

Understanding the ways of the ajuma

As many ajumma have similar hair styles, sometimes it's hard to figure out which one is your mother. By Michelle Kang

It is said that there are three genders in Korea: male, female and ajumma.

Ajumma in Korean refers to a married woman or a middle-aged lady, but it has a deeper meaning than that. These women are often mocked or considered a threat because of their tendency to be aggressive or self-centered, mostly in public places.

For instance, it's difficult for most young women to balance a large bag of rice on their heads, but even the tiniest of ajumma can do it with ease while shoving people out of the way.

Feel free to call older men ajosshi, but if a woman is called ajumma by a stranger, she probably won't be happy, thinking her physical appearance, behavior or style was being criticized.

Here is a look at the characteristics of one of the most socially influential figures in Korea: the ajumma.

Fashion

The hair is a good sign. Most ajumma get the same solid perm and try to maintain the strong curly waves for as long as possible. The reason behind the unified hairstyle is based on practical reasons. The stronger the curls are, and the longer the hairstyle stays. They have more important things to do.

Another feature is their identical style. For semi-formal occasions, the go-to outfit for ajumma is a simple black jacket with glittering gemstones and a vivid, brightly-colored shirt underneath. But there's another item that is ubiquitous: outdoor apparel.

Whether they are going abroad for a vacation or just visiting a neighborhood park, ajumma pull out their favorite mountain gear. They must have at least one red or hot-pink wind breaker made of Gore-Tex fabric with matching pants.

When they get serious and go hiking or jogging, they are dressed head-to-toe in the getup. To protect sensitive eyes from ultraviolet rays, they wear a Darth Vader-like sun visor. Yellow dust is deadly to ajumma, so a mask that completely covers the face except the eyes is a must.

It's almost impossible to tell who is who, but ajumma in their Korean HazMat suits can recognize each other regardless of the number of layers.

Ajumma like to cover their faces with hats and scarves to protect their skin from the sun.

Lifestyle

As suggested above, hiking is the biggest fad among ajumma. Almost every weekend, the mountains are tinged with the fluorescent jackets of middle-aged hikers. They are fully equipped with professional hiking gear, from trekking poles to functional hiking boots.

Hiking is not just for exercise. For tired moms, daughters-in-law and wives, it's a way to connect with others. That's why they pile onto the subway on weekend mornings for this short getaway trip while their

family members are still in bed.

If ajumma are going on a longer trip with their friends to enjoy the autumn foliage or snow flowers on Mount Seorak, they will cook gomguk, or beef broth, for their families to survive without them as the broth makes a great meal with only a bowl of rice. That's why husbands start to get worried they're going to be left alone when their wives start to boil a big pot of gomguk.

Though not as popular as mountains, public parks and jjimjilbang serve as good hangout places. The health-conscious ajumma do very unique moves to maintain a toned body on the walking trails in the parks along the Han River.

Simple jogging is not enough, so they power-walk, swinging their arms back and forth at an almost 90-degree angle. Some experienced joggers walk backward while others walk clapping in front and then behind. Another popular workout is hitting backs against trees. They believe the impact helps improve their blood circulation.

In particularly bad weather, ajumma go to jjimjilbang, Korean saunas, for skin care. They burn body fat while sweating in front of an intensely hot furnace and watching TV dramas while chatting with fellow ajumma lying down on the heated floor with facial masks. It seems every woman's desire is to look as youthful and beautiful as possible, regardless of age or marital status.

Behavior

The most distinctive traits of ajumma can be summed up with two words: speed and power. Recently, a TV commercial for high-speed Internet depicted how fast ajumma can move on the subway.

First, they hunt for an empty seat through the windows while waiting on the platform for the train. As soon as the door opens, they turn into a multi-sport athlete. They shove their way through to get a seat, dashing like Usain Bolt, body-checking like Scott Stevens and breaking tackles like Michael Vick.

If a seat is out of reach, they will throw their purse like a Justin Verlander fastball to the exact target to secure the seat. This can probably explain why Korea has had such great success at the Olympics!

Even if the space is only big enough for half a bum to be perched, any ajumma worth her salt can squeeze in and widen it enough to seat herself.

Among their many skills is an ability to make noise, either by non-stop popping of the chewing gum or by shouting on the phone in a high-pitched voice. This way, the bus driver never falls asleep on long distance trips!

Their unrivalled athletic skills also work well at large discount stores. On the last day of a limited time sale, speed and strength are key. After shopping, it doesn't seem to be a problem for them to walk all over the town with a ton of shopping bags in-hand and a heavy bundle on top of their heads.

Looking at their softer sides, ajumma are natural social lubricants. Far from shy, they are gregarious and readily make friends with anybody. If you are alone and lost on a mountain, at a wedding with nobody to talk to or having a fight on the telephone, seek out an ajumma. They can hash out a deal and solve problems with their great negotiation skills and sociability.

Once upon a time, they were shy, blushing girls, but marriage and age gave them a social influence with some power. They have to be as strong and sometimes intimidating as they are in order to play different roles. Ajumma are judges, juries, referees, facilitators, conciliators, accountants, attorneys and generals. It's often said that being a mother is the toughest job in the world, but try being an ajumma for a day. Hats off to them!

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