

The Han River Flows From Earth to the Milky Way

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Although space flights and space settlements have been dreams of humans for eons, only a few American astronauts have ever walked on the surface of a natural object other than Earth, when they did so almost four decades ago. No humans have walked on our Moon or any other place in space since then. And humans may never return again.

It is entirely possible that future generations of humans will look back on that experience in the late 1960s and early 1970s as occurring during a strange, aberrant period in human history, never to be repeated again. Eventually that marvelous moment may fade from memory as a fact and become another mis-remembered myth from a time of giants and heroes, long, long ago.

Instead of returning to the Moon--and moving on to Mars and elsewhere in the Inner Solar System--humans instead have wasted our precious natural and human resources on stupid wars, maniacal economic growth, and senseless consumerism. Moreover, we have polluted the space above us almost as badly as we have polluted the water around us and ground under our feet. There is so much garbage in space that, if we continue our pollution, humans may be forced to remain on Earth forever. Our own space garbage may seal us in as surely as our lack of resources may keep us here.

However, it may be that humans simply will not have the time, resources, will, or even possibility to go the Moon, Mars or elsewhere ever again. It certainly does not seem that the United States, which, with the former Soviet Union, once led humanity to the stars, has the will and the ways to continue forward. While there is great potential for space leadership in China, India, Europe, Brazil and elsewhere, Korea strangely has lagged behind.

Korea--a nation that has correctly been described as the world's first "Dream Society"--has strangely ignored the greatest dream humanity has ever had, which is to leap out of the confines of its cradle, Earth, and to take our rightful place within the universe: first on the planets and moons near Earth, then farther out in the solar system, and finally among the myriad galaxies of the Milky Way and beyond.

What are we waiting for? Why doesn't Korea grasp the opportunity for leadership and urge humanity forward?

Once upon a time, the Han River served both as the source of live-giving water for irrigation, and as the main avenue of commerce along the spine of the peninsula. Then, for some years the river served as little more than a sewer for industrial growth. Now the Han is mainly an object of nostalgia expressed in poems, songs, and soap operas.

Oh Se-young wrote:

"The Han River flows
Into rice fields and gardens.
The River colors barley and cabbage in blue.
Snowstorms can't stop the River.
Rainstorms can't detour the way of the River.
The River encourages all creatures to lighten their lives.
Now, the River flows in silence like the Milky Way of the universe."

It is time now for the Han to serve as the source of inspiration for space travel, as Oh's poem dares us to dream. As birds now rise from, fly above, and return to the Han, so should humanity rise from the Han to the heavens.

There is a famous image of the vast Milky Way as imaginatively seen from an even more distant spot in space, with a sign pointing to a tiny dot within the galaxy which says, "You are Here."

I challenge the leaders of Korea to become foremost champions in the space enterprises and activities of the 21st Century so as to enable humanity to flow from "here", with the Han, to the "there" of the Milky Way and beyond.