

Dongnae Byeoljang and the Hot Springs

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Road to Dongnae Byeoljang

Walking from the main street of Dongnae hot spring resort along Geumgang-ro, you will come across the Oncheon 1-dong Community Service Center. In the alley behind it, you will find an entirely different world of old houses and trees wrapped inside a long perpendicular wall with traditional roof tiles. This is the famous Dongnae Byeoljang, or Dongnae Summer House. While it is now a traditional Korean course cuisine and palatial cuisine restaurant often used for weddings, it was a Japanese style garden building built in the early years of the Japanese occupation. The summer house was left in disuse for some time until after

independence when it was used by the U.S. army as an office and recreational facility. It was then sold to a private owner who began operating a high class restaurant in its premises. It was closed for a while in the 1990s and reopened in the 2000s in its current incarnation, which was selected as an official restaurant for the APEC Summit.

History Held within the Hot Springs

Let's turn back the clock to revisit the origins of the hot spring resort. The hot spring resort was originally a naturally formed village of about 30 households named Geumsan-ri. It was named Geumsan village for its location on the foothills of the beautiful Geumjeongsan mountain. Since the era of the three kingdoms, the hot spring in the village has been famous for its healing properties and was frequented by royalty, aristocrats, and men of learning extending into the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties. Even Japanese envoys to Joseon would visit the Dongnae hot spring, having heard of its restorative powers. According to the Sejong Sillok (Year 20, March 1st), Japanese nationals who entered through Naeipo (Jinhae Woongcheon) would head to Dongnae hot spring to bathe on their way back from Seoul, making long detours that caused fatigue in both men and horses. Thus a decree was made to have them bathe in Youngsan hot spring while the Japanese nationals anchored at Busan harbour would

be allowed to bathe in Dongnae hot spring. Another famous record of the Dongnae hot spring is the Bongsan Yokhaengnok, which describes mid-Joseon dynasty official Lee Yun-woo's visit to the hot spring with his old teacher Hangang Jeonggu in 1617 (9th year of Gwanghaegun). As more visitors came and the facilities became old, the bath had to be renovated. In 1766 (42nd year of Yeongjo), Gang Pil-ri, the chief administrator of Dongnae local government made comprehensive renovations to the hot spring bath and recorded the details in the onjeong gaegeonbi (hot spring reconstruction monument, Monument of Busan no. 14). The memorial stone currently stands at a modest height of 1.4 meters in the inner yonggak (dragon god shrine) courtyard, in front of Nokcheon bath. It is where annual rituals to the Dragon King are held. It seems paradoxical that this hot spring with all its rich history was only developed as a specialized destination by the Japanese after the annexation of Korea.

Development during Japanese Colonization and Modern Tourism

After the end of the Joseon dynasty, modern western civilization started to make its mark on Busan. Japanese capitalists made large investments in the city, beginning to build electrical infrastructure and railroads. The light railway service between

Busan and Dongnae began in 1909 and trams began running between central Busan and the hot spring resort. With the introduction of convenient modes of transportation, development of the hot spring resort began to accelerate in order to attract more tourists. This was when Japanese tourists began visiting places like the hot spring resort, Geumgang park, Beomeosa temple, and Tongdosa temple from the Japanese concession in large numbers.

The Dongnae Byeoljang was a Japanese garden style building constructed by the major property owner Hazama during the Japanese colonization. After entering Busan in the late 19th century as a trader, he became an independent businessman who amassed a fortune through land looting and loansharking, eventually becoming a property owner who had vast amounts of land in Dongnae, Kimhae, Yangsan, and Milyang. Many Japanese capitalists like him at the time would build summer homes in Busan and spend their days traveling and pleasure seeking. Famous hotels in the hot spring resort included the Bongnaegwan (which later became the Nongshim Hotel) and the Daeji Hotel, run by Japanese owners. With their clean baths and luxurious facilities, these establishments became the subject of great curiosity from the public. There used to be a large pond outside the Bongnaegwan, which is currently the area in front of the Heosimcheong spa. It was an artificial pond filled with water from the hot springs and photographs of people rowing boats in it and sitting by its shore are well known images even today.

These pictures are displayed in the corridors of Nongshim Hotel and Heosimcheong spa today, allowing us to picture what it used to look like.

After the original building was demolished and the facilities were expanded to include a main building and an annex, the Dongnae Byeoljang earned the new name of Bakgan Byeoljang. The overall structure and layout retained the style of Japanese luxury. The Dongnae Byeoljang has been visited by Japanese royalty while other high ranking officials from Japan have stayed in its premises. The spaces can be encountered one by one once you make it past the main gate inscribed with the name "Dongnae Byeoljang." At first, you see the main building behind the entrance path and modest forest. It is a 2 story Japanese style wooden building with long corridors decorated by glass windows. The well worn outer walls of wood and the stone bath within tell of the luxury during its prime. However some of the wood has been replaced during renovations and no evidence remains of the original interior layout as it has been converted to a Korean table d'hote restaurant. The garden is well groomed with a variety of plants and stone sculptures. At the back is a pavilion where one can gaze upon the small Japanese style pond with a stone bridge as well as a path where one can take a leisurely stroll.

As the development boom of the modern era ensued, the hot spring resort rose in fame. Hot spring owners then tried to attract even more customers. The Joseon Gas and Electricity Corporation, which opened a new spa in 1925, sold discounted

railway tickets together with spa tickets. It was a package deal selling tourism products together with spa entry. In 1922, the South Manchuria Railroad Corporation opened the grand Mancheol Hotel in the hot spring resort, gaining control of hot spring management rights. At the time, promotional postcards and guide maps to the hot springs and Geumgangwon gained in popularity, inspiring a desire for travel in ordinary people. This culture of tourism which transformed the Dongnae hot springs and Geumgangwon into recreational areas was the result of imperial Japan's policy of promoting colony tourism among Japanese and Koreans. The hot springs of historical Dongnae and tales from travellers became an effective promotional tool for colony tourism, enticing Japanese tourists to board the Busan-Shimonoseki ferry to Busan. This led to large scale accommodations, restaurants and shops opening in the area as well as its streets becoming lined with cherry blossoms, transforming it into a pleasure-centric hot spring resort for the Japanese.

Return to the People after Its Days of Glory and Shame

The Dongnae Byeoljang has gone through a reversal of fate, from its days of indignity when it was a summer house for an exploitative colonial capitalist under Japanese rule and then a recreational facility for American soldiers during military rule after independence to finally entering Korean possession. After it

was sold to a private owner, it was very successfully operated as a high class Korean restaurant from the 60s to the 80s. It was where political and economic elites gathered and its halls were filled with female performers who did fan dances to gayageum and jango music. Rumour had it that dozens of hanboks would be sent to the laundry next door the day after a banquet night. In my undergraduate days, I had a daring friend who would jokingly try to goad us into going to Dongnae Byeoljang to see the female performers. Of course a table there back then cost 1 million won in today's prices so it was out of the question. Present day Dongnae Byeoljang consists of a Korean restaurant, a Japanese restaurant, a traditional wedding hall and a folk performance stage. It is a comprehensive cultural space where one can not just savour international dishes from Korea and Japan in the midst of cozy nature but also enjoy a variety of performances in a comfortable setting. Dongnae district hosts the Dongnae Eupseong Historical Festival every October. During the festival, a variety of cultural games and historical reenactments take place along the Dongnae town wall, the Cultural Center and around the hot spring resorts. In front of the yonggak, one can watch the parade for the Dongnae hot spring dragon king ritual. With the hot spring festival, a new landmark called Dongnae Spatopia was also created. It is an outdoor hot spring foot bath open to all passers by who wish to rest their tired legs. The hot spring resort has been returned to the people after the days of indignity past. The summer house and hot springs of Dongnae are

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becoming familiar places of rest and recreation for ordinary citizens.