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How a Beloved Chalk Bridged a Bitter Divide to Survive

By HIKARI HIDA and JEAN CHUNG



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEAN CHUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A worker checks the density of the chalk dough under a bread blender at the Hagoromo chalk production line in Pocheon, South Korea. "I thought, 'Chalk is chalk,' but I was wrong," said David Eisenbud, the director of the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, who has purchased a lifetime supply. Devotees love the chalk's vivd colors, left.

The bright-white sticks drop one by one into the whir and clatter of a weatherworn piece of machinery, where they are stamped with the most celebrated name in chalk: Hagoromo.

The early stages of the process look a lot like food production. The ingredients in what the company's owner calls a "recipe" are dumped into a mixer originally designed for bread dough, and what comes out is fed into a kneader originally intended to make udon noodles.

Of the thick grayish mass that emerges, four ingredients are known: calcium carbonate, clay, glue and oyster shells. The other three are a secret. In a video posted to YouTube about the chalk, an American fan offers a guess as to one of them: angel tears.

Hagoromo chalk is a cult favorite of elite academics, artists and others around the world who praise it for its silky feel, vibrant colors, scant dust and nearly unbreakable quality. Mathematicians in particular are prone to waxing poetic about it, and buying it in bulk. The YouTube video, produced by Great Big Story, has been viewed more than 18 million times.

Despite its renown, Hagoromo is still produced on a relatively small scale, using custom-made equipment, much of it run by two laborers who are identical twins — a throwback in a high-tech era where interactive displays are replacing chalkboards.

The chalk has survived World War II and, nearly 70 years later, the closing of the Japanese company that originally made it. The coronavirus pandemic is the latest threat, hurting sales as education and other activities go virtual.

Hagoromo's continued existence is an unlikely story that bridges Japan and South Korea, two countries that have had an uneasy, and often bitter, relationship ever since the war.

The company that produced the chalk for its first eight decades was founded in Nagoya, Japan, in 1932 as Nihon Chalk Seizosho. After its production building burned in a World War II air raid, the company was rebuilt and chalk manufacturing resumed in 1947 under the name Hagoromo Bungu.

Production peaked in 1990 at 90 million sticks. But sales then steadily declined, eventually reaching half that level over the next two decades amid competition from whiteboards and newer technologies like so-called smartboards.

In 2014, Takayasu Watanabe, the grandson of the company's founder, announced that Hagoromo would halt production, partly because of the industry's declining fortunes and partly because of his own ill health. He did not ask any of his three daughters to take over the company.

As Mr. Watanabe was preparing to shut it down, he received a visit from Shin Hyeong-seok, who had been importing the chalk to South Korea for nearly 10 years. Mr. Shin sold the chalk through his company, Sejong Mall, named after King Sejong the Great, who in the 15th century created Hangeul, the Korean writing system.

Mr. Shin had discovered the chalk years before in Japan while investigating the workings of cram schools. At the time, he was teaching math part time while pursuing a Ph.D. and his dreams



of becoming an architect.

"I went into the teachers' lounge and remember being mesmerized by the fluorescent-colored chalks," he said. "And when I started writing with one, I could not put it down."

On his trip to see Mr. Watanabe, Mr. Shin presented what he called a "crazy idea." He, a teacher and importer with no manufacturing experience, would take over production of the chalk in South Korea. Mr. Watanabe laughed.

But Mr. Shin kept pressing. "My pitch to him was that there are many things in the world that will disappear one day, but the best-quality item should be the last to do so," Mr. Shin said.

Eventually, Mr. Watanabe came around. He gave his machines to Mr. Shin at practically no cost. The slightly younger of the two twins, Choi Eui-chun, an ethnic Korean born in Japan, moved to South Korea to work at Mr. Shin's factory, and the older brother, Choi Eui-haeng, later joined him.

Mr. Watanabe visited three or four times to examine the installation and operation of the machines from his wheelchair. He died in July.

Since 2015, the chalk has been produced in a modest corrugated metal building along a four-lane rural highway 20 miles from the border with North Korea.

Many of the machines in the small factory, like the logo stamper, with its rust-flecked metal and old-style rubber imprinter, look more like museum pieces than cogs in a modern assembly line. At the end of the assembly line, the chalk is sorted into rows of 12 and then placed by workers into boxes bearing the name Hagoromo Full-touch Chalk. "World Best Quality," the boxes proclaim.

Seventy-two white pieces sell for $11.

> A favorite of artists and academics who prize its silky feel.

Mr. Watanabe was called a traitor by some of his colleagues who accused him of seeking to transfer good technology to South Korea. The Japanese chalk association feared that Mr. Shin would produce an inferior, cheaper product and export it to Japan, undercutting manufacturers there.

Mr. Shin recalled that Mr. Watanabe had been untroubled by any of this criticism. He said that Mr. Watanabe eventually came to treat him as a son.

Takako Iwata, the second of Mr. Watanabe's three daughters, who served as interpreter for Mr. Shin and her father, saw a grander ambition in their bond. "I hope my father's chalk could help relieve Japan-Korea tensions," she said. "That's the hope, at least."

She said she wasn't exactly sure how Hagoromo had become so beloved outside Japan. "I guess people who came to Japan just kept on bringing the chalk back to their home countries," she said. "When my father was still running the company, he did not know about this huge following."

That changed a bit, though, in his company's final months, when he received a flood of orders, including from American professors who hoped to buy supplies large enough to last 10 years or more.

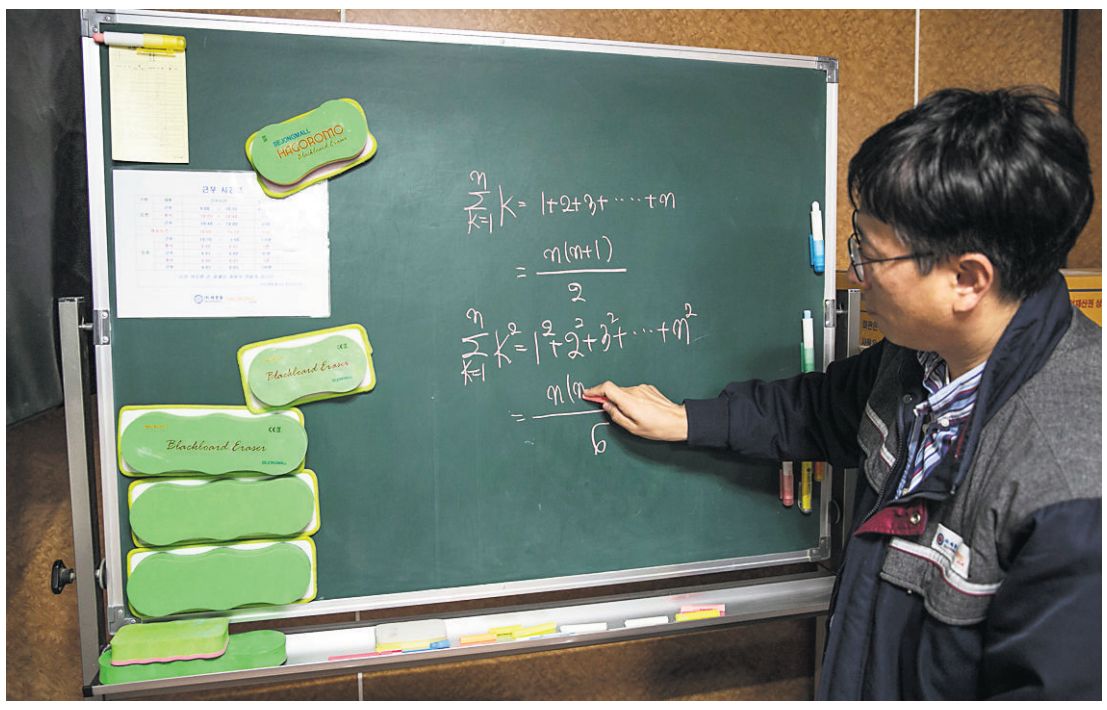
David Eisenbud, the director of the Mathematical Sciences Research Institute at the University of California, Berkeley, said he had bought enough to last the rest of his life.

Dr. Eisenbud is a key figure in the chalk's popularization in the United States. He was first introduced to it years ago during a visit to the University of Tokyo. "Everything about the chalk was exquisite," he said. "I thought, 'Chalk is chalk,' but I was wrong."

He later persuaded an acquaintance to import the chalk into the United States. (Mr. Shin now sells it to American buyers through Amazon.)

Yujiro Kawamata, a Japanese mathematician who introduced Hagoromo to Dr. Eisenbud, marveled at the turn of events.

"I happened to tell Eisenbud about the chalk, which was just a tool that was a part of my everyday life, and now the whole world knows about it," Dr. Kawamata said.



Shin Hyeong-seok acquired Hagoromo Chalk after the founder's grandson halted production.

Su-Hyun Lee contributed reporting.

Anger in China as Store Brands Larger Women's Sizes 'Rotten'

By TIFFANY MAY

HONG KONG — "Slim." "Beautiful." "Rotten." "Extra Rotten." "Rotten to the Core."

Those were the size descriptions for women's clothing, ranging from small to XXL, that a Taiwanese chain, RT-Mart, slapped on chart measurements in one of its superstores in China.

It set off a furor this past week in a country where fat shaming is common on the internet and in advertising, and institutionalized definitions of beauty and femininity are narrow.

The chart was first noticed by a customer who took to Weibo, a Chinese microblogging platform, to criticize the retailer, according to local news reports. "Help!" the customer wrote. "I was stupefied when I saw this at an RT-Mart location today. I feel rotten to the core."

Soon, photos of the chart, which specified that the clothes were for women between the ages of 18 and 35, began circulating online on Nov. 11, China's Singles' Day, an annual online shopping extravaganza concocted by the e-commerce behemoth Alibaba as an alternative to Valentine's Day. Alibaba is a major shareholder of RT-Mart.

Dismay and anger over the size descriptions erupted in China. "We shouldn't elevate thinness as the beauty standard," a blogger who uses the handle "Is This a Joke?" wrote. "Even if someone's weight is perhaps in the highest category, you can't just put them in the 'rotten to the core' category."

The issue of body shaming has drawn scrutiny globally as, more and more, women have emphasized fitness and acceptance of their bodies, as well as pushed back against impossible beauty standards. In China, many are starting to challenge an aesthetic that has been held up as the ideal for Chinese women — "pale, thin and youthful."

In 2016, after women — and some men — on social media began posting photographs of their waists behind a vertical piece of A4 paper to boast of their small sizes, others mounted a different campaign. One social media user named Zhai Ruoyi wrote on Weibo: "How can you have an A4 waist? I have A4 legs!" And Zheng Churan, a feminist, posted a photo with the paper held horizontally and the message, "I love my fat waist."

Clothing brands have long been accused of fueling unattainable beauty standards. J. Crew's XXXS and triple-zero sizes for women were criticized for normalizing an unrealistic and unhealthily thin look. The company said in 2014 that the sizes had been created because of growing customer demand from its Hong Kong stores, both of which closed this year.

Some social media users questioned why RT-Mart would want to sabotage its sales with such polarizing language. Others saw the chart as a failed attempt at humor. Still others saw it as emblematic of a larger issue about body standards.

"Two of society's most nauseating standards: women's figures and men's heights," a blogger named Laphro said on Weibo.

Jen Chen, a reporter in the eastern Chinese city of Jinan, noted in a Weibo blog post that the sizes — S, M, L, XL and XXL — corresponded with adjectives in Mandarin that had similar sounds — shou, mei, lan, xi lan, xi ba lan. She said that another word for large — liang, or attractive — would have been much more appealing.

> Igniting a debate over fat shaming and beauty standards.

RT-Mart, which operates a few hundred supermarkets in mainland China, later apologized, saying that it was "deeply sorry for the inappropriately worded marketing material and the offense it caused."

The company added that it had removed the problematic sign, noting that it had been in only one store, the location of which was not identified.

Some of the anger appears to have been directed toward the chain's Taiwanese owners, as tensions grow between Beijing and the self-governed island, which China claims. A few users found the chain's apology insufficient and said they would boycott its superstores for offending customers in mainland China.

China Women's News, a newspaper owned by the state agency All-China Women's Federation, published an editorial on Saturday with the scorching title, "The evil and vulgar body-shaming chain is on the road to ruin."

It said that RT-Mart was "playing with fire" and that "such base methods exude the rotten smell of death," the newspaper said.

It's an issue that permeates many aspects of Chinese society, including job advertisements, which often stipulate height, weight and "attractiveness" requirements for women. In a 2015 job posting, Alibaba said applicants must have "recognizably good looks." It deleted the posting after it drew anger online.

The aesthetic has even crept into the pinnacle of athleticism — the Olympics. Female ushers hired for the 2008 Beijing Games were told that they had to have a "standard body shape with good proportions," and only those between 5-foot-6 and 5-foot-10 were considered. (The average height of Chinese women is 5-foot-2.)

Height requirements in certain arenas also extended to men: Male soldiers selected to march in China's National Day military parade in 2019 had to be between 5-foot-9 and 6 feet tall, the state news media reported.

Afra Wang, a host of the Chinese-language pop culture podcast "Loud Murmurs," was doubtful that the backlash against body shaming would bring about any major cultural shifts. She said in a phone interview that language celebrating the diversity of bodies was superficial and limited at best.

"Body positivity is still a very peripheral topic," she said, adding, "I don't see any sign of social change."

Thinness as a selling point is still a powerful lure.

Brandy Melville, a brand that carries a single size — extra small — for all its clothing, opened a store in Shanghai last year and has since gained a large following among young women in China. This year, a series of videos appeared on Douyin, a Chinese app similar to TikTok. They showed young women weighing themselves and breathlessly calculating when they would lose enough weight to fit into the brand's crop tops and 24-inch jeans.

Aid Groups Seek Access To Refugees In Ethiopia

By SIMON MARKS and ERIC NAGOURNEY

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — Even before fighting started in November between the Ethiopian government and powerful military forces in the country's northern region of Tigray, the area was home to as many as 200,000 refugees and displaced people, according to United Nations agencies.

Now, with airstrikes increasing and the conflict intensifying, international aid groups say that tens of thousands more people are fleeing. But the organizations say that they have been prevented from helping.

On Tuesday, aid groups appealed to the Ethiopian government to secure access for them to the Tigray region so they can replenish dwindling supplies for people stranded by the fighting. At refugee camps in Tigray, fuel is running perilously low, a major concern because the camps rely on generators to pump water.

"We have fuel for a week — and that maybe dwindled to days now," said Ann Encontre, resident representative for the U.N's refugee agency in Ethiopia. "So you can imagine how desperate everything is."

The conflict began in early November when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed ordered Ethiopia's military to open a military offensive against the powerful ruling faction in Tigray. Mr. Abiy accused the region's ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front of arming irregular militias and orchestrating an attack on a federal army base.

The T.P.L.F. had for decades been the dominant force in Ethiopia's government, but when Mr. Abiy became prime minister in 2018, he accused the region's leaders of corruption and sought to undermine their power. They quit the coalition government, and proceeded to hold regional elections in Tigray, in defiance of Mr. Abiy, who had called off elections, citing the pandemic.

While reports from the region are sparse, analysts and aid workers say that hundreds of people have died in the fighting since then, and thousands have been displaced.

Saviano Abreu, spokesman for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, in East Africa, said "Since the conflict began in early November we have had reports of tens of thousands of people being newly displaced inside Tigray."

In addition, 5,000 people crossed the Ethiopian border to Sudan just on Monday. So far, more than 27,000 people fleeing the violence in Tigray have arrived in Sudan, Mr. Abreu said.

With roads to Tigray cut off, getting food and other supplies to the refugees has become impossible, the aid group says. Most communication lines are also cut off.

"Because of the communications blackout, it's really difficult to corroborate a lot of the information we get," Ms. Encontre said.

Speaking to reporters in Addis Ababa on Monday, Redwan Hussein, the Ethiopian state minister for foreign affairs, offered reassurances.

"We'll come up in a couple of days with a solution," he said. "We will come up with a plan to take care of the humanitarian issue before it becomes a crisis."

But aid workers are becoming increasingly frantic, with one senior U.N. official complaining of "a de facto economic blockade."

The U.N. has food, health supplies and other goods in warehouses ready to be sent to Tigray. The problem is getting there.

"The telecommunications are down, road access is closed, and fuel, water and cash in particular for our remaining staff and civilians to buy food wherever they may be is cut off," said Catherine Sozi, the United Nations resident coordinator in Ethiopia.

"Things are getting rather hard," she said.

Aid groups are in talks with both the government and the Tigray Region leadership about opening a humanitarian corridor. But in the meantime, thousands of refugees have decided to flee.

Mr. Abiy was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize last year "for his efforts to achieve peace and international cooperation, and in particular for his decisive initiative to resolve the border conflict with neighboring Eritrea."

But with the fighting spreading in Ethiopia and threatening to bring about a wider conflict in the region, the Nobel Peace Prize committee on Tuesday issued a rare — if tacit — rebuke of one of its honorees.

"The Norwegian Nobel Committee follows the developments in Ethiopia closely, and is deeply concerned," it said in a statement.

Simon Marks reported from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and Eric Nagourney from New York. Rick Gladstone contributed reporting from New York.