

Life in Korea and Korean Culture

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Introduction

To write about the culture of a country is no small task. That task becomes even more daunting when the culture you are to write about is not your own. However, as a Canadian who has lived in Korea since the late 1990s, I approach this challenging task with zeal. This paper will present practical information about life in Korea and Korean culture from the perspective of someone born and raised outside Korea. All the information presented in this paper as well as other materials and resources can be downloaded from: www.walterforeman.com/epic. The author can be reached for question or comment via email at: walter@walterforeman.com.

Size matters

South Korea has an area of approximately 98,000 sq km and a population of approximately 49,000,000 people. Put another way, South Korea is roughly the same size as the Canadian province of Newfoundland, the US state of Indiana, or the Republic of Hungary. As such, life in Korea can, for people not accustomed to such large numbers of people in a relatively small space, be stifling. In addition, as a matter of necessity caused by Korea's high population density, people seldom, if ever, apologize for making accidental contact in public. This behavior can be a source of frustration for people coming from parts of the world with much lower population densities. However, if one is aware of these actions -- and their underlying causes -- it becomes a simple matter to take them in stride.

Planes, trains, and ...

Another potential source of frustration while living in Korea is the ever increasing number of motor vehicles on Korean roads. In the past ten years the number of registered vehicles on Korean roads has increased more than 50 per cent from less than 10,000,000 vehicles in 1996 to nearly 16,000,000 vehicles in 2006. As one would expect, having such a large number of vehicles in a relatively small space results in traffic and parking conditions that differ greatly from the traffic and parking conditions of larger countries (or those countries with fewer vehicles on the road). Again however, if one is aware of these factors -- and their underlying causes -- it becomes a simple matter to take them in stride.

From a Land of Morning Calm to Dynamic Korea!

Prior to co-hosting the 2002 FIFA World Cup, the government of Korea sought to change its official tourism slogan. The previous slogan, Land of the Morning Calm was no longer relevant nor accurate. While mornings in Korea are indeed calm, the Korea of today is so much more than that. As such, a new slogan was needed that could properly portray modern Korea; Dynamic Korea emerged as the slogan that "most succinctly illustrates the energetic image of Korea, the values the Republic of Korea is pursuing for the future, and its vast potential."

Life in Korea is the personification of dynamic. The speed at which life moves is nothing short of remarkable. It is safe to say that the Korea you see upon your arrival will bare little resemblance to the Korea you see when (and if) you leave Korea. Just as some people see the cup as half full while others see it as half empty, this vigorous pace of life is for some a benefit and for others a hindrance; the choice is yours.

Our country, our language, even our wife

If you were to ask a member of the Canadian armed forces why he or she serves in the military, that person's answer would likely be, 'for my country' or 'to protect my country.' If

you were to listen to two Americans discuss vocabulary differences between English and a second language, most likely they would say, 'in English we'd say this' or 'English uses this word.' However if you were to ask the same questions of a Korean or listen to two Koreans discuss vocabulary differences, the answers would likely be, 'for our country', 'to protect our country', 'in our language we'd say this', 'our language uses this word.'

The typical Korean ethos places supreme importance on group harmony and general group mentality. This is in stark contrast to the typical Western ethos that tends to be much more individualistic. While neither good nor bad, this difference in thinking does take some getting used to, especially in how it manifests itself in language; imagine your reaction when, in conversation with a Korean he refers to his wife as, 'our wife', to his father as, 'our father', and to his brother and sister as, 'our brother and sister.'

Singing in the rain

Another area of life where examples of the Korean ethos of group harmony can be found is in social gatherings. Nearly any type of social gathering will include singing either at the event itself -- with a spoon placed in an empty liquor or soft drink bottle to serve as impromptu microphone -- or later at a specially designed singing room (노래방 / noraebang). Singing is so much a part of life in Korea that there are many variety programs on television that feature nothing but singing for a full hour.

During social gatherings, it is not the quality of a person's singing that is important but rather the effort the person makes. Indeed, the group will often cheer loudest for that person who is the weakest singer, just to make him or her feel better. Although the theory has never been scientifically tested, this writer proposes that if you were to take a random sample of 100 Koreans, well over 75 per cent of them would be exceptional singers. Regardless of one's singing ability, an evening in a singing room is a great way to become closer to new friends, relax, be silly, and relieve some stress.

Newcomers to Korea would be well advised to have at least one or two songs in their repertoire for the time when they are called upon to sing in public; it's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. Remember it is not the quality of the piece you sing that is important, nor the piece itself, but rather that you make the effort to contribute to the harmony of the group (no pun intended).

Pink Floyd was wrong

“Koreans have traditionally placed great importance on education as a means for self-fulfillment as well as for social advancement.” These words come from Cheong Wa Dae, the Office of the President, in an overview of education in Korea. “Koreans put an uncommon degree of emphasis on education.” These are the words of Dr. Duk-Chung Kim, former Minister of Education for the Republic of Korea in the forward to the book, “Korean Education.” Nearly every publication that deals with education in Korea opens the same way. Also, in 2006, the Korean government's annual budget proposed spending of approximately 28.5 billion US dollars (USD) for education. This amount represents an enormous 19.7% of Korea's nearly 115 billion USD budget! In fact, education expenditures are the single largest expenditure in the Korean budget.

Education is of paramount importance in Korean culture and in Korean society. As such, teachers are held in very high regard by students and by members of the community. There is a Korean proverb that translates loosely as, “one dare not step on even the shadow of a teacher.” As an English teacher in Korea, chances are good that you will also be afforded that same level of respect. How you handle this respect and what you choose to do with the power it gives you will largely determine your degree of success while in Korea.

Conclusion

It takes a special kind of person to live and be successful in Korea. By saying this I do not mean to imply that Korea is a difficult place in which to live, in fact it is not. What I mean to

imply is that it takes a special kind of person to live and be successful in any place that is not the place of their birth. It takes a person with awareness of their surroundings and how those surroundings may differ (or may not differ) from what they are used to. It takes a person with sensitivity to understand that those differences are neither better nor worse than what they are used to, simply different. And it takes a person with knowledge of the place and of the culture to which they will be moving. To help remember these three qualities simply remember the word, 'ASK', Awareness, Sensitivity, Knowledge.

This paper has endeavored to provide awareness and knowledge about life in Korea and Korean culture. During your time in Korea it is up to you to use and develop your own sensitivity. In doing so you will help to ensure your success in Dynamic Korea; all you need to do is ASK.

The author

Walter Foreman (B.Ed., Secondary English; M.A. with merit, Professional Communication) first came to Korea in 1998 and has taught in and administered language and international programs throughout the country. At present he lectures in the listening department of the Foreign Language Training Center, Center for In-service Education at Korea National University of Education as part of the Korean Ministry of Education's Intensive English Teacher Training Program.

His first book, a study guide for Korean high school students taking the College Scholastic Ability Test, will be published in early 2007. Mr. Foreman will also be starting his Ph.D. candidature (English Education) at Korea National University of Education in early 2007.

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