

Warm Ondol, Warm Heart

I Kyonhi (Korea)

Embers burning in the pechka, a kotatsu and sweet mandarin oranges ... every country has its own way to pass winter. So, what is done in Korea? Everyone sits in a warm room and talks. In Korean, that room is called an “ondol”. It means warm stones. When building the room, stones are laid under the floor with a system for heating them. When a fire is made, the warmed stones heat the floor of the room. A chimney that leads out of the room channels the smoke from the fire away from the house. For the Koreans, who have been sitting on the floor for meals since ancient times, a floor heated by warm “ondol” has been absolutely essential to life. As the warm air rises, it fills and warms the whole room. You can sense the wisdom of their forefathers in the ondol.

The ondol of Korea has a heating system that differs architecturally from homes of other countries. The difference is seen in the “togetherness”. For example, in a western pechka, people gather around a warm fire. But, with the heated floor system of Korea, people can gather and sit anywhere in the home. Moreover, when warming a room the traditional way, there are warm areas and slightly cold areas because of the structure. The warmest area is called the “kamiza (above the seat)”, while a less warm area is called the “shimoza (below the seat)”. Since long ago, the person of highest authority sits in the warmest spot and, if guests came over, a kamiza was prepared for them. You can see the warm heart of the Koreans, who are Confucian by faith.

Nowadays, the working principle of the modern ondol has been changed so as to heat the floor more simply. However, the typical home in Korea has warm floors. Today, the entire home is warm so there is no distinction between kamiza and shimoza. Meanwhile one can travel to the countryside (Hanok Village) where traditional homes are preserved and experience the original ondol with its separate kamiza and shimoza.

In the winter of 2009, I took a trip in Korea with friends. The theme of our trip was “to experience the Korean home”. We took a four-hour train ride from Seoul to Jeonju. This is where you find Hanok Village with 900 traditional homes and a floor area of 80,000 tsubo (approx. 240,000 m²). It is a popular tourist attraction that draws many Koreans besides foreigners. It is a beautiful village where traditional techniques have been applied to restore old homes. It is also famous for the many places where you can experience traditions for yourself. It is a great place for traditional weddings or trying

your hand at making traditional paper, ceramics and foods.

Our prime objective this time was the stay in one of the traditional homes in the village. The home has been preserved from the Joseon Dynasty and staying there was like going back into time. Even in a cold winter, the warm floor warms the body and soul when you enter the room. Comfy and cozy, we stayed up chitchatting to the wee hours of the night. At breakfast the next day, we felt quite accustomed to each other as having talked incessantly in the warm room the night before.

Why do the Koreans like this warm floor so much? All sorts of answers come to mind. I like to think it is because you can sense the “togetherness” in the warmest place of the house. Anyone who experiences the “ondol” will be captivated by the charm of the warm floor. I think it is safe to say that the warm heart of the Korean people was born from the gathering together in the “ondol.”