

In a land of workaholics, burned-out South Koreans go to 'prison' to relax

Sun-won Kang recently spent a week occupying five square metres of solitude. He gave up his phone, swapped his clothing for a uniform of dark-blue shirt and slacks and slept on the floor of cell number 207.

He grew a bristly beard, took meals of rice porridge through a door slot and used a toilet and washbowl in the corner.

But this wasn't prison. In work-addicted South Korea, this was his vacation.

The Land of the Morning Calm is the most overworked nation in Asia. It has the second-longest work hours in the 35-nation Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, after Mexico. South Koreans work 2,069 hours a year, compared to the average of 1,764 hours among OECD countries.

Fourteen-hour days are not uncommon here, nor are six-day workweeks. Small wonder, then, that professionals like Kang seek ways to alleviate burnout.



Guests emerge from solitary confinement at Prison Inside Me to assist in cleaning and maintaining the facility. (Matt Kwong/CBC)

The 57-year-old engineer was clocking nearly 70 hours a week at a Kia and Hyundai car plant in Seoul. This month, he was among 14 guests who paid 500,000 Korean won

(\$578 Cdn) to stay for seven days at Prison Inside Me, a meditation centre in Hongcheon, a snowy mountain hamlet two hours west of Pyeongchang.

Here, Kang said, he could slip out of the shackles of manic Korean life by shutting out external stimuli and focusing inward.

"I'm overworking. That's the main reason I'm here," he said, his voice barely rising above a whisper on the last day of an intensive zen program called The Gateless Gate.

"Today, I feel more refreshed. My mind is light."

A feeling of 'freedom'

This was Kang's third stay at Prison Inside Me, which opened in 2008. Over the years, hundreds of patrons from around the country have checked in, including office workers, stay-at-home moms and high-school students. One program even hosted a 13-year-old boy.

The 28 identical cells have a window, heated wooden floors, a small table with a diary, a tea set, a yoga mat and a panic button. Though the doors are locked on the outside, participants are shown how to undo the latch from inside.

Repeat visitors insist that for what it lacks in amenities, the facility makes up in spiritual healing. The penal atmosphere provides Kang with something he feels he's missing back in the capital.



Each of the 28 identical cells is equipped with a table, kettle, tea set, diary, toilet and washbowl. (Matt Kwong/CBC)

"Freedom," he said.

That attitude reflects the irony of the jail-themed retreat, said Ji-hyang Roh, the facility's co-founder.

"Locking themselves up in solitary confinement here is not a prison; the true prison is the world outside," she mused.

The complex was the brainchild of her husband, Yong-Seok Kwon. As a prosecutor in the countryside, Kwon was working 100-hour weeks. It took a physical and mental toll.

"I thought I would feel better if I stayed in solitary confinement. At least there are no people, no phone calls looking for me, no smoking, no drinking," Kwon said. "I would be alone. And I would probably heal myself in a prison."

So Kwon built his own version. The stress-reduction facility operates as a non-profit run by an organization called Happiness Factory. It cost three billion Korean won (\$3.5 million Cdn) to build, and most of it was self-funded. The rest came from donations.

'I cried, too'

Given time to relieve their existential angst, guests sometimes end up weeping silently inside their cells.

"I cried, too," said Roh, who runs a theatre company and recently spent 24 hours in solitary confinement in one of the empty third-level cells.



A guest receives a daily meal of rice porridge and pickled vegetables through a food tray slot in the door of her cell. (Courtesy Happiness Factory)

South Korea's competitive work and educational demands have bred a nation of economic worriers and potentially dangerous habits. Last year, there were a spate of stories about fatigued bus drivers who fell asleep at the wheel, resulting in deadly accidents and prompting a reexamination of overwork culture.

Age and hierarchy might influence the amount of overtime employees accrue, said Bongsoo Jung, a prominent Seoul-based labour lawyer.

"There's a culture of respecting your elders, your senior managers," said Jung. "The employees want to show some loyalty — like they must follow what's asked of them."

Decades ago, it was viewed as necessary for fast-tracking economic growth. But work itself has become an occupational hazard, blamed for societal ills such as a declining birth rate and an alarming suicide rate.

President Moon Jae-in's "right to rest" campaign introduced last year aims to slash the workweek from a legal maximum of 68 hours to a more manageable 52 hours. Politicians have been haggling over whether a workweek in the final law should count weekends, and are debating how overtime factors in.

Distraction-free living

Technology has also taken some of the blame for inflated work expectations. Some

companies have restricted use of KakaoTalk, South Korea's most popular smartphone messaging app. For many users, the instant chat service has become a millstone, allowing employers to contact staff at any hour.



Ji-hyang Roh, the facility's co-founder, said some of the guests end up crying after experiencing solitary confinement and getting the opportunity to reflect on how overwork has affected their lives. (Matt Kwong/CBC)

At Prison Inside Me, participants must part with their phones during their solitary confinement. Many visitors welcome the rule.

"This retreat is the place for me," said 63-year-old Jeong-soon Yoon, who works 10 hours a day, six days a week, running two cafes at a Seoul university. "I've been looking for a place where I can really find myself."

During her stay, Yoon performed 108 Buddhist bows in the morning. The voice of an on-site monk was piped into her room for an hour each day through speakers in the ceiling. Untethering from the world of instant communication helped her meditate distraction-free for four hours a day, she said.

Running Prison Inside Me has helped Kwon achieve a measure of fulfilment. He wants the concept to spread globally. Curiously, though, he revealed he's still working as a lawyer. Was it not counterintuitive to take on a second job?

Not quite, he insisted.

"I'm not working 100 hours a week anymore — I'm cutting back," Kwon said. "And what gives me happiness now is seeing people stay here and feel better."