

A Healthier Gwang-ju

by Jeff Shields

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During my last contract in Gwang-ju I lost count of how many times my director declared that all things Korean promote 'good health'. Eating [kim-chi](#), and lots of it, ensured 'good health.' Hiking is certainly 'good health.' Green tea - Korean green tea, that is - is 'good health'. I'm quite certain that if gasoline was drinkable he would proclaim that imperative for 'good health', just as long as the gas was produced in Korea. With that spirit in mind there is little wonder why Koreans and foreigners alike are flocking to Gwang-ju's gyms in rapid pace.

Traditionally, Koreans have enjoyed a fitness regime consisting of such sports as mountain climbing, jogging, soccer and badminton to name but a few. However, with available space decreasing, hiking trails too crowded and heavier workloads many people are opting for fitness clubs in their neighbourhood. With 250-300 gyms already in Gwang-ju and more springing up each year, this is becoming increasingly easier.

As a foreigner in Gwang-ju whose Korean is admittedly terrible, joining a gym appeared to be a daunting task. Throughout university I enjoyed working out, finding it the only option to combat the incessant binge-drinking inherent with higher education. In my early twenties, however, a gym-related incident in Toronto that still haunts me to this day prompted a long break from working out. Due to an increase in my own workload my time was limited, so I reluctantly joined the muscleheads that crowd the gym on Saturdays. At the end of my workout I regrettably glimpsed in the direction of four steroid-junkies tearing each others shirts off after their last set. Horrified at the possibility of sharing a shower room with such animals I quickly went to the front desk and resigned from the gym. It took coming halfway around the world to feel comfortable working out again.

Enter Living Health, the first fitness club in Pungnam-Dong and an important part of the recent rise of a healthier Gwang-ju. Membership fees are 30,000 won per month or 100,000 won for five months, besting prices in Toronto by up to 50%. Living Health offers the standard amenities for a gym: cardio equipment, free weights and machines, as well as fitness advice and personalized training. Included in the price is a locker in the fully stocked changerooms, which have showers, ample storage space and a sauna in the women's changeroom. They also offer stretching classes - movements similar to Dahnhak yoga - four times daily (9 am, 11am, 5 pm and 8 pm). The club is managed by Yoo Byung-Ahn, who is certified in sports massage, chiropractic, health club

management and badminton. He speaks some English, and his wife is a university student who speaks extremely well. With the rest of their staff they are very accomodating, making everyone feel very welcome each time they come to work out.

Although I am the only foreigner at Living Health, I know that many of us are taking part of health club culture in Gwang-ju or are at least interested in becoming part of it. It's extremely easy to join (basically give them your money and a phone number) and the upside is tremendous. Aside from being active, I am more or less left alone to work out at my own pace. A hagwon teaching schedule is perfect, as most gyms are busiest in the early morning when none of will realistically be there (be honest) and right after regular business hours, when we are teaching. I occasionally have to answer the standard questions we often run into, but it is always pleasant and never forced upon me as it sometimes is at bars or on the street. One piece of advice would be to have your walkman with you, unless you find Korean pop music particularly motivating.

Being back in Gwang-ju for a second time it's good to experience something new, and no, I don't mean Mad Season as opposed to The Blue Monkey. Having an outlet like Living Health is perfect. Still, the familiar is... well, familiar. With that in mind I called my former director to talk about old times, see a friend and find out if he is still obsessed with 'good health'. As he poured the first of many so-ju's I realized something I should have known all along: Korea does have drinkable gas, and my old boss is the healthiest man in town.