

Introduction

My Journey to Korea

On April 16, 2014, I came home to find out that a boat accident had claimed the lives of over 300 people. Most were high school students on a field trip to Jeju Island. My first thought was, “My students and I could have been among the victims!” I also thought about how devastating the accident would be for the victims’ families, the school, and the whole country. Some people were shocked; others appeared traumatized. I knew then that I would write a book about Korea. Such was my initial reaction to the *Sewol* ferry accident, one of Korea’s worst tragedies in the recent past.

Before stepping foot on Korean soil in the 1990s, I had made a few Korean friends who told me how beautiful their country was, so I wanted to see it for myself. Some of my initial trips included meditation tours that enabled me to visit Buddhist temples in rural areas. At the end of the tours, I would take the time to see large cities, like Seoul and Busan, to get a different perspective.

As I visited Korea for the first time, the country’s technological advancements impressed me to no end. It was convenient, even back then, to rent a cellular phone at the airport to be in touch with friends and family in the country and back home. It was impressive to walk around Seoul, where I saw many people using cell phones in the late 1990s. Back in the States, a smaller percentage of people seemed to own one. After thinking about it, I realized it made total financial sense for a country like Korea, which was undergoing a technological transformation, to skip expanding landlines and embrace broadband and wireless technology instead. After all, it is more efficient.

The efficient use of technology continued to impress me even at restaurants, where I noticed inconspicuous buttons at the end of each table that customers used to summon a server. While researching this book, I found that these devices are known in the industry as “push-for-service systems.” When customers pressed the button on their table, a buzzer sounded, and a server immediately said something aloud to acknowledge the call. The server signaled to the client who had pressed the button that someone would arrive any second to find out how they could be of service. Based on my observations, the use of this system appears to have expanded since I started visiting Korea.

This technology aims to enhance customer service, but using the button was, first and foremost, efficiency-driven. The customer quickly gets a server’s attention; the servers immediately know which table needs assistance; the customers’ needs are promptly met, and they can enjoy a more pleasant visit. What a difference between this experience and one in the States, where flagging a server in a busy restaurant may take significant effort! In most American restaurants, a server is assigned to specific tables, meaning other servers may or may not be able to help you.

Another instrument widely used in Korean coffee shops for quite some time is the guest pager. This device notifies customers that their order is ready. In the U.S., even today, baristas are still calling out customers’ names.

As I continued to visit the country for short intervals, I admired the glittering shopping centers, the tall skyscrapers, the efficient subway system in Seoul and Busan, the expansive national highways with long tunnels that significantly shorten travel time in a mountainous country, and of course, the high-speed train system. The latter is better known as KTX (Korea Train eXpress). In

short, Korea possessed every infrastructural and technological attribute that one would expect in a developed country.

I took early retirement and struggled for a year to adjust to my new lifestyle after being extremely active and involved in education from the classroom to counseling and finally to administration. Since I had so much free time, I decided it was time for me to experience an unfamiliar environment.

The attachment I had to Korea made it an ideal place for me to explore. So, I decided to rent an apartment near Seoul for one year. Having lived in large cities most of my life, I sought a less hectic environment. I settled in Jukjeon, a small town south of Seoul. It was close to the big city and convenient for travel purposes. Since I did not have Korean residency then, I could only live in the country for 90-day intervals as a visiting tourist. I spent much time traveling to nearby towns, trying Korean dishes, attending yoga classes, and visiting cafés.

The most valuable part of this experience was my contact with Koreans through my yoga classes. I learned much about Korean culture from my observations and conversations with them. I did not own a car then; therefore, I used public transportation, which limited my explorations of the country. I was particularly fond of visiting and walking around Jukjeon café street (to Koreans, this street is known as Bojeong-Dong Café Street or 보정동카페거리). Even though the difficulty of relying solely on public transportation was somewhat limiting, it gave me the confidence that I could survive in a foreign country. It propelled me to a much more enriching experience in the ensuing four years.

After my one-year sojourn in Korea, I returned to the U.S. Since my adjustment to retirement was still a challenge, I decided to turn it into an opportunity. During my American teaching and administration career, I knew a few teachers who taught in foreign countries during their

sabbaticals. Their sense of adventure fascinated me. I was confident that one day, I would have the courage to go to a foreign country to practice the profession for which I have an enormous passion.

This was the perfect time to achieve the dream of practicing my cherished profession outside the U.S. I applied for a few teaching positions in the late spring of 2012. My fascination with the country, the advanced technology level, and my interests in philosophy, religion, and teaching motivated me to consider a teaching assignment in Korea. I was invited to interview via Skype for a job at an accredited American high school that operated under the auspices of a university.

The prospective job was a teaching and guidance counseling position, which would afford me the additional opportunity to teach an English class for the university. This job was tailor-made for me, given my professional background. I was offered the position, and I accepted it. My dream had become a reality faster than I had imagined. Suddenly, I was in Korea, ready to begin my new assignment in early August 2012. This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity was feasible because I was single and had no children. Had this not been the case, the feasibility would have been challenging, perhaps even impossible.

As I started my assignment, I had no idea of the profound impact my experience would have on my consciousness. I was about to learn what many expats grow to realize: Living in a foreign country is very different from visiting one as a tourist. As a resident, I was about to delve into the fabric of society and learn the nuances of Korean behavior, both subtle and otherwise. I was about to have the privilege of looking at the country's underbelly from within it. Also, I was about to undergo a reality check about my view of Korean society. This experience would enable me to compare the Korea I remembered as a tourist to present-day Korea as a "resident."

In retrospect, I am grateful for the opportunity to live and work in Korea. I am thankful to the Korean people, those who embraced me with open arms, put aside their shyness, and tried to speak English to me, and those who chose to keep their distance. I could immerse myself in their culture through their approach to social interaction with someone who looks, talks, and acts differently from them. Thank you!

On a more practical level, thanks to this opportunity, I could witness and confirm the country's beauty that my friends had relayed. I traveled throughout the country in the five years I lived there. On weekends in spring and fall, I particularly enjoyed visiting unfamiliar places. My travels enabled me to witness the fantastic palette of Korea's natural colors and the inherent beauty of the country.

Both spring and fall are equally beautiful in their unique way. Still, if I had to choose, my favorite would be autumn because it is exhilarating to the senses, particularly sight and taste, and it touches me at a more profound level. It is a live visual tapestry that evokes the cycle of life in the body and mind. Persimmon trees adorn the landscape with their turning leaves and bright orange fruit, particularly in rural villages throughout the autumn months. The fruit is harvested from October to early December. I enjoyed eating persimmons and the earthy, ever-present roasted chestnuts. The latter are in season from October to March and can be enjoyed anywhere in the country, from big cities to small mountain towns and from the most crowded Seoul neighborhoods to rest stops along the highways.

The kaleidoscope of colors starts every year with the ubiquitous cherry blossom trees that bloom during a very short period from late March to early April. This event marks the end of the winter season and the beginning of spring. One of the most impressive and stunning images that will remain forever engraved in my memory is the variety of flowers that form a colorful landscape

in cities, highways, and mountains throughout spring, summer, and fall. The color of the landscape changes every two or three weeks, depending on the blooming flower. Autumn concludes with a spectacular shower of ginkgo biloba tree leaves and others that turn from green to bright yellow, red, and brown. The changing leaves in autumn are a sight to behold, especially in the mountains and around Buddhist temples.

Located primarily in the mountains, Buddhist temples with streams or rivers running nearby attract Koreans and tourists alike. They provide a place to rest, meditate, or pray before or after an invigorating mountain hike. Streams and waterfalls are delightful and refreshing any time of the year, particularly in the summer. Both adults and children relish playing and getting wet in a stream. Entire families enjoy a picnic by a river in the spring, summer, or early fall. The sounds of children playing echo up and down streams and make the mountains even more vibrant.

On the way to and from the mountains, hikers—millennials and baby boomers—and Buddhist temple visitors can satisfy their hunger with *bibimbap*. It is served at any number of restaurants leading into or out of the town. The iconic blend of rice, mountain-grown vegetables, such as beansprouts, carrots, radish, cucumber, your choice of meat or no meat, a fried egg, and red pepper paste is served in a dish of your choice, either in a hot stone pot or a bowl at room temperature. *Bibimbap* is garnished with numerous side dishes of nutritious and wholesome mountain-grown vegetables. Some side dishes may include fermented sesame seed leaves, radish, seaweed, and the ubiquitous *kimchi* or fermented cabbage, which most Koreans eat with breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

A meal in a mountain town is not complete unless it includes the traditional *soju*. For those unfamiliar with *soju*, the national drink of Korea, it is a neutral-tasting, clear spirit. *Soju* was traditionally made from rice, but nowadays, it is made from a blend of grains and starches such as

wheat and sweet potatoes.¹ It is somewhat like vodka but has half the alcohol. The alcohol content in *soju* is around 20 ABV (Alcohol by Volume), whereas vodka is 40.² *Soju* is customarily consumed straight in small shot glasses and used in cocktails.

One interesting cultural detail about drinking *soju* among Koreans is that consumers do not serve themselves. They serve each other. For instance, if I am having dinner with a Korean friend and we are both drinking *soju*, when our glasses are empty, my friend fills my glass, and I refill his. We toast, we down the *soju*, and we start over.

About this Book

I decided to author this book to show my appreciation for Korea and the Korean people. It is my way of giving back to the country that opened its doors and enabled me to relish its long history and natural beauty. My co-author, Young Lee, and I examine social behaviors and attempt to identify patterns that tend to repeat from one area of society to another, thus indicating that they are firmly ingrained in the fabric of the culture. We question the source of behavioral patterns and attempt to determine whether efficiency is the driving force, thus the book's title. Recognizing that Korea has arrived on the world stage to join other economic powers in record time, we ask these questions: What has been neglected in this evolution? What have been the individual and collective sacrifices and the human toll associated with the national progress?

We present the set of observations for individuals, Korean or otherwise, who are open-minded and realistic enough to accept that, as in all societies, including those in the West, there is work to be done to achieve real, lasting, and sustainable progress, and for society to be more equitable and compassionate. Compassionate societies recognize that values must be revisited and questioned to ensure their relevance. They also acknowledge that attempting to get around a rule or regulation

may give one person or a select group of entities an advantage. However, it places others at a distinct disadvantage and may endanger the safety of many.

This book is meant not as a criticism but as an observation from an outsider's perspective about culture and its role in the evolution of economic progress. The commentary is intended to show how a country's policies and procedures and resulting attitudes must be revisited to ensure congruence with the pace of financial and technological advancement. It is meant to place a mirror in front of the Korean people so they can judge whether they can use their current situation as a springboard toward the country's overall evolution. Or do they need a thorough and systematic review of policies and procedures at various government, business, and industry levels? Do these entities need to ensure appropriate safety regulations are in place, consistently followed, and rigorously enforced? Also, do they need to recognize that taking shortcuts with selfish motives is usually done at someone else's expense and may be accompanied by unintended consequences? These repercussions may include casualties of innocent bystanders. Finally, we pose the question, is the country adequately prepared to overcome the nation's challenges? Given the demographic projections, economic conditions, and behavioral patterns discussed in this book, are Koreans ready to commit to the long-term solutions needed to prevail over the apparent perfect storm gathering on the horizon? Meaningful, fundamental, and profound change is up to the Korean people.

Since this book focuses on Korea, I made a concerted effort to avoid passing judgment and making value-loaded comparisons to other cultures, societies, and economies. However, it is difficult, if not impossible, to be objective when the observer, in this case, me, is born and raised in a radically different culture. Consequently, the observer's perception of reality is affected by their culture, socioeconomic background, level of education, religious framework, and upbringing,

to name a few factors. In those instances where I make comparisons, it is to point out where Korea is in relation to other countries, not to judge Korea, for the only fair judgment is to compare today's Korea to the Korea of 10, 20, or 70 years ago.

This book provides a historical perspective only when needed to understand how a specific current situation developed. A substantial number of books about Korea delve thoroughly into the historical perspective. Instead, the present work focuses on describing the current condition based on extensive research, the power of observation, and systematic analyses of behavioral and cultural patterns.

Many sources cited are from credible Korean newspapers or news outlets that offer an English version of their website. A handful of the citations are from news sources published or broadcast in Korean. Young Lee, the co-author, translated articles or news reports in these cases. These instances are noted in the endnotes at the end of the book. The remaining articles and reports are from English-speaking countries. We purposefully consulted various sources to validate the information and balance the references.

For the present edition, we have updated the most critical data. The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly influenced human behavior worldwide. As a result, some statistics have been affected, such as those related to trade. In some cases, we have decided to retain the data generated before the pandemic to project an image as close to "normal" as possible and avoid contaminating them with affected statistics. Lastly, whenever we quote amounts in "dollars," they represent U.S. dollars.

Finally, it is humbling and reassuring to recognize that societies often behave in ways that reflect nature, particularly concerning the large spectrum of human progress. Economic and technological advancement go hand-in-hand. However, consciousness-level development appears

to happen independently of the first two, like autumn leaves change colors at their own pace rather than in unison. This natural process gives us hope that Korea's consciousness level will not only equal but surpass its economic and technological progress soon.

John Gonzalez and Young Lee

- What impressed me most about South Korea?
- Why does a resident's impression of a country differ from that of a tourist?
- What is the purpose of this work?