

# Eight days a week: Life in Korea and Korean culture

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## Introduction

The title of the 1964 Beatles song, “Eight Days a Week” is said to have come from Paul McCartney's chauffeur who complained of working so hard that it felt like he was working eight days a week.<sup>1</sup> More than 45 years later, that description is a good metaphor for life in Korea. It is not, however, that life in Korea is particularly difficult. Rather, eight days a week in Korea describes Korea's pace of life. Life moves so quickly in Korea that even the international direct dialling code for Korea (+82) sounds like the Korean word for quick or fast (빨리 / *bbal-li*). If New York is, as Frank Sinatra so eloquently crooned, the city that never sleeps, then surely Korea is the country that never does so.

This paper will present information about life in Korea and Korean culture from the perspective of someone born and raised outside Korea. Except where references are given, the information in this paper is the *opinion* of the author. It should *not* be taken as fact nor considered applicable to all people/things/situations in Korea. People who come to Korea will have their own unique experiences that may or not be the same as the author's. Additional materials and resources can be downloaded from: [www.walterforeman.com](http://www.walterforeman.com). The author can be reached for question or comment via email at: [walter@walterforeman.com](mailto:walter@walterforeman.com).

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia. Accessed July 12, 2010.

[[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Eight\\_Days\\_a\\_Week\\_\(song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Eight_Days_a_Week_(song))]

## **Culture**

In any discussion about culture it is important to clarify the meaning of the term. This paper will view culture from two separate but related perspectives. The first describes culture as, "The way of life of a society, consisting of approved ways of behaving or accepted beliefs, values, and skills." The second is a similar, but somewhat more simplified description of culture: "All life patterns passed on from generation to generation within a group."

Both descriptions purposely omit the word, "country" because even within countries which purport to share a common culture, various and diverse subcultures exist. Douglas Brown (1997:163) furthers this idea of culture being a condition of groups rather than nations when he calls culture "the glue that binds a group of people together."

Another important condition to consider when discussing culture is its fluidity. All aspects of culture change, albeit at different rates. Furthermore, culture changes depending on who is observing it and for what purpose the observation is being done. Linda Harklau (1999:110) captures this concept when she says, "Culture is a vague idea that shifts constantly over time and according to who is perceiving and interpreting it."

Finally, when discussing culture a distinction must be drawn between "big C Culture" and "little c culture." The former refers to refinement or sophistication within a society and is sometimes called MLA (music, literature, arts) culture; the latter is associated with the way of life of a group of people and is sometimes called BBV (beliefs, behavior, values) culture. This paper will focus on "little c" cultural elements that are affected by Korea's geography, history, language (including music), and social interaction (Confucianism and collectivism).

## Geography

South Korea has a land area of about 100,000 square kilometers and a population of about 50,000,000 people.<sup>2</sup> Put another way, South Korea is roughly the same size as the US state of Indiana<sup>3</sup>, but with the combined populations of California and Texas<sup>4</sup>. Not surprisingly then, life in Korea can present some unfamiliar challenges for people not accustomed to such large numbers of people in a relatively small space.

Two such challenges are a reduced amount of personal space and an increased amount of unintended contact in public. Generally speaking, Koreans may stand closer to you than you are comfortable with; for example while queuing at the bank, while using public transportation, or while waiting at a pedestrian crosswalk. In addition, and again resulting from Korea's high population density, people seldom, if ever, apologize for making accidental contact (in other words, bumping into you) in public.

These two behaviors 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. In addition, one should avoid falling prey to the notion that these things are happening because you are not Korean. A quick glance around you will reveal that Koreans also stand close to other Koreans and bump into them without offering an apology. In short, you are not being singled out because of your non-Korean-ness; you are, in fact, being treated the same as everyone else.

Another area where Korea's geography affects its culture is in the

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<sup>2</sup> Wikipedia. Accessed July 12, 2010. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South\\_Korea](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Korea)]

<sup>3</sup> Wikipedia. Accessed July 12, 2010. [<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indiana>]

<sup>4</sup> Wikipedia. Accessed July 12, 2010. [[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_U.S.\\_states\\_and\\_territories\\_by\\_population#States\\_and\\_territories](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_U.S._states_and_territories_by_population#States_and_territories)]

pace of life in Korea. Korea's high population density effectively exerts a constant pressure on people. Just as gas molecules under pressure move more quickly, exert more pressure, and generate heat, so too do the people of Korea. The pace of life in Korea is nothing short of remarkable. It is safe to say that the Korea you see upon your arrival will bear little resemblance to the Korea you will see when (or perhaps, if) you leave Korea. Just as some people see the glass as half full while others see it as half empty, this vigorous pace of life is a benefit for some and a hinderance for others. The choice is yours.

On the plus side, the quick pace of life in Korea creates an environment for rapid and extensive social, political, economic, and cultural change. For example, a person could count on one hand the number of people in Korea who owned credit cards in 1998. However, just eight years later Korea posted the second-highest credit card ownership rate in the world.<sup>5</sup> Korea can go from zero to world-leader in the blink of an eye!

On the downside, the breakneck pace of life in Korea can lead to a sort of "shoot first, ask questions later" mentality where results are valued over the processes which yield them. Koreans themselves refer to this attribute as "*Korean Disease*" (흔들궤병). At best, this hasty mindset manifests itself in sudden changes to schedules and curricula and short-notice invitations to staff functions. At worst, it can have disastrous consequences such as collapsing bridges, exploding subway construction sites, and collapsing department stores. Thankfully, Korea's propensity for rapid change has meant that "*Korean Disease*" has become less prevalent today.

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5 Korean Overseas Information Service (KOIS). Accessed September 20, 2008.  
[[http://www.korea.net/news/news/NewsView.asp?serial\\_no=20061213033&part=105](http://www.korea.net/news/news/NewsView.asp?serial_no=20061213033&part=105)]

## History

Like all countries, Korea's history has played a large part in shaping its culture. Korean history is full of invasions, occupations, colonizations, and civil wars. As such, many Koreans have developed a skepticism of outsiders. For TaLK scholars, this wariness of outsiders will likely reveal itself as, at best, a healthy curiosity in your "otherness"<sup>6</sup> and at worst, xenophobia.

This curiosity in your "otherness" will likely be stronger in rural areas and stronger for those TaLK scholars who differ from what is perceived (perhaps wrongly) as the "typical" image of a westerner. It is only within the last ten years that dyed hair no longer attracts stares of attention; however, other distinguishing features still do. In short, be prepared to be noticed; be prepared even more so if you have any distinctive features.

The sheer length of Korea's history has also influenced its culture. While American school children are taught (perhaps wrongly) that it was in 1492 that Columbus sailed the ocean blue thus signalling the start of America's history, Korean school children are taught (also, perhaps wrongly) that Korean history began approximately 5,000 years ago. In addition, it has traditionally been taught (again, perhaps wrongly) that Koreans are of one blood. Given the length of Korea's history, its historical hardships, and the belief (correct or not) in a pure and homogenous bloodline, it is easy to understand (which does not presuppose acceptance) the interest, sometimes healthy sometimes not, toward outsiders in Korea.

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<sup>6</sup> This term comes from the work of the French sociologist Julia Kristeva

## Language

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," "to protect my country," "to serve my country," or some similar answer using the first person singular possessive adjective, "my." Likewise, if you were to listen to two Americans discuss vocabulary differences between English and a second language, they would likely say, "in English we'd say this," or, "English uses this word." However, if you were to ask the same question of a Korean soldier or listen to two Korean language learners discuss vocabulary differences, you would likely hear, "for our country," "to protect our country," "to serve our country," in our language we'd say this," or, "our language uses this word."

Korean culture typically places supreme importance on group harmony, while western culture tends to be more individualistic. While neither good nor bad, this difference in thinking takes some getting used to for those not accustomed to it, especially in how it is reflected in the language. The Korean language's focus on collectivism is evident in the frequent use of the first person plural possessive adjective, "our" where most English speakers would probably use, "my." Imagine your reaction when, in conversation with a Korean, he refers to his father as, "*our father*," to his brother and sister as, "*our brother and sister*," and to his wife as, "*our wife*."

A further linguistic example of the collectivist nature of Korean culture comes from the structure of Korean names. In Korea, a person's family, and membership in that family, is more important than the person themselves; the structure of Korean names reflects this importance. A Korean name places the family name (group) first, followed by the given

name (individual). In contrast, a Canadian name places the given name first (individual) and the family name second (group). The Canadian school teacher, Bob Andrew Smith is an individual person first and a member of the Smith family second. Conversely, the Korean accountant, Hong Gil-dong (홍길동) is a member of the Hong family first and an individual person second.

Finally, another feature of Korean language that can result in cultural misunderstandings for newcomers to Korea is its hierarchical levels of politeness. Korean verbs are conjugated based on the age relationships between the speakers. Therefore, Koreans must know the age of the people to whom they are speaking in order to conjugate verbs properly. This practice is extremely important to group harmony and is deeply ingrained in Koreans. As such, the practice of asking a person's age when initiating a conversation often persists even when the language of communication is English. In short, do not be surprised or offended if Koreans ask you your age; although it may seem contradictory, they are just trying to be polite.

### **Music & Singing**

Another area of life where the Korean ethos of group harmony can be found is in the prevalence of music and singing throughout society. 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 an impromptu microphone, or later at a specially designed singing room (노래방 / *noraebang*).

The quality of a person's singing is unimportant. Instead, it is the effort the person makes that is important. Indeed, the group will often cheer loudest for the poorest singer, just to make that person feel better and to show their appreciation for the effort. Having said that however,

most Koreans are excellent singers. Although no hard evidence exists to support the claim, it is safe to say that in a random sample of 100 Koreans, the majority would be exceptional singers.

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 is not a matter of if, it is a matter of when. Remember, the song you sing and how well (or poorly) you sing it is unimportant; instead, it is the effort you make to contribute to the harmony (no pun intended) of the group that is important. Regardless of one’s singing ability, an evening in a singing room is a great way to become closer friends and colleagues, to relax, to be silly, and to relieve some stress. So when the opportunity arises, seize it! Your Korean hosts will likely be the most gracious and forgiving audience you will ever have.

**Social Interaction (Confucianism)**

Confucianism is arguably the primary factor to influence Korean culture. The Confucian philosophy of thought seeks to achieve and maintain social stability and harmony through prescribed relationship roles between people and the social obligations that accompany those roles. Without going into too much detail, Confucianism consists of five main codes and three main principles.

Confucian Codes	Confucian Principles
Righteousness and justice between governors and the citizens.	Loyalty to your government and country.
Distinction (different roles) between husband and wife.	
Order (respect and protection) between young and old.	Respect for your parents.
Closeness (love) between parent and child.	
Trust between friend and friend.	Fidelity and chastity to your mate.

As the table above shows, relationships in Korea, as prescribed by Confucianism, are vertical in nature. That is, people have different status and this status is typically determined by age. Factors such as occupation and income may also influence status, but these factors themselves are usually also functions of age.

People of lower status are expected to respect and obey their superiors, while people of higher status are expected to care for and protect their subordinates. This vertical and age-based hierarchy can be a source of consternation for people from cultures where relationships are more horizontal in nature and are based on the theory (if not the practice) that, regardless of age or gender, "all people are created equal."

Another way to look at Korean relationships is to extend the parent/child relationship to all aspects of society. Older people, teachers, government officials, and hosts are the parents. Younger people, students, citizens, and guests are the children. So as teachers, TaLK scholars will be placed quite high on the Confucian scale of status. However, as many TaLK scholars are young, unmarried, childless, and guests in Korea, that status is often undermined.

Adding to the complexity of being a non-Korean on the Confucian status scale is the fact that your very presence in Korea means that you have, even if only temporarily so, violated the first principle of Confucianism: loyalty to your government and country. In addition, being so far away from your parents may be interpreted as a violation of the second principle: respect for your parents. Finally, if you are unmarried, you have not even fulfilled the third Confucian principle: fidelity and chastity to your mate. Yet, despite all these violations, TaLK scholars are teachers and thus highly ranked in terms of status. With this obvious

cognitive dissonance at hand, it is easy to see how and why many Koreans feel uncomfortable in dealing with outsiders, and why many Koreans do treat outsiders differently; outsiders are, by the Confucian framework guiding Korean culture, different.

Having said that however, it is the author's experience that one's status as a teacher normally overrides the other principle violations. In short, if you act professionally and "teacherly" then you will be treated accordingly. Conversely, if you act juvenily, you will also be treated accordingly. However, remember that no matter how professionally you conduct yourself, you can never surpass your assigned status on the Confucian scale. In short, your co-operating teacher, your school principal, government administrators, and all other superiors with whom you will interact are higher in status than you and will always be, regardless of how they conduct themselves.

## **Collectivism**

Finally, the single most important cultural element that visitors to Korea must know about, the one that culminates from all the cultural elements discussed thus far, is the role of the group in Korean culture. In nearly every situation imaginable, the needs of the group will outweigh the needs of the individual. Needless to say, this collectivist mentality can vex people from cultures where individualism prevails and has far-reaching consequences on living in Korea as a non-Korean.

As a simple example, consider two house parties, one in Canada and the other in Korea. The Canadian party will likely see its guests mingling throughout the house, joining and leaving conversations with friends, acquaintances, and strangers alike, and generally engaging in whatever activities interest them. People will be arriving and departing the party as

the night goes on. In other words, several things will be happening simultaneously; some people may be talking, others may be listening to music or dancing, while others may be playing games. The host of the party will also be mingling in an attempt to ensure that the guests have everything they need to enjoy themselves. At the Korean party however, all the guests will likely be sitting on the floor around the meal table engaging in just one activity. The host will ensure that everyone is included and that a sense of unity and cohesion is established. People arrive at the party in groups and depart from the party in groups. To do otherwise would upset the harmony of the group.

Another way in which Korea's group mentality affects life in Korea is in the distinction, or more accurately, the lack of distinction, between one's public and private life. Socializing with colleagues is the norm, rather than the exception in Korea. So do not be surprised when you are invited out for dinner or a weekend excursion with your colleagues.

## **Conclusion**

It takes a special kind of person to live and to succeed in Korea. This statement is not meant to imply that Korea is a difficult place in which to live, in fact it is not. Instead, it should be noted that it takes a special kind of person to live and to succeed in any place that is not that person's birth place.

Success in Korea results from the combination of many personal qualities. First among these qualities is *awareness* of one's surroundings and understanding of how those surroundings may (or may not) differ from what one is used to. Next is *sensitivity* to understand that any differences which do exist are neither better nor worse than what one is used to, simply different. Finally, *knowledge* of the host culture is also a key

element to success in a foreign culture. To remember these three qualities, just remember the word, "ASK" (Awareness, Sensitivity, Knowledge). The next time you encounter any culture difficulties or misunderstandings, remember it is always better to "ASK" than to assume.

Rather than providing a simple list of dos and don'ts<sup>7</sup>, this paper has endeavored to provide *awareness* and *knowledge* about life in Korea and Korean culture. It is your responsibility during your time in Korea to place this awareness and knowledge in the proper context and to develop your own *sensitivity*.

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<sup>7</sup> For an excellent list of dos and don'ts as well as insightful commentary and analysis of Korean culture, see the "Korean Culture" pages at: <http://www.atesk.org/>