the school for nearly 10 years, Jason and Yeonghwa planned



Jason Fowler holds a seminar for a new school that will open next week in Daegu.

Whiz Education

to sell the business and return to the United States.

"We thought it was time to go home, because we thought the golden period was clearly over. Lots of schools were still making money, but it wasn't as easy," Jason said.

Only a week after deciding to resume his studies in dentistry and medicine in New York, Jason and Yeonghwa were approached by Park Jong-shik, the owner of an ECC Language School in Gwangju, and their biggest competitor.

Park also thought that market trends were changing, and that franchising was the best

way to remain competitive.

"He thought now was the time — whenever there's a little chaos in the industry is always the best time to start something new," said Jason.

Franchising was something that Jason and Yeong-hwa had thought about in the past, but never seriously. With a Korean business partner, it became a genuine possibility.

The three agreed that offering something different would be the key to success.

"What we did was come up with a business model where we could keep foreigners in our schools but could still go local,"

said Jason.

The first franchise began classes in September 2009, and by the end of the month seven more schools had opened up. In October 2010 the first school in Seoul opened. Now they have almost 50 schools across Korea. "Before this franchise I had not seen a lot of Korea. I was turned off by the traffic," said Jason. "But in the last year I have seen every nook and cranny of Korea!"

While operating a business in a foreign country has been difficult, Jason believes it is also one of their key advantages that helps set You and I

Language Schools apart from the competition.

"I am certainly sure that there are no foreigner-owned franchises in Korea. I can tell you from meetings in Seoul that we have found many executives to be shocked to learn that we are the owners of the franchise," he said.

Jason and Yeonghwa have no regrets about their decision to stay on.

"It certainly was daunting," said Jason. "However at the same time we saw it as an amazing opportunity and challenge."

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Expat climbers work to conserve routes

By Robert Lee

For expat rock climbers, the unique beauty of Korean mountain ranges has a way of stealing their hearts.

"The places I often go to have become very special to me. These are beautiful places packed with awesome memories," said Les Timmerman, an expat who has been climbing here for over 4 years.

However, as everlasting as the rock may seem, a lack of care or sense of responsibility can quickly ruin the climbing experience for all. Hence the "leave no trace" code of ethics in the international climbing community, which can be difficult to practice when flakes crack, chalk defaces and holds break.

Grateful for the experiences given by the crags here, a group of expat climbers has found a way to give back to both the mountains and the local climbing community.

Korea on the Rocks initiatives aim to honor the rocks by learning from the existing local community, cleaning up, and offering manpower to help maintain climbing areas throughout Korea, for future generations.

Understanding that the expat community will always come and go, the KOTRI has done its best to develop the scheme with guidance from the Korean community.

The KOTRI is an organization which branched out from the go-to forum for expat climbers in Korea, Korea on the Rocks. Formed by Bryan Hylenski, climbers take time out of their busy schedules to volunteer, set up logistics, prepare initiatives, and go out to use a little elbow grease.

Its first initiative kicked off at Yeongseo Falls in South Jeolla Province. Teamed up with the Aekdong Climbing Club, the local climbing community, the KOTRI was able to replace dangerous safety equipment, start a trail restoration project, and translate menus and information to help local lodges deal with foreign visitors.

The KOTRI provided equipment and manpower to do maintenance work on over 20 routes in the area, and worked



Alec Furguson (left) and Cho Han-ik replace the safety equipment at Yeongseo Falls in South Jeolla Province.

Shim Seon-hwa

with the Korean community by letting the locals take the lead in the project's direction. It also showed the expat community how Koreans preferred things to be done when replacing bolts and anchors.

The aforementioned safety equipment was drilled into the wall at Yeongseo during the 1990s, but has since become weathered, worn and dangerous, allowing the possibility of a bolt breaking off, which could cause a fatal accident.

Recognizing the potential problems in the trail that leads up to the climbing area in Yeongseo, the KOTRI set about restoring the trail into a stone staircase, creating a safe and easy access to the rockface.

By this March, the KOTRI plans to finish the initiatives in the Yeongsu Falls area, complete a recycling program, install an environmentally safe toilet and continue cooperating with the Aekdong Climbing Club to maintain the area.

And according to Timmerman

and other members, the KOTRI has been well received by the Korean community.

"As KOTRI and its activities became more well known, climbing clubs from other areas contacted us saying that they were impressed and wished to team up for other projects," said Shim Seon-hwa, a Korean member of the KOTRI.

"I met members of the KOTRI at Yeongseo falls during our maintenance projects, and I was impressed by their love of both nature and the rocks," said Cho Han-ik, member of the Aekdong club.

"The members of KOTRI that I have seen went beyond simply using the crag for their enjoyment, and I was again impressed that they took the initiative to clean up the crag," said Cho who headed the Korean side of the initiative at Yeongseo.

To kick off the New Year, the organization has decided to work in the Munsusan area, and is discussing the details

with Choi Byeong-ho, manager of the area. According to Hylenski, the Korean community will teach the KOTRI how to preserve the area and how to replace the safety equipment, or bolts and anchors.

"We will also be donating a large amount of the cost to purchase the bolts, hangers, chains and anchors for this project," Hylenski told the Korea Herald.

The KOTR forum was started in 2004, and provides information on some 268 climbing areas throughout Korea to more than 1,200 members.

"Through the love we share for climbing, we understand and overlook the differences, helping us overcome all cruces, despite the language barrier and different in culture," said Shim, who joined the KOTRI to bring the two communities together.

The KOTR are always looking for climbers and volunteers from both the foreign and Korean climbing community. (rjmlee@heraldm.com)

Ruling leaves F-2 visa applicants stranded

By Joo Hye-mi

Citizens of America, Canada, Britain, Australia, and New Zealand all struggled to obtain the F-2 spouse visa this year, as the required documentation ceased to be available.

Until Dec. 31, embassies had issued a "report and certificate of marriage" form, based on the verification of registration of marriage that "gu" district offices provided when a couple registered their marriage at the office. The Korean Supreme Court in November ordered the gu offices to stop issuing verification documents, stating that they do not have the legal right to issue them.

This caused problems for international couples applying for spouse visas, as they could not prepare the required documents. Many people were told they needed a "certificate of marriage" from the foreign spouse's home country.

According to an Immigration official, F-2 applicants require a marriage certificate from the spouse's home country to prevent bigamy. Korean authorities worry that a U.S. citizen married to a Korean in Korea would be free to marry someone else in America unless they report their marriage in the United States.

However, although these English-speaking countries recognize marriages happening outside their countries, they do not issue marriage certificates for the marriages taking place and registered outside their territories.

One American man who recently married a Korean woman told us that he had tried to get a marriage certificate from the U.S. Embassy after marrying in Korea, but was told that they could not issue a certificate since the ceremony was not held in the U.S.

"I called immigration and told them this, but they were not sympathetic and kept insisting that we need a U.S. marriage certificate. I kept telling them that we could not

get it because we were already married in Korea, but they wouldn't listen."

He said he was considering flying to the U.S. to marry his wife again, in order to get a U.S. marriage certificate.

"We can't afford to go to Hawaii but we don't really have a choice if I want to stay in the country and find other work without dealing with the E-2 requirements," he said, adding that he hadn't begun the lengthy preparations for the E-2 process as he thought he would have a spouse's visa.

He said the delay meant that he had missed out on the best time of year to find employment in English education, before the school year starts in March.

"I'll have to go back to an academy, which I haven't done in years," he said "My previous job was editing textbooks and I've been working at a private elementary school for the past year. I'm not looking forward to going back to a hagwon."

Immigration decided Monday which criteria to accept as valid for confirming that the marriage between a Korean citizen and a foreign spouse is legally recognized in their home country.

Director An Kyu-Suk of Immigration Bureau said that Immigration offices had been told that "any form that contains the couples' personal information, a statement that their marriage is valid and recognized in their home country, and a consular signature is considered applicable as certificate of marriage."

Although it is not clear whether all embassies concerned will be able to produce such forms, some confirmed that they had arranged to do so.

The New Zealand Embassy has come up with an alternative form, stating that the Korean marriage certificate issued at gu-offices — which is different to the report and certificate of marriage — is legally acceptable in New Zealand. The British Embassy has also come up with a valid form. (hyemi0216@gmail.com)