

# My Cultural Learning in Korea: The Highs and Lows

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## Biography

Brian Heldenbrand is from Cameron, Missouri in the United States. He first came to Korea in 1988 as a foreign exchange student in Korea Baptist Theological College in Daejeon for 16 months and returned to Korea in 1992 as an English teacher in the city of Jeonju. Brian has taught English in Jeonju University since 1994 and has more than 20 years experience in the field. Brian enjoys Korea and is always eager to learn more about the Korean language and its culture.

## Abstract

Life as a foreigner in Korea for almost 20 years has brought its cultural highs and lows. Entering the country with an extremely limited understanding of the language and culture resulted in exhausting periods of struggle as well as rewarding learning opportunities. Before entering Korea, as a university student, I was fortunate to have had prior

worthwhile experiences with Korean students on our American university campus. After arriving in Korea, friends, classmates, and students have shared valuable insights with me for better relating to Koreans within their culture. Although I never intended to stay in Korea more than a few years, the additional years in Korea have given me the opportunity to experience Korean culture firsthand. These cultural experiences gathered through the years will always remain as valuable imprints in my life for better understanding Korean people and living well in Korea. This paper focuses on the author's last 20 years of his life, as he prepared for departure to Korea in 1988, experienced Korean culture while studying abroad in Daejeon, and during the cultural ups and downs of his life in Jeonju, as a foreign bachelor and later as a married man to his American wife.

## Introduction

I came to live and work in Korea in my early twenties and am now in my early forties. Interestingly, I have lived almost half of my life in Korea. Although I am not a Korean, but an American, I have chosen to live and work among a nationality that generally recognizes me as a foreigner. The comment I hear these days, is “You’re almost Korean!” For me, the word almost, after living in Korea for about 20 years, is interpreted as still a long way off. My reasoning for this interpretation is determined by the response I receive from many Koreans when I’ve asked them why they were late for our appointment: “I’m almost there.” After often waiting another 30 minutes for their arrival after hearing this statement, I’ve come to learn that the word almost simply means “not yet”. Crane believes that a foreigner will never be completely accepted as a person by Koreans. He writes, “a Westerner can never become a Korean” (Crane, 1978).

A common word heard early-on in a foreigner's visit to Korea is the

word, “foreigner” or “외국인”. This word is used to classify his or her position within society. As Paul S. Crane wrote in *Korean Patterns*, “A beggar, a prostitute, a criminal, a butcher, and in a certain sense, a foreigner, is an ‘unperson’” (Crane, 1978). These are somewhat harsh words, but I believe foreigners are still very much outsiders in Korea, who are rarely offered the chance to participate in major decision-making opportunities. To illustrate, I use the example of a football game, because many people play football in Korea. Some foreigners desire to participate by playing on the field, but the only option generally provided for them as they live in Korea is to sit in the audience and be spectators. For me, as a foreigner in Korea, climbing over or breaking down the established walls of national pride has been quite difficult, but over time, I have been given the opportunity to kick the ball around a little. Over time, I hope more foreigners in Korea will eventually be offered the chance to become a starter or a consistent player on Korea’s team. According to data from the Korean Immigration office, the number of foreign residents in Korea surpassed one million in August of 2007 (Howe, 2008). Times are swiftly changing in Korea and more changes are on the horizon.

A common question asked endlessly to foreigners in Korea is “Are you an American?” I couldn’t tell you how many times I’ve been asked this question. Fortunately, for me, I am an American. However, I feel sorry for the Canadians and other English-speaking foreigners who come to live and work in Korea. The American military’s presence in Korea for the last 50 years has left a strong impression on the minds of its citizens. This is a question error: if the question were adjusted to, “Where are you from?” it would easily erase the dissension caused by the bias towards Americans. Korea is fortunate to have English teachers from many nations of the world.

Overall, my stay as a foreigner in Korea has provided me with an enormous number of memories and an abundance of cultural stories that

will never be erased from my mind. Yes, cultural diversity exists and as I've chosen to immerse myself within a culture that sometimes runs counter to my upbringing, I've learned to appreciate the diversity. This diversity has made me a better foreigner in Korea and has also greatly assisted me in trying to adapt myself to know when my small-town, Midwestern, United States cultural upbringing is not an appropriate solution to my circumstance. Korea, with its diverse culture, has been a great educator in my life.

### Korean Experiences Before Coming to Korea

My experience with Korea began as a university student at Southwest Baptist University, a small, private Christian school in Bolivar, Missouri, U.S.A. I had the opportunity to hook up with a Biology lab partner named, Jeong-hoon Nam. On that day, we were doing blood-type sampling and we were the only two in the class who had the AB blood type. (Since that time, though, I've learned my blood type is O, not AB; oh well, the friendship was established.) The establishment of this friendship led me to become involved with the Korean Student Association, a group of around 20 Korean students on our campus. My friend, Jeong-hoon was the oldest Korean student and served as the leader of the group. I greatly enjoyed his company and came to better understand his hardships as he lived and studied abroad. One summer, Jeong-hoon's parents came for a visit and stayed in our apartment for a few weeks. His father could speak some English, but his mother only spoke Korean. On one particular occasion, Jeong-hoon's mother was in the kitchen cooking dinner and I went into the kitchen to offer some cooking assistance. Surprisingly, I was yelled at and told to "Get out of the kitchen!" by Jeong-hoon's mother. Her words startled me because I truly wanted to assist in making the meal. However,

Jeong-hoon explained that in Korean culture, a man doesn't belong in the kitchen. This episode served as my first cultural teaching about Korea.

My university days introduced me to other cultural concepts about Korea. The Korean roommates I had for three years as an undergraduate revealed much of their culture through their daily actions. I had many opportunities to socialize and spend quality time with the Korean students in our school. This time spent together served as Korean Culture 101. Truly, these encounters pulled the nation of Korea very close to me and I soon found myself pursuing a study abroad opportunity in Korea, with a sister-school in Daejeon. This city was also the hometown of Jeong-hoon, my first Korean roommate, and his family warmly welcomed me as their adopted youngest son. During their visit to our campus in the U.S., Jeong-hoon's father gave me a Korean name, Jeong-han Nam, allowing me to be connected to their family. Little did I know that I would eventually leave to study at this sister-school in less than a year.

In the summer of 1987, I met the president of Korea Baptist Theological College during his visit to my university in the U.S. During his stay, he offered me a full scholarship to go and study in Daejeon. I was excited and concerned at the same time because my mother was not in support of this decision. It took over three months before my mother finally agreed to let me go and study in Korea. My father was undecided and somewhat confused regarding my decision to study in Korea. I believe my interest in studying abroad in Korea brought back a lot of memories of his time spent in Korea during the Korean War. Perhaps reliving Korea all over again was not a pleasant journey for my father. Although he understood my interest and plans to study there, he never fully supported me in my decision to leave the States in order to study in Korea. For me, I was ready to experience a new pathway. Deep inside, my mind was ready for a challenge and I anxiously anticipated the new steps awaiting me in Korea.

## My Experience as a Student in Korea

I arrived in Korea in February of 1988, as the nation of Korea was busy preparing to host the Summer Olympic Games. I was excited about the adventure, but had never been on an airplane or spent time in another country before. My hometown in America was only around 5000 people, but I was moving to a city of almost one million people. While on the airplane flying to Korea, I sat next to an elderly couple who were serving as missionaries in Korea. I asked them a question about the most important thing I needed to know about living abroad in Korea. They responded with a two-word comment that has truly made my stay in Korea as a foreigner much easier; “Be flexible.” This answer was more than a textbook answer, but proceeded out of their personal trials in Korea. These two words definitely prepared me for a culture that would eventually challenge my American upbringing and force me to take the advice of James 1:19 in the Bible, which says to be “quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry”(NIV, 2002).

After arriving at the airport and making my way through customs unharmed, I approached the doors that lead me out to the world of Korea. As the doors opened and I stepped out, I was mesmerized by the crowds of non-white faces seemingly staring at me. It was at this moment that the concept of culture shock walloped me. I remember thinking to myself, “Brian, you’re not in Kansas anymore” as Dorothy in the movie, *The Wizard of Oz*, said to herself after landing in Oz. I had arrived in Korea and was about to come face to face with a new culture.

I was to be met by Jeong-hoon’s older brother, Sang-yong, but nobody approached me as I made my way up and down the terminal. I continued to push the baggage cart in the terminal area until a taxi driver approached me and offered to help. He didn’t speak English, but used enough body language and pointing to encourage me to make a phone call. Being

unfamiliar with international travel, I didn't have any Korean money, so this gentleman paid 10 or 20 won for me to make a phone call to Daejeon. Jeong-hoon's father answered my call and told me that I should continue waiting for Sang-yong's arrival. Looking back at these early minutes of my time in Korea, I have determined that this taxi driver, reaching out to help a total "white-faced" stranger, experiencing his first 20 minutes in Korea, served as an awesome inspiration for my arrival into Gimpo Airport. This unknown Korean gentleman's generosity displayed the hospitable spirit I would continue to observe within the Korean people. Crane writes, "Koreans are famous for their hospitality and politeness. This great sensitivity to others in interpersonal relationships lends a graciousness and generosity to society that makes for a very attractive people" (Crane, 1978). Won-dal Yang in his book, *Korean Ways, Korean Mind*, also acclaims that "Koreans are . . . one of the most generous and most hospitable people in the world" (Yang, 1982).

After 40 long minutes of anxiously pushing the luggage cart around the terminal, Sang-yong finally arrived, welcoming me to Korea. We were driven to Daejeon by car and I stayed a few days with Jeong-hoon's family. The first morning in Daejeon, Jeong-hoon's father entered the room where I was sleeping, carrying breakfast, a tray filled with bread, jam, milk, and juice. I was treated to breakfast in bed and greatly enjoyed every bite of it. After breakfast, Jeong-hoon's father informed his oldest son to take me to a public bathhouse in Yuseong. I had only heard about the bathhouse experience from another Korean student in the U.S., but to experience it after being in Korea less than 12 hours was quite unexpected and alarming. At that time, to me, "all Koreans looked alike." After arriving at the hot spring, we entered the men's locker area, and I was instructed to take off my clothes and glasses and leave them in the locker. Although I was somewhat embarrassed, I followed the lead of Sang-yong, putting my clothes and glasses in the locker and finishing up by putting the key

around my ankle. From here, we proceeded to enter the bathing area. However, after entering the bathing area, Sang-yong suddenly disappeared. I was unaware of the bathhouse procedure and too embarrassed to speak out in English; therefore, I began looking around the bathhouse to watch the other bathers and follow their system. Of course, some people misinterpreted my glances, as I was squinting because I couldn't see well without my glasses. From what I can remember, I sat in the hot tub for a few minutes with some young boys, took a quick shower with soap and water, dried off in about ten minutes, and returned to the locker room and put on my clothes. I waited in the locker room for Sang-yong to return, but after about an hour, he still hadn't returned. I noticed a door connected to the locker room that many people were coming out from wearing white bathrobes. Finally, I stepped inside to see if I recognized anyone resembling Sang-yong. It didn't take long for him to recognize me and he called me by name. He was sitting down wearing a white bathrobe and drinking a glass of orange juice. He wanted to know why I was dressed and why I hadn't come in for a drink. I told him I had taken my shower and finished. At that moment, he understood that I was completely unaware of the Korean culture of bathing in a bathhouse. I truly learned a lot that day about how private Westerners are and how less inhibited Korean people are when bathing in public.

After moving from Jeong-hoon's parents' home in Yuseong to the college dormitory, I realized that the privacy I was accustomed to in America was going to be very different, if non-existent. Private dormitory bathrooms were not available, but the bathrooms were all public. No private rooms were available in the dormitory, but all rooms were shared by at least three students. The dormitory rooms were quite small and did not have beds, but students slept on the floor using padded mats. Personally, I was not accustomed to sleeping on the floor or having a roommate sleep to my immediate left or right. As all of these concerns

were running around in my brain during my first day in the dormitory, I became hungry and went to find the university cafeteria to eat dinner. However, I learned that in Korea, since it was Sunday, the cafeteria wasn't opened and it was my responsibility to find a restaurant myself off campus. I walked a short distance to the front of the campus and entered a small restaurant. Pointing to the menu and using my broken Korean to order the food, I was fortunately served a nice meal with many side dishes. I don't remember what I ordered, but after I started to get full from the meal, I became concerned because I wasn't able to eat all of the food put in front of me. I hadn't touched some of the side dishes and began to feel embarrassed. In America, as a child growing up, we were always taught to clean our plates or finish eating all of the food served to us. In American culture, it is not polite to leave extra food. As I got up from the table, with my head down, unsure about what to do or say, I apologized using my poor Korean, bowing deeply to the lady for not being able to eat all of the food.

Dormitory life at Korea Baptist Theological College was thrilling and always challenging. The training received while studying and living there will be remembered for many years to come. A few distinct cultural memories from my stay include the first lesson learned while on the campus. Since I was the first non-Korean student in the program, many people were curious about my background. Over lunch and dinner, students would ask me questions and I would respond to their questions with lengthy answers as if I were talking to my American friends over a meal. Well, I soon learned that my eating mates were finishing their meals and I had barely touched my food. This scenario happened a few more times in the cafeteria. Finally, one of my classmates informed me that according to traditional Korean culture, it is disrespectful to converse while eating a meal. Crane comments on the severity of talking at meals by writing "the most impolite thing that one can do is to talk too much while eating"

(Crane, 1978). He elaborates by stating “the Westerner who persists in conversation is intruding on the private and personal pleasure of filling one’s stomach” (Crane, 1978). I was totally confused by this eating culture because my Korean classmates were the ones beginning the conversation by asking me the questions. However, I was told to eat first and then talk over a cup of coffee. Truly, western culture is quite the opposite and enjoys the company of conversation while eating a meal. Although I preferred to converse over the meals I ate in the dormitory cafeteria, I learned to reduce the amount of talk-time while eating my meals and save it for after the meal.

Another cultural difference related to food occurred while enjoying a special meal together with the male classmates in our wing of the dormitory. We totaled about 30 students, and we went to a Chinese restaurant near our school for lunch. Although I wasn’t able to converse much with the other students, I enjoyed being around them, listening to their chatter. On this particular day, as we ordered, I wanted to eat fried rice, but the other 29 students had already decided that we would eat “jja-jjang-myun (자장면)” for our meal. I asked for fried rice, but I was told that we needed to keep our order the same. I didn’t eat fried rice that day, but I learned that the opinion of the whole tends to make the final decision and those who differ usually remain quiet and simply follow. Horace Underwood writes that “Korea is a collective society. While we Americans revere the individual and think that individual rights and individual development are the highest good in society, Koreans believe that the group is far more important than the individual” (Underwood, 2008). Coming from America, where individualism is quite strong, it was a struggle for me to always comply with the opinion of the whole.

My dormitory experience in the early weeks was often filled with some unsettling circumstances. Two of my roommates were considered the better English speakers and they tried to assist me in getting settled in the

dormitory. The most difficult part about dormitory life in the beginning was related to washing clothes and bathing. There were no washing machines, but it was necessary to wash one's dirty clothes by hand or put them in a large basin, add soap and use your feet to clean one's clothes. For me, it was customary to wash clothes once a week and to wear different outfits every day. Therefore, my first week in the dormitory I had a lot of dirty clothes. I'm sure a lot of other dormitory students were commenting on the amount of dirty clothes I had, but from that week forward, I learned quickly to wear the same set of clothes two or three times a week and wash my socks and underwear by hand as often as needed. Since there were no dryers to dry the clothes, only a "spin-dry (탈수기)", an apparatus to remove the excess water from my clothes, it was necessary for students to hang their clothes on a man-made line in their small rooms to dry. My dorm room the second week of school was covered in drying clothes. Honestly, the first few weeks in the dormitory required a lot of patience and flexibility in dealing with the many differences. I truly felt as if I had stepped back in time to the generation of my parents.

During my dormitory stay, public bathing was not a comfortable activity for me. Due to my private nature in taking a shower, I tried to choose times when the bathing area contained fewer people. However, the boiler was only turned on for early morning or late evening bathing. The bathing system was not a typical western-style shower, but a large central water basin, which was heated and students would dip their scoops into the water and then pour it over themselves. If the water was too hot, they mixed it with the cold tap water and then poured it over themselves. After being wet, one would lather on the soap and then rinse with more scoops of water. It was a different method to get accustomed to, but I learned quickly. An interesting situation happened one morning. I happened to enter the bathing area and the water was still warm. No one was there and I decided to enjoy a private shower. However, after a few minutes, a

younger classmate entered to take his shower. While we were both showering, he tried to have a conversation with me in English. He moved closer to where I was showering and he continued talking. I answered his questions, but didn't feel comfortable talking face to face. I kept my back to him and continued showering, trying to hurry in order to get out of the shower. Suddenly, the younger student offered to wash my back. I politely said no, but he proceeded by rubbing his soap-filled hands all over my shoulders, back and lower waist area. My back arched considerably and my body immediately stiffened. However, I became more uncomfortable after he finished rinsing my back and saying to me, "You are beautiful." I believe my heart stopped beating for a few seconds. No one besides my mother had ever washed my back before that day and I had never been told I was beautiful while I was naked by another man. However, in less than five minutes, both things had happened to me. I tried to remain calm, not wanting to offend this younger student. After a few minutes of trying to understand the situation, I came to realize that this young man's intention, along with his pure, simple English sentence was simply filled with a compliment and an expression of welcome for me. Although feeling quite uncomfortable with my experience for a few days, I eventually recovered from this bathing experience.

Another bathhouse experience happened a week later, after I was invited to join some other dormitory classmates at the local bathhouse near our school. During this trip, I was better prepared and had other people to guide me from point A to point B within the bathhouse. However, after soaking in the hot water with the other classmates, we proceeded to sit on plastic stools and the three other classmates began washing each other's back with a rough cloth called an "e-tae-ri (이태리 타올)" towel. Again, a student offered to wash my back, but this time, I was more aware of the meaning and I felt more comfortable as he began using the towel on my back. After a few minutes, he stopped. He seemed perplexed. I learned

later that he couldn't understand why I didn't have any "ddae (때)" and while rubbing my back, he pressed quite hard and the end result was not "ddae (때)", but skin from my back, causing it to bleed. I felt some sensation throughout the day, but the scratches all over my back later healed. I lost some blood, but learned more about the bathing culture in a Korean bathhouse.

Other cultural bathing experiences in Korea have included men coming over to look at my private parts and people touching the hair on my body. Truly, I look different than a Korean, and it is true that some Koreans are simply curious about foreigners. Fortunately, the expression, "be flexible," has greatly assisted me in remaining open to a bathing culture which is less private than my own.

Personal space is another cultural point that exists between Asian cultures and the West. Due to the large number of people within a limited area, Koreans utilize less personal space than Americans. Before coming to Korea, I served as a camp counselor with the Salvation Army helping American youth for two consecutive summers. During the spring and fall semesters, I studied, spending a lot of my free time with Koreans. My awareness of the issue of personal space didn't exist yet. However, one day, another camp counselor was doing impersonations of a few other counselors and I asked him to impersonate me. The counselor immediately responded by coming within inches of my face and remarking, "Hi, I'm Brian." His observation of me was quite intriguing and brought a few laughs from the other counselors. For me, it made me aware of the fact that I had begun to adopt the personal space required for a Korean and was approaching too closely on the personal space expected from westerners. Potentially, I was causing other westerners to be uncomfortable as I overstepped the personal boundary for their personal space. Although I had never been to Korea, by living with Koreans in my university, I had picked up this difference. Life in an American dormitory with its space and life

in a Korean dormitory with two or three roommates in the same amount of space made many things tight. Personal space in Korea is definitely much closer. Sleeping shoulder to shoulder with my roommates was not normal for me. Yet, this was normal life for a Korean and I was immersed within the real culture of Korea. Who could have asked for a better teacher?

Another major teaching that I learned in my study abroad program of 16 months was relating to people and knowing how much information to share with them. I tried to be polite to everyone and learned who in the dormitory was older than me and who I could trust to help me. Having opportunities to spend time with the male students in the dormitory provided me many chances to socialize and learn about the other students. My roommate in the dormitory liked to play the guitar and we used to sing songs together on the lawn in front of the female dormitory. One day, as we sat outside and sang a few songs, he asked me what I thought about one particular female student. I quietly commented that I thought she was very pretty and I liked her smile. I asked him to keep my words a secret and he told me he wouldn't tell anyone. A few hours later, I returned to the dormitory and was greeted by a friend of my roommate in the hallway. He stopped in front of me and had a smirk on his face. He then asked me if I really thought she was beautiful. I was shocked by the fact that my secret had been shared. I soon came to know that all of the male dormitory students had been informed of my comment and by the next day, my statement expressed in confidentiality had been passed to all of the female dormitory students, including the particular female student I had said was very cute. It took less than a day for my secret to reach all of the students on our campus. After that event, I became better aware of how to communicate and how much to communicate with Korean people. To this day, I've learned that secrets are better not shared in Korea.

Although I spent a lot of time on campus, I also found time to travel

around the city of Daejeon. While living there, I was accustomed to walking everywhere. For the first few months, I wasn't familiar enough with the language to ride the bus. However, while walking, I would do my best to observe the location of certain bus numbers and where I could get on that particular bus. As I observed the bus numbers of the buses that passed in front of our college, I gained confidence to ride certain buses, knowing they would take me back to the college area.

One particular day, I took a bus to visit my Korean parents' home in Yuseong. There were no seats available on the bus, so I had to stand. I was wearing a backpack and was holding another bag in my hand. Suddenly, an older lady tried to take my bag. In the beginning, I was surprised because I thought she was trying to steal my bag. After our mini-tug-o-war, I realized she was trying to offer me assistance rather than steal my bag. However, during the course of my bus ride, I kept my eye on her to make sure she didn't try to take something out of my bag. Culturally, this lady was offering assistance to me because she had been given the benefit of sitting while I was standing. In the West, the threat of someone wanting to take your possessions, along with a Westerners' independent nature, could easily result in a misunderstanding in regards to Korea's friendly bus culture. For me, having the opportunity to experience this particular assistance continues to display the benevolent nature of a Korean's spirit.

Since the bus is a major form of transportation in Korea, I've spent much time travelling by bus. Due to the possibility of riding a bus with many people on board, there were times I needed to sit close to different people. One particular time, in the middle of summer, I was riding the bus, sitting next to a lady in her 50's. Without any notice or personal request, this lady reached over and began rubbing my arm. At first, my body froze a little, but not wanting to make a scene and embarrass her, I allowed her to continue running her fingers over my arms a few times. After a few

seconds, I made eye contact with her and the lady smiled. She pointed to her arms that didn't have any hair. I acknowledged her observation and life returned to normal. Out of curiosity, this lady reached out her hand to compare something unknown to her. For me, to allow a stranger to enter my personal space and play with my arm could easily have resulted in a major cultural dilemma, if I had not chosen to be open-minded and culturally sensitive at that particular moment.

During my stay in Daejeon, I was fortunate to be healthy most of the time. However, the few times I was sick, I received immediate assistance from dormitory students. I remember experiencing my first cold in the dormitory and needing medical assistance. My roommate told me that an older classmate in the dormitory could help me feel better. I had a fever and knew I needed to do something. We went to his dormitory room and he immediately offered to help me. I was grateful in the beginning, but after I saw him take out a kit filled with small needles, I started to panic and told him that I didn't want his medical assistance. However, the dormitory mates in his room attempted to encourage me and told me that the treatment with the needles wouldn't hurt and the end result would make me feel better. After much prodding, I finally allowed the older classmate to put needles in my hands and fingers. I remember the stress of the process because my hands sweat profusely. I'm sure my fever skyrocketed during the whole process. By the time he was finished, I had over 20 needles in each hand. Seeing and feeling the needles protruding from my own body were enough to cause me much alarm. After about 20 minutes, the needles were removed from both hands. Pain had never been something I have been good at dealing with; however, by morning, my fever was down to normal and I began to feel better. Personally, experiencing acupuncture during a time of need during my first illness and seeing immediate results, served to allow me to accept more elements of the Korean culture. Having the opportunity to personally experience the

various differences within another culture, whether they are painful or not, certainly prepares the mind to open up and recognize the benefits available to all involved.

Student demonstrations on our campus and the Mokwon University campus were common while I was living in Korea. Although I couldn't completely understand the reasons for them, I witnessed the peaceful sit-ins and the traditional drums and instruments broadcasting their concerns with other students who would listen. On our campus, around 30-40 students actively involved themselves in speaking out to the administration of our university. Generally, these demonstrations would begin immediately before mid-term and/or final exams. On one occasion, I was barred from entering the classroom as a student stood guard to keep other students from entering to take the exams. I was told that if I took the exam, the other students would receive an "F" for their grade; therefore, they could not allow me to take the exam. Although I didn't understand the democratic principle being applied, I chose not to enter the classroom. The professor entered with the exams, but since no students were there to take the test, nobody was penalized. However, due to my Western upbringing and my independent nature, this circumstance has always puzzled me to this day.

I observed demonstrations on our college campus every semester and experienced a combined demonstration with another university near our school. A few times a year, the smell and burning sensation associated with tear-gas would infiltrate our campus grounds, forcing everyone to seek shelter inside. One particular day, while walking back to campus, I met a student who seemed to be a student activist. He wasn't from our college, but from the school across the way from our college. The young man made eye contact with me and strongly spoke out the expression "Yankee, go home!" His words surprised me. I had heard this expression repeated by the student movements while watching the Korean news

programs regarding the demonstrations around Korea. The student movement wanted the American military to return home. However, I never expected to be on the receiving end of this proclamation. As this man looked at me and spoke these strong words, I responded in English by saying very boldly, “I’m not a Yankee because my state is the state of Missouri and our state was a neutral state.” I believe I also shared that I am not in the military and a few other short sentences during my verbal rampage. However, as I spoke for about 10 seconds, this student only looked at me with glassy eyes, completely unaware of the English words that had come from my mouth. After we stood there looking at each other for about 10 seconds, I smiled, waved, and then turned around and walked away.

Although I have been in Korea for almost two decades, I have struggled to understand 선배/후배 relationships. In Western culture, age is not a major divider from developing a friendship. Although times are changing, in 1988, the concept of “respecting your elders” was strictly followed. For me, it was necessary to attend classes with the graduate school students because the classes offered in the graduate program were for an extra credit hour and my university in the States needed that extra credit hour. Therefore, instead of attending classes with students my own age, I began taking classes with classmates who were at least five years if not 10 years older than me. Because I wanted to respect my older classmates, I did my best to greet them by bowing appropriately and using formal Korean with them. Most of the graduate school students treated me like a younger brother; however, a few older classmates treated me either like a servant or somewhat harshly, while one particular student chose to take out his hatred for America by trying to humiliate me in front of his friends. This upperclassman was rude to me on many occasions and it was easily noticed by other students. I would always greet him appropriately, but his attitude and demeanor were not something I wanted to emulate.

I was fortunate to have known a fellow Korean student, James Chung, from Southwest Baptist University, whose father was a faculty in Korea Baptist Theological College. His family took great care of offering assistance to me whenever I needed it and a few times I was able to meet up with James in Daejeon. His family would often invite me to join them for special meals in their home and in special restaurants. One particular meal that brought me much excitement was the opportunity to eat dog stew for the first time. Out of curiosity, I had always wanted to eat this meal, but had never had enough money or an understanding of where I could go to eat it. On this day, the Chung family welcomed me to join them for a meal of dog stew. I savored each bite of the stew and didn't waste a drop. I remember finding three small bones in the bottom of my bowl and I was curious to know which part of the dog they came from. Rather than throw the bones away, I mailed them to my mother for safe keeping, boasting of the fact that I had eaten "man's best friend" and enjoyed it very much. Throughout the meal, the owner of the restaurant could easily see my enthusiasm and provided me with an opportunity to enter the kitchen and take a picture of the kettle used for cooking the meal. I had my camera with me that day and I took a few pictures to commemorate this exquisite food culture known in Korea. Even after twenty years, dog stew is still one of my favorite Korean meals.

Although I wasn't able to learn to speak a lot of Korean during my stay in Daejeon, I truly experienced an immersion into Korean culture. Whether it was fish heads staring at me from the cafeteria tray or attempting to eat the fish with chopsticks, or learning to wash my clothes by hand or feet, or acupuncture needles sticking out of my hands, I truly had the opportunity to experience culture. I learned to relate to Korean people in their culture and I now appreciate them more. Those 16 months made me wiser and more familiar with what it means to be Korean. Finally, in July of 1989, I departed from Korea and returned to finish my final semester as

an undergraduate at my university in the States. I thought my involvement with Korea had come to an end, but as I look back now, I realize it had just begun. While back in the States, my love for Korea and the opportunity to share time with Korean people intensified, leading me to seek out and offer myself to the Korean population in my university and in a Korean church in Columbia, Missouri, where I moved to live with my sister after graduation.

While living with my sister and working a couple of part-time jobs, I began meeting Korean professors who were enjoying their sabbatical year in the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri. These relationships eventually turned into private English tutoring and English discussion opportunities. Over the next two years, I began tutoring Korean professors on sabbatical and enjoying the chance to associate more with the Korean community.

## My Return to Korea as a Teacher

I never planned to return to Korea, but after receiving news that I had failed to enter medical school, I was left determining how I would proceed for the next year. Then one of the Korean professors who I had tutored for one year, and who had since returned to Korea, called me one spring day about going to teach English in the city of Jeonju. Due to the timing and the opportunity, I accepted the job offer and came to teach English at Top Institute in Jeonju. In Jeonju, I knew three previous students who I had tutored in Columbia, Missouri. Two of the professors were faculty in Chonbuk National University while the other professor taught in Gunsan National University. Because of their assistance during my first few days in Jeonju, I was able to become accustomed to living comfortably in a new city. The major piece of information that I learned about living in the city

of Jeonju was that Jeonju has excellent cuisine.

For the first two weeks of my stay in Jeonju, many Korean students and staff from the language institute took me out for lunch and dinner. All of them insisted on me trying the main dish of Jeonju, “bibim-bab(비빔밥).” Even though I wanted to enjoy the other meals on the menu, people continued insisting on eating “bibim-bab.” I was fortunate to have a lot of people offering to take me out for a meal, but after two weeks of eating “the same thing for lunch and dinner, I stopped eating ”bibim-bab“ for over a month. I truly appreciated students and Jeonju friends trying to acquaint me with the ins-and-outs of Jeonju, but I truly got tired of eating this food.

In the first few months of my stay in Jeonju, due to my teaching schedule, I had to use a taxi in order to travel around the three language schools in different regions of the city. Because of the location of the institutes and my teaching schedule, I would use a taxi at least three times a day. Over the course of a few months, I learned very much from the taxi drivers. Many drivers would try to communicate with me in Korean. Most of them would ask the same questions, and this allowed me the chance to become accustomed to basic Korean conversation. Although they would occasionally ask personal questions, which are not appropriate in the West, I owe a lot of appreciation to the Jeonju taxi drivers. They were my first Korean language teachers.

I greatly enjoyed teaching and was able to spend much time with the students in my classes. My age was similar to some of the male students who had returned from the military. They truly wanted to be my friend and saw the age factor as something of relevance. Personally, age is not always a major factor for determining friendship. However, in Korea, friends generally must be the same age. A couple of male students tried hard to win my friendship. These students invited me to drink alcohol with them and take short overnight excursions with them to nearby sightseeing places in order to develop the friendships. One particular male student

would grab my wrist and walk next to me or put his arm around my shoulder as a sign of friendship. I felt a little uncomfortable at first, and even though I had noticed this type of touching among all age groups, I never expected to be included or to experience skinship as a foreigner. From my western culture and family upbringing, one's personal space was reserved for only someone of the opposite gender. However, in Korea, skinship was a relatively accepted practice among close friends of the same gender.

One Sunday afternoon, as I was walking with a church friend to lunch, he suddenly reached over and grabbed my hand. At first, I was alarmed because I was concerned about what other people on the street were thinking. However, after a couple of minutes, I was deeply encouraged. This friend was willing to include me in his life and his way of welcoming me into his world was to walk with me hand in hand. I could have easily pulled my hand away, but instead realized the overall meaning of acceptance and chose to participate in the moment by walking down the busy city street holding his hand.

On a financial note, the Korean banking system has changed considerably over the course of my stay in Jeonju. These days, cash machines are common inside and outside of banking establishments. Everyone uses cash cards to withdraw money from the bank, eliminating the time to speak with a bank teller individually for processing the transaction. In the past, before the cash cards and the numbering system existed for expediting customers, it was necessary to fill out a withdraw form, seal it, and push yourself into the crowded pack of customers reaching to the teller with their banking form. I remember so many times standing among middle-aged ladies and elderly women fighting to give my banking form to the teller. I felt terrible because I was much taller and had a longer reach. I took advantage of my height and arm span and never had to wait a long time in line to receive my money in the bank.

I learned a lot about Korean culture, its language and its people by watching a lot of Korean TV programming. Programs like “3 Men & 3 Women (남자셋 여자셋)” and “Sunday, Sunday Night (일요일 일요일 밤에)” were entertaining and both displayed humor as well as the mind of the youth in Korea at that time. Every morning like clockwork, after teaching my first shift of English classes, I would watch the morning TV soap opera while eating breakfast. Even the weekday or weekend TV dramas would easily entice me to stay home and watch them. Although these shows were not reality, they allowed me to observe various relationships and the intricacies of Korean life. I really enjoyed the learning connected with watching Korean television at that time, and I still realize the benefits.

Over the course of my stay in Jeonju, I have always had to deal with a recurring back injury sustained while playing tennis as a teenager. I have used medicine, chiropractic care, and other treatments to deal with this long-term injury. After coming to Korea, acupuncture and analgesic patches became the new treatment for me. However, on one particular occasion, Sung-bong, a close friend of mine suggested that I try snake wine as a method to heal my disc problem. When the delivery man arrived, I paid him 70,000 won and he gave me a 2 liter glass bottle of soju with a venomous snake in the bottom. I was told the wine had aged for three years and was very potent. And so, during my first winter in Jeonju, over a five-day weekend, I drank small doses of the snake wine to treat my back pain. I truly wanted to believe it would help my back to feel better. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to do anything for my back. However, I learned how to drink the wine through a straw to prevent the wine with its snake venom to touch the enamel on my teeth. Although the treatment didn't work, I truly enjoyed the experience of another health practice used in Korea.

While living in Jeonju, I have been fortunate to experience many

fun-filled opportunities as a foreigner. In the summer of 1993, the KBS National Singing Contest came to the city of Jeonju. My friend, Sung-bong, encouraged me to try out for the event. I prepared for the preliminary judging held at the Jeonju City Hall, but after singing for about 10 seconds, the judge said no. However, he shared that if I would sing the song “Made in Korea” (신토불이) they would allow me to be in the contest. I didn’t know much about the contest, but I said I would learn and sing the song. On the day of the event, I sang well enough to receive the “Most Popular Award (인기상).” I greatly enjoyed the contest and did my best to perform well; however, other foreigners commented that I was used by the broadcasting station like “a monkey in a cage. They told me that too many times, foreigners are put in the spotlight to make fun of them, and that was the reason I was chosen. Since that time, I have recognized this to be true in certain situations. Foreigners have been used by the Korean media to ridicule them due to their pronunciation or appearance. Yet these days, I see less and less of this scenario. To be honest, foreigners sometimes enjoy being in the spotlight, and the opportunity for attention benefits them as well. For me, I had fun singing and having the opportunity to participate in a Korean singing contest with a national audience was exhilarating and makes me smile even now.

My stay in Korea has not always been without problems. Some of them have resulted from my own poor decisions. A few times while working in Jeonju, I forgot to extend my visa stay in the country, causing me to overstay and become an illegal resident. In order to correct this error, I was put under investigation and forced to answer questions as to my reasons for staying past my visa period. While under investigation, I was treated with respect by the Immigration office workers. They spoke a formal language with me and never once showed me disrespect or used a harsh tone of voice. However, while waiting to talk to the investigators, I observed other foreigners, most from Southeast Asian countries, who were

not properly respected and treated very poorly in front of me. Although I was not aware of the criminal acts committed by these other foreigners, I still didn't understand why they deserved to be publicly humiliated. I was appalled at the disrespect and the tone of voice used with them. I felt so sorry for these other foreigners and didn't understand why I was treated differently. Was it because I was not from Southeast Asia, but from the United States? Did it have something to do with me being an English teacher? It is still unclear to me, but I believe all humans deserve the utmost respect, no matter where they are from or what crime or action they may have committed. Personally, I wish they had treated me with the same disrespect. Then, at least, it would have made better sense.

## **My Marriage and the Start of a Family in Korea**

On December 19, 1998, I was married in the United States. After enjoying our honeymoon in New York City, I returned to live in Jeonju with my wife, Tammy. My wife didn't speak Korean and was not familiar with Korean culture. Her arrival in Korea served as a major review course for me on Korean culture. It didn't take long for my wife to come face to face with the struggles of living in a new culture. Her first Saturday afternoon shopping experience in E-mart was eye-opening for her. She and I were out buying a few things for our new home. Suddenly, she told me that people were being very rude and were bumping her and not saying excuse me. She was truly upset and couldn't understand why people were not being polite. I told my wife honestly that she was no longer in the States where personal space is respected and bumping into someone is considered impolite, but in Korea, these actions are interpreted differently. To this day, my wife still hates shopping amidst large crowds, and especially dislikes shopping on the weekends. On the weekends, I almost

always do the shopping.

As a Westerner, it is puzzling that the driving culture does not match well with how Korean people generally show respect to strangers in conversation or by their actions. Particularly, the Korean language is a respectful language. Crane writes, “Koreans are among the most naturally polite people one will meet, when the proper rules of etiquette are followed. Koreans tend to be very strict in observing the rules of etiquette in personal relationships with strangers or associates”(Crane, 1978). However, I’ve noticed that the etiquette connected to the language and culture does not transfer very well to the driving culture in Korea. Respect is seemingly discarded by drivers in Korea as other drivers are surprisingly categorized as challengers. The end result of this mentality is less likelihood of showing respect to them. To me, the “me first” mentality on the road runs contrary to the generous spirit and respect displayed by Korean people at other times. Truthfully, the driving culture in Korea does not have a long history, but seemingly compromises the high standards exemplified by the beauty of the Korean language and its culture.

In 2003, our son, Malachi, was born in Jesus Hospital. Both my wife and son were given the best care by the staff at Jesus Hospital and our son has grown up well. However, our son has had to endure an endless number of people who have been interested in touching him. Complete strangers came up to my son in his stroller and attempted to play with his arm or touch his belly or even squeeze his cheeks. In Western culture, young infants are rarely approached by unknown people. People generally need to ask permission to touch or approach a newborn or infant child. Due to the susceptibility of germs being passed, parents do not allow their babies to be touched or held by strangers. However, because Malachi was unique in Jeonju, people were curious to see this foreign baby. My wife was very uncomfortable with Koreans approaching our son and eventually had to make a sign in Korean that said, “Please, do not touch him.” To a Korean,

this action might have appeared funny or unnecessary, or even selfish, but to a Westerner, the element of protection for his or her infant is considered important.

As my son continues to grow up in Korea, he is truly immersed within Korean culture and is learning Korean culture without another culture overly hindering him. As he attends preschool now, he is developing as if he were a Korean child. He expects to take his shoes off before entering a house. He knows to bow to someone when greeting them or saying good-bye. He even knows to use two hands when giving or receiving something. Although Korean culture is still somewhat foreign to his parents, my son is experiencing the details of Korean culture every day. Even though our home in Jeonju is like a Little America, to him, it will never compare to the grandeur of Korea all around him.

## Conclusion

My journey of almost 20 years in Korea has been very enriching. My experiences as a foreign exchange student and as an English teacher in Korea have truly opened my eyes to another world. From my early days in Korea until now, I have been given the opportunity to experience an immersed life within Korean culture. Enduring hardships and, at the same time, relishing in the special relationships I've established lead me to better understand the struggles between being an outsider, and being included in Korean society. Before English became a huge commodity in Korea, I was strongly encouraged to "hurry up" and learn Korean. However, these days, many Korean people expect me to communicate with them in English or offer counseling assistance in how to learn English. The cultural experiences gathered through the years will always remain as valuable imprints in my life. Friends, classmates, and students have shared valuable

insights with me for better relating to Koreans within their culture. Every day, more cultural learning opportunities exist to either challenge my present understanding or assist me in adjusting my cultural stance in the future. Honestly, I believe I have an obligation to continue learning about Korea. Even though I may never agree with or clearly understand every aspect of Korean culture, the opportunity to experience it will definitely broaden my way of thinking and assist me in working with Koreans here or abroad. While I live in Korea, I have accepted the truth that I will always be a foreigner in Korea, but still realize that my cultural journey with Korea will continue for many more years.

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