

From Pyongyang to Seoul: Learning what an International City Feels Like

About the author:

Geoffrey (Kok Heng) See is currently enrolled in the Wharton School's Huntsman Program in International Studies and Business as a Joseph Wharton Scholar and Wharton Research Scholar. He visited Seoul in 2005 to represent Singapore in the APEC Youth Conference and fell in love with the city and people. He returned in 2006 on a self-organized stay to learn more about the Korean language, culture, politics and economics. He also visited Pyongyang in 2007. Geoffrey is considering returning to do an exchange program at a Korean university and to learn the latest drinking games as they change every year.

Transition

My train pulled into the station, and I am hit by a pang of nostalgia as Korean words wash over me. While familiar, it was tinged with a different accent. Most notably my tour guide insists on calling the language “조선말” (Choson Language) rather than the “한국말” (Hanguk Language) I learned back in Seoul. I stepped onto the platform and the words “평양” (Pyongyang) greets me. The scene was entirely different, but the beautiful Korean language that greeted me elicited the same excitement I had when I arrived at Seoul International Airport almost exactly one year ago.



Understanding Korea 1 – Koreans love their country.

Korea is one nation, sadly divided, with two capital cities that grew up on different sides of the borders, each taking very different paths and possessing unique charms. One city sought to reach out to the world, and became a global economic hub – its name is Seoul. The other city chose an inward looking *Juche* ideology – its name is Pyongyang. Drawing out the cosmopolitanism and color of Seoul that fascinated me is best done through the lens of the differences it shares with Pyongyang, and I imagine someday after Korean unity is achieved, I will walk the streets of Seoul with my friend from Kim Il Sung University. This will be from her diary:

Even if I had stayed forever in Seoul, I would never get used to the bustling crowd that greets me every morning as I step out into the streets at Silim Dong. I let the sounds, sights and smell of this youthful crowd, brimming with energy and enthusiasm, wash over me. It is crazy. The only crowds back home were in the electric tram down Cheollima Street during rush hour.



Understanding Korea 2 – There is no crowd in Korea like the World Cup crowd.

I get off the subway at Kangnam station, met Geoffrey, and together we plunged into the madness that is the *Koex* shopping mall. If New York is the city that never sleeps, then Seoul is the city that never stops shopping. Electric mixes of people are here everyday, shopping at stores that sell everything from traditional Korean handicrafts to the latest Samsung phone. But I am not here to buy a new Samsung phone (as much I want to). Instead, I had come to see an anime convention. The exhibition halls of *Koex* are always hosting something new, bringing the latest fashions, trends and art from around the world to Seoul. The crowd suddenly swelled and we heard feverish screaming! Bae Yong Joon from *Winter Sonata* was in *Koex* to promote his new film! I almost fainted from excitement at seeing my favorite actor. I already watched his *Untold Scandal* almost as many times as I have the *The Country Party Secretary* back home.



Understanding Korea 3 - Shopping is a national sport.

Geoffrey dragged me across the river to Myeong Dong after that. The shops there were upscale and the latest fashion crowded every window. Exquisite international and local brands sat side by side in the departmental store, and a purse with the letters “LV” all over it caught my sight. It had beautiful workmanship and I told Geoffrey how much I liked it. He immediately pulled me away.

The summer heat, mixed in with our enthusiastic window shopping (so quaint sightseeing in stores), and the vibrant crowds we readily plunged into were making me dizzy. Geoffrey suggested we grab some Krispy Kreme donuts and 팔빙수. 팔빙수 is my favorite desert. I love the rice cakes sitting on top of the crushed ice, ice cream, and syrup best. We received free donuts from Krispy Kreme but it was soooooo sweet! Geoffrey said the donuts were from America. I could never imagine having desserts from all over the world at the same time. Geoffrey called this “globalization” before finishing my donut for me.

As evening approached, I told Geoffrey that we should head back as all the stores would be closed. He rolled his eyes (as he always does when he intends to surprise me). “Life in Seoul begins at night,” he said before dragging me back onto the subway. The subway here never ceases to amaze me. I stopped counting the number of stations at 100. Getting anywhere in Seoul is possible by subway, which is probably why the trains are so crowded all the time. I feel slightly claustrophobic. I asked Geoffrey if other subways had so many stops. He smiled and said “only in Seoul...only in Seoul.” He feels bewildered everytime he enters the Seoul subway too.



Understanding Korea 4 – The morning rush at the Seoul Subway is impossible to get used to.

We arrived at Dongdaemun and when we exited the station, I expected to see the night sky punctuated by the occasional light. Instead, the street was colored by neon lights and people were everywhere as if it was still day. Roadside stores lined both sides of the street. The color, crowds, and noise somehow reminded me a little of the Arirang mass games at the May 1st stadium in Pyongyang. We had to bargain at the shops at the Dongdaemun night market. I was not used to this: all prices were fixed back home. However, Geoffrey told me to enjoy it as this was part of the fun here. We grabbed some 떡볶이 (rice cakes in hot sauce) and Geoffrey's favorite 삼겹살 (barbequed pork slices) for dinner. At a store selling sunglasses, there was a Caucasian man saying "각아 주세요" (can you lower the price)? Geoffrey caught my surprised expression and told me that everyone speaks a little Korean these days. Korean popular culture had seized the world's imagination, and learning Korean was trendy. Everyone comes to Seoul now. I jot the words 한류 (Korean Wave) down in my little black notebook.

We made our way down to Insa Dong. Walking down that little street paved with black bricks, with its charming cultural wares, soft lighting, and calming ambience filled my head with romantic notions. I told Geoffrey I was in love...with the art galleries that lined the street, and bought a beautifully embroidered silk pouch. Geoffrey encouraged me to try my hand at baseball in a batting cage while we waited for his friends to arrive. I missed all but one ball and Geoffrey laughed. I pointed out that I bested him at bowling in Pyongyang and he sulked until I bought him some tasty 쥐포 (dried squid). Geoffrey's friends joined us at this time. I was surprised that they were all from different places: from Canada, Hong Kong, and France. They were here in Seoul to learn more about the Korean language and culture.

Dan, the Canadian, insisted that we visit the Cheonggyecheon stream. The stream was lit such that colors danced on the water as if a rainbow had hid itself underneath. Jets of water ten meters high lanced the sky, spraying my face with water droplets mixed with the cool night breeze. It was a magical moment frozen into my memory, as beautiful as strolling along the Potong River in Pyongyang during 장마 (monsoon season) feeling the drizzle caress my cheeks. Geoffrey says the Cheonggyecheon is even prettier in winter. I find that hard to believe, but I want to be back to find out.



Understanding Korea 5 - Korea is incomplete without Soju.

We went to a nearby pub as Geoffrey wanted me to sample yoghurt soju. It's a creamy alcohol that tasted weird. Geoffrey thinks it's the most amazing thing in the world. He has bad taste. But I fell in love with the fruit soju here, especially kiwi soju, and we drank and laughed until 11pm as we cooked 해물파전 (Korean seafood pancakes) at our table. At this point, Dan asks if we knew what day it was. Before I could say anything, Dan said it was "club day" with an excited look in his eyes. A single ticket grants entry to 11 clubs on the last Friday of the month. I asked what the club was about and Geoffrey said it was a party. He added, "I know you only have three parties in Pyongyang, but this ain't a workers party. It's a lot more fun!" He always makes the same lame joke. We took the subway to Hongdae and danced until the morning (or at least I tried), inundated by the latest Korean and American hit songs, and also saw some really talented Korean breakdancers. At 3am, I stumbled out onto the streets. I felt exhausted but at the same time exhilarated. I thought I was dreaming. So this is Seoul. So this is what an international city that never sleeps feels like. Geoffrey taught me a phrase to capture what I was feeling: "I shall return." Indeed I shall.



Understanding Korea 6 - At a pub in Myeong Dong.

Translations double-checked by Jaeyoung:

Choson Mal=조선말, Choson is old name of Korea. 'Chosun dynasty' was the last kingdom in Korean history. It lasted 1910, for 519 years with 27 kings. North Korea goes by the name of Choson.

Hanguk Mal= 한국말, Hanguk is 'Korea'.

Pyongyang= 평양, Pyongyang is the capital of North Korea.

Bap bing su= 팥빙수, actually I think 'Pat/pat/ Bing su' is right pronunciation. 'Pat' means red beans. And pat bing su is a kind of dessert made of sweet red bean on ice. It's delicious.

Sam geok sal= 삼겹살, it's a part of pork. 'Sam geob sal' is mainly a flesh of stomach part and it has 3 layers, flesh, fat and flesh. It is a very popular food in Korea.

Kakapcuseyo= 깎아 주세요. You also can say as 'Ssage hae juseyo'(싸게 해 주세요)

Changma= 장마, It is a long rainy season. Normally this season is from end of June to end of July. But these days the weather seems crazy!!!!

Haemul Pachon= 해물파전, It is a Korean style pizza with lots of seafood. I love this!