Over 4.5 million copies sold!

CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

The *CultureShock!* series is a dynamic and indispensable range of guides for those travellers who are looking to truly understand the countries they are visiting. Each title explains the customs, traditions, social and business etiquette in a lively and informative style.

CultureShock! authors, all of whom have experienced the joys and pitfalls of cultural adaptation, are ideally placed to provide warm and informative advice to those who seek to integrate seamlessly into diverse cultures.

Each *CultureShock!* book contains:

- insights into local culture and traditions
- advice on adapting into the local environment
- linguistic help, and most importantly
- how to get the most out of your travel experience

CultureShock! Korea is the complete guide for those who seek to understand South Korea, a country that seems ancient yet modern, uniform yet diverse and simple yet jazzy. For the better part of the last century, South Korea has transformed in ways that have rendered it all but unrecognisable from one generation to the next—from an impoverished agrarian backwater to a global exporter of technology, culture and style—while new currents continue to drive the process ever forward. Whether you're in South Korea to do business, seek pleasure or find your inner *Hallyu* diva, if you are lucky enough to find yourself on this part of the peninsula where stunning natural scenery meets hyper modernity, get the most out of your stay with this compelling and elegant love letter to the country, written by one of its long-time residents to his adopted home.

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

Marshall Cavendish Editions

TRAVEL/CULTURE
ISBN 978-981-4771-13-9
9 789814 771139

CULTURE SHOCK! KOREA

Marshall Cavendish Editions

CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

KOREA

John Bocskay

CULTURE SHOCK!

A Survival Guide to Customs and Etiquette

KOREA

John Bocskay

Marshall Cavendish Editions

Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International

Reprinted 2018

A member of the Times Publishing Group

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:
Marshall Cavendish Corporation. 99 White Plains Road, Tarrytown NY 10591-9001, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd. 253 Asoke, 12th Flr, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

Marshall Cavendish is a registered trademark of Times Publishing Limited

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name(s): Bocskay, John.
Title: CultureShock! Korea : a survival guide to customs and etiquette / John Bocskay.
Other title(s): Korea : a survival guide to customs and etiquette | Culture shock Korea
Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2017] | Series: Culture shock!
Identifier(s): OCN 982086311 | ISBN 978-981-4771-13-9 (paperback)
Subject(s): LCSH: Etiquette—Korea (South). | Korea (South)--Social life and customs. | Korea (South)--Description and travel.
Classification: DDC 951.95--dc23

Printed in Singapore by Markono Print Media Pte Ltd

Photo Credits:
All photos by the author except pages 31, 119, 167 & 245 (Adam Parsons); 25, 30, 157, 196, 198 & 210-211 (Chris Cusick); 151, 162, 199 & 202 (Max Neivandt); 26, 156, 193, 212 & 219 (Mike Dixon); 200-201 & 214 (Ryan Bentley); vi, viii, 7, 8, 10, 19, 34, 60, 64, 69, 72, 208 (Thomas L Coyner); and 100, 112, 130, 160, 191 (Will Jackson). Cover Photo by Shuvra Mondal

All illustrations by TRIGG

ABOUT THE SERIES

Culture shock is a state of disorientation that can come over anyone who has been thrust into unknown surroundings, away from one's comfort zone. *CultureShock!* is a series of trusted and reputed guides which has, for decades, been helping expatriates and long-term visitors to cushion the impact of culture shock whenever they move to a new country.

Written by people who have lived in the country and experienced culture shock themselves, the authors share all the information necessary for anyone to cope with these feelings of disorientation more effectively. The guides are written in a style that is easy to read and covers a range of topics that will arm readers with enough advice, hints and tips to make their lives as normal as possible again.

Each book is structured in the same manner. It begins with the first impressions that visitors will have of that city or country. To understand a culture, one must first understand the people—where they came from, who they are, the values and traditions they live by, as well as their customs and etiquette. This is covered in the first half of the book.

Then on with the practical aspects—how to settle in with the greatest of ease. Authors walk readers through how to find accommodation, get the utilities and telecommunications up and running, enrol the children in school and keep in the pink of health. But that's not all. Once the essentials are out of the way, venture out and try the food, enjoy more of the culture and travel to other areas. Then be immersed in the language of the country before discovering more about the business side of things.

To round off, snippets of information are offered before readers are 'tested' on customs and etiquette. Useful words and phrases, a comprehensive resource guide and list of books for further research are also included for easy reference.

CONTENTS

Dongdaemun Design Plaza, Seoul.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

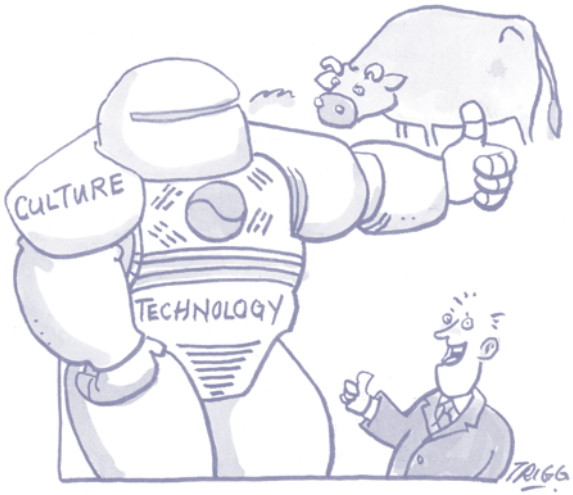
In writing this book, I was very fortunate to be able to enlist the help of various people, and the resulting work has benefitted enormously from their insight, experience, advice and feedback. Whatever flaws and shortcomings remain are mine alone.

I would like to express my humble and heartfelt thanks to the following people, in no particular order: Kenneth May, Earl Reid, Thomas Locke, George Baca, Jeong Jeong-soon, Kang Young-hee, Eo Hae-jeong, Kim Seon-I, Tom Coyner, Shannon Sawicki, Jen Lee, James Strohmaier, David Balcanquel, Mike Dixon, Yujin Lee, Chris Cusick, Jeff Liebsch, Michael Meyers, Eric Price, CedarBough Saeji, Shuvra Mondal, Minhee Kim-Tharp, Jeff Harrison, Christie Swain, Kwon Seon-ae, Ben May, Krissi Faith, Joe Rawnsley, Robert Perchan, Chris Birdsong, Matthew Sidgreaves, Robert Holley, Joshua Weaver, Will Jackson, Park Jihyun, Peter Underwood, Adam Parsons, Max Neivandt, Katie Mae Klemsen Yee, Ryan Bentley, Bobby McGill and Steve Feldman. Special thanks go to my editor, Shereen Wong, for her sterling guidance from start to finish. My deepest thanks go to my wife Aeran, and my three daughters, Cheyoon, Cheyoung and Chewon, for being my most patient, dependable and charming guides to the country of their birth.

Much of what appears in the pages that follow is also the indirect product of countless interactions over the nearly two decades I've lived in South Korea. To that anonymous legion of friends, students, teachers, acquaintances, colleagues, drinking buddies, good Samaritans and fellow travellers who have enhanced my understanding and eased my acclimation to my adopted home, I bow in gratitude.

Girls wearing traditional *hanbok* (Korean dress) set up for a selfie.

PREFACE



As a high-tech democracy steeped in thousands of years of tradition, South Korea at once presents visitors with much that is familiar, and much that is very different. Novel sights, sounds, tastes, and experiences excite the short-term traveller, but the same novelty can bedevil the long-term resident, who finds that simple tasks once taken for granted—taking a bus, paying a phone bill, knowing how to greet someone—are suddenly complicated.

This pervasive feeling that one is out of step with the norms of the people around you is what is commonly referred to as culture shock, and it can have negative effects on your social relationships, your peace of mind, even your health. Culture shock is one of the prime reasons many expat assignments head home early and perhaps worse, is a big reason why many who stick it out remain grumpy, frustrated and out of sorts, in some cases for years.

The good news is that culture shock is eminently treatable, and many long-term visitors pass through it and come to

have rewarding and enjoyable lives in their new home. One of the keys to minimising the confusion is to arm yourself with as much information as you can about your new environs. Being able to answer questions like, “How do I find an apartment?”, “What is there to do for fun?” and “How do I avoid embarrassing myself at a meeting?” get you on a firm footing for dealing with day-to-day concerns. To dig a bit deeper, discovering the values that animate the people, the language they speak, the cultural touchstones they share, and the historical forces that brought them here helps the visitor make the leap from survival to appreciation and enjoyment of the new culture.

Beyond this background and practical information, it also helps to adopt attitudes that help you roll with the punches on the bad days, and to draw the most from the good days as you expand your cultural boundaries and the horizons of your world. The question becomes not so much *what* you are looking at, but *how* you choose to see it, the answer to which will have an outsize influence on the quality of your experience in your new surroundings.

In writing this book, I have tried to provide the information, insight and background you need not only to live but to appreciate and enjoy your time in South Korea, whether you are a businessperson, teacher, engineer, missionary, soldier, student, or informed traveller. In doing so, I have drawn on what I have learned about both South Korea itself, and about living and working in South Korea, from the point of view of someone who has called it home for the past eighteen years. Because no one person can know all there is to know about a country—particularly one as dynamic as South Korea—I have been pleased and fortunate to draw on the knowledge and insights of my Korean friends, family, colleagues, teachers

and students, as well as the experience and wisdom of other long-term foreign residents who call South Korea home.

To be sure, the descriptions that follow will not apply to every person you meet, nor will your experiences always jibe with everything presented here; indeed, Koreans themselves disagree over how best to characterise their society as it embraces global currents of social and cultural change while striving to preserve a distinctly Korean character. For the better part of the last century, South Korea has transformed in ways that have rendered it all but unrecognisable from one generation to the next—from an impoverished agrarian backwater to a global exporter of technology, culture and style—while new currents continue to drive the process ever forward.

In selecting the material for this book, I have tried to focus on the South Korea that greets the visitor today and to tease out the broad trends, tendencies and undercurrents that are both noticeable and useful for the newcomer to understand, and have strived to illuminate the historical threads and cultural strands that have intermingled to form the modern Korean tapestry, in the hope that the reader be well equipped to both reckon with the present, and to navigate new trends, information and developments as they unfold. It is my sincere wish that this book serve you well in softening your landing in Korea, and if you are drawn in deeper, that it provide you a springboard to continued discovery.

MAP OF SOUTH KOREA

CHAPTER 1

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

> "No man ever steps in the same river twice; for it is not the same river, and he is not the same man."
>
> **— Heraclitus**

My earliest impression of Korea came in a 1998 phone call. I was a recent college graduate with an itch to work abroad, and was sending out resumes to anywhere for anything at all. Had things worked out differently, I might have been a house-sitter in the Canary Islands, or a newsletter editor in St. Kitts and Nevis—wherever that was—but it was an English teaching franchise in South Korea who was the first to reply to my queries. A telephone interview was arranged, and the next day I found myself on the phone with their recruiter.

"If there's some kind of cultural misunderstanding in the classroom, how would you handle it?" he asked me, and I lost my footing right out of the gate. I had grown up in a 99 per cent white suburb of New York City, where the most serious cultural misunderstanding I had ever witnessed in a classroom was when my 9th grade Social Studies teacher referred to Bon Jovi as "heavy metal". The idea that there could be a truly disruptive gulf between teacher and student had simply never crossed my mind. Fumbling for a coherent answer, I tried to at least assure him that while there was admittedly a lot I didn't understand about Korea (a gross understatement), the bottom line was that I would do my best to identify the source of the misunderstanding, so as to avoid it in the future.

Just as I was beginning to worry that I was already blowing it, he asked me his second question, which turned out to be the last, and for which I had a ready answer.

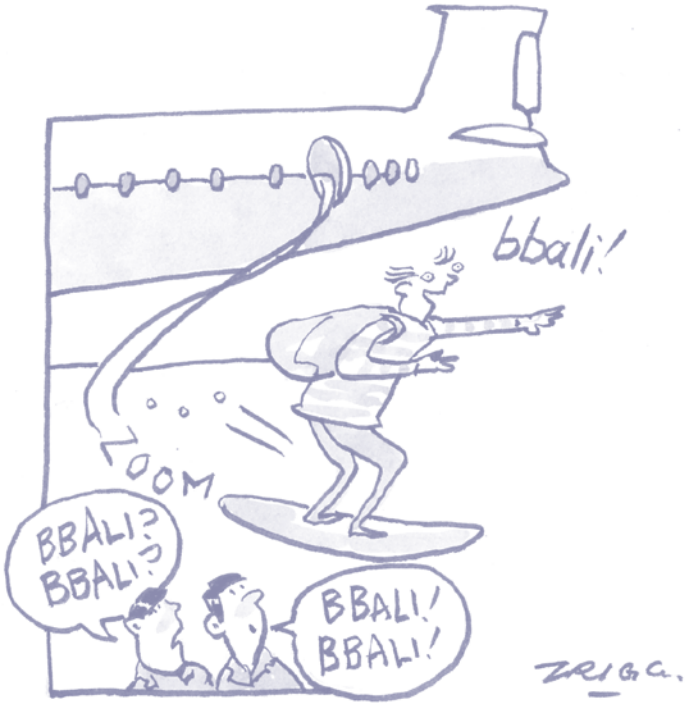
"Can you be on a plane to Korea in two weeks?"

BBALI BBALI!

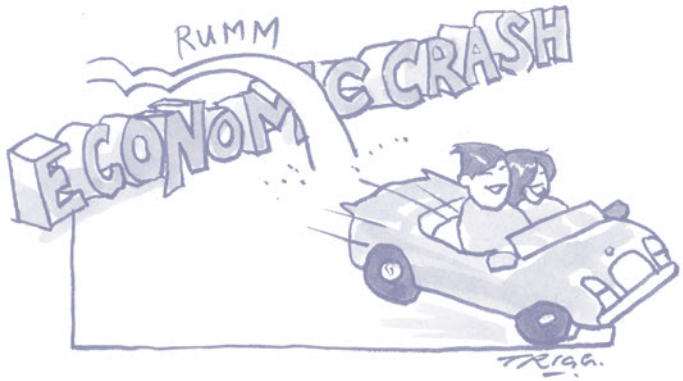
In that brief interview, I got my first glimpse of some of the qualities that makes South Korea what it is. For one thing, these were people who made things happen fast, an impression that was only reinforced when I arrived in Seoul exactly two weeks later. Thoroughly jet-lagged after a full day of travel, I was picked up at Gimpo airport and driven straight to the head office for a round of introductions, a cup of coffee and a one-hour crash course in Korean, before being shuttled right back to Gimpo for the hop to Ulsan. There, after dropping my luggage at what was to be my new home, I was whisked to my assigned *hagwon* (institute), where I was instructed to observe one of the outgoing teacher's classes. One hour later, having graduated from my "teacher training", I was thrust into my own classroom, textbook in hand, to teach my first class, all of which took place before I had a chance to sleep, shower, change clothes or simply stop moving for a few minutes. In true Korean fashion, I had hit the ground, not running, but sprinting.

It thus seemed fitting that one of the first phrases I learned in Korean was "bbali bbali", which literally means "quickly, quickly", and I soon began to hear it everywhere. "Little" Ulsan (population one million) had a palpable buzz that made even New York (which bills itself as "the city that never sleeps") seem drowsy in comparison. Everyone in Ulsan was doing something, going somewhere, driving just a touch too fast and setting deadlines that would often seem to pass before you had known about them. Korea is the only place where I have ever felt obliged to walk *up* a moving escalator, lest I be considered lazy or become an

obstacle to dozens of other people clambering up behind me. Even hospital patients seemed unable to sit still, and could often be seen shuffling around town in their gowns and slippers, a rolling IV stand in one hand and a cigarette in the other, on their way to God-knows-where. “Bbali bbali” seemed to be the motto of South Korea, and the subsequent years have done little to alter that initial impression.



This sense of urgency was also apparent in the rate at which they were building up their cities. The first clue was the towering cranes that sprouted everywhere, and the apartment blocks that seemingly rose before my eyes, in some cases creating entire neighbourhoods—replete with schools, supermarkets and dozens of real estate agencies—where only a field had been before. Older buildings were demolished and replaced so quickly that it occasionally affected your ability to give directions, as the hair shop you had used as a landmark last week was now a Dunkin Donuts. That I arrived during the Asian Economic Crisis, which hit Korea hard and required a bailout from the International Monetary Fund, made this rapid buildup all the more striking. Far from resembling the economic train wreck I was reading about in the papers, the country before me seemed to be humming along—the mobile hospital patient writ large.



The longer I stayed, the more apparent was the remarkable scale of construction. An incomplete list of what has been built in Busan since I moved here includes two suspension bridges, three subway lines (and another currently under construction at this writing), a World Cup soccer stadium, the world’s largest department store, eight of the ten tallest buildings in Korea (six of which are among the 30 tallest residential buildings in the world) and enough high rise apartments to house several armies and their next of kin. The university where I now work has added a soccer field, baseball field and two multi-storey buildings, while the neighbourhood around

us has acquired a mall and cinema, countless restaurants and coffee shops and an apartment complex where an army base used to be. A recently-retired professor I know remembers when the entire area was a melon farm.

One of the things I noticed straight away was that for a country that claims thousands of years of history, I had to go out of my way to find any structure that had been built more than thirty or forty years ago. Compared to European cities of comparable age, there is relatively little architectural trace of the millennia that have passed in Korea, and one does tend to have to look for it. Except for defensive walls and city gates, nearly everything built before the twentieth century was made of wood, which, in addition to being susceptible to natural decay, has often been put to the torch during the many invasions and wars that have visited the peninsula throughout its history right down to the 20th century. Nearly every temple I visited was a reconstruction of a much older one that had been destroyed in an invasion centuries ago. I would also learn that many more of the old buildings were razed in Korea's rush to modernise, when neighbourhoods of densely packed, single-story *hanok* houses were levelled to make way for the massive apartment blocks that were springing up everywhere. Now that the dust of occupation, war and industrialisation has settled, the Korea that greets the visitor today can boast of only a fraction of what stood here before, while much of the traditional architecture that remains struggles to hang on in the face of ever-encroaching and powerful developmental forces.

As a result of the race to get a rapidly growing urban population properly housed, it seemed that things like right angles and strict adherence to building codes were considered optional, and the cities had a rough-around-the-

"Biwon ("secret garden"), set behind Seoul's Changdeok Palace, was once the private garden of the royal families of the Joseon Dynasty (1392–1910). Today it is open to the public and is a popular tourist attraction year round."

edges look and feel. Ill-placed paving stones tripped me on the sidewalk, improperly sized windows and doors often stuck or rattled in their frames and handymen rather unnervingly employed duct tape in a far wider range of applications than the manufacturer clearly intended. As someone who had been hired as a teacher with no experience, this willingness to make do had certainly worked in my favour and tempered the urge to complain, but it was never reassuring to realise that the only thing standing between you and calamity was sometimes just a few inches of tape, a length of knotted twine or a bungee cord.

A common sight in Korea, in its constant rush toward urban development.

Despite all that, everything seemed to work, and if it didn't, it was repaired or replaced with similar speed, which is still true today. Last year, a ten-metre section of water main in the alley leading to my house was excavated and replaced, and the whole alley repaved, all between the time I left for work and the time I arrived home. Korea is also the place to be if you ever have a problem with a product, as taking a broken phone or appliance to a service centre almost always results in a quick, cheap repair, or in some cases, replacement of the defective item with a new one.

The changes in construction between then and now have been dramatic in terms of materials, design and guiding principles. As the urgency to house its swelling urban population subsided and the downsides of hasty construction became apparent, speed gave way first to style, then to livability, the current buzzword of urban development plans from Seoul to Jejudo. As drab concrete gives way to steel and glass, the new arrival is more apt to complain of too much light in his apartment than not enough (if he must complain about something). The cookie cutter apartments of the 1980s and 1990s still populate the cityscapes, but newer buildings are apt to have more idiosyncratic designs. Even my point of entry, Gimpo Airport, has been brushed aside and relegated to domestic duties by Incheon International Airport, an airy glass-and-steel complex that regularly wins annual Best Airport awards for its design, efficiency and numerous amenities, which include a cinema, a golf course, a culture museum, a spa (with sleeping rooms) and an ice rink.

LAND OF THE MORNING *WHAT*?

In the 1880s, the American businessman and astronomer Percival Lowell travelled around Korea and later published a book about his experience and reflections, in which he dubbed Korea "The Land of The Morning Calm". This nickname still occasionally appears in the type of tourist literature that seeks to brand Korea as a land of twirling women in colourful *hanbok* singing *Arirang* in pristine

green valleys, but one of the first questions foreigners ask on hearing this sobriquet is, “To what country can this ‘morning calm’ possibly refer?” While Korea certainly may have been laconic in Lowell’s time, one no longer gets the sense that “the morning seems to tarry till the middle of the day”, as he wrote. The sight of millions of students, workers, shoppers and walkers on the move has more often inspired foreign wags to rebrand Korea as “The Land of the Morning Clamor”.

One of the first things that struck me when I first came here was the decibel level—it often seemed as if the whole country was bellowing for your attention. On my very first morning in Korea, I was jolted out of bed at some ungodly hour by what I thought must surely be a public emergency broadcast warning of an incoming North Korean missile, but turned out

The Korea of today is not quite the land of twirling women in colourful *hanbok* anymore.

to be a vendor parked just below my window, blaring a looped recording through loudspeakers mounted on the top of the truck: “Get your dried squid! Three for 5,000 won!” Nearly everywhere I went, retailers blasted music into the streets, creating a cacophony in the densely packed commercial districts. If a new business opened, they cranked the amps to eleven: more than once I approached what sounded like an outdoor rave only to find two young women shouting into a microphone on an empty street to announce the grand opening of an electronics store.

Even the Buddhist monks, ensconced in their serene mountain temples, seemed to be in on it: rising before dawn, breathing deeply of the misty, mountain air and repeatedly swinging a log suspended on chains into an iron bell the size of a Volkswagen. A monk once explained to me that this was a symbolic call for the whole world to awake, though I must admit it has always seemed fairly literal to me.

The Gwangan Bridge lit up on a weekday night.

Korea was bright as well, and neon was everywhere: on the shop signs, the crosses of church steeples and the edges of motels—there was even a popular style of children's shoes with lights in the heel that flashed with each footfall and were accompanied by a squeak sound effect, just in case your toddler was not already making quite enough noise. While recent laws and ordinances have muffled some of the worst noise polluters, the Korean love of lights has shown few signs of abating. If ever I am in danger of forgetting this, the view from Busan's Gwanganli Beach, just a short walk from my house, serves as a good reminder. Since 2003, our horizon has been dominated by the Gwangan Bridge, which in addition to its primary role as an elevated roadway, pulls extra duty as the launching pad of Busan's annual fireworks displays, as well as the host of a nightly light show, in which tens of thousands of synchronised LED lights installed on the bridge's cables and supports make horses, seagulls and hearts appear to race from end to end, choreographed to the bouncy strains of Jacques Offenbach's "Can Can", because why not.

GO HARD OR GO HOME

Then and now, Koreans have displayed a gung-ho attitude in their approach to everything from work to study to play. I saw people everywhere working hard, or at least making a very good show of it, and as they made clear during my whirlwind arrival, they expected me to work hard too. There was a sense that not knowing exactly what you were doing was no excuse not to do a good job, and they apparently assumed that you'd eventually figure out what you needed to do (which I did).

I also soon learned that one had to be very ill indeed to take a sick day; it was far more common to see feverish colleagues and students don a surgical mask, drag themselves in and park their heads on their desks. And the same was apparently expected of me. The one day a nasty bout of food poisoning forced me to call in sick, the head teacher's persistence in asking about the nature of my illness and whether I was "totally sure" that I couldn't come in finally obliged me to clarify the precise nature of my "accident" on the way to work. "A-ha," she said, "I think you should probably stay home."

Prior to arrival, I had heard talk of the legendary Korean emphasis on education, but once I was in the trenches it struck me like something closer to a craze, particularly as it applied to the study of English, which almost everyone I met believed was the golden ticket to future success, and was the

reason they were flying thousands of young Westerners like me halfway around the world. Many of the elementary school students at our academy finished at 10pm, often after they had already attended two or three other academies for math, art, science, taekwondo or music, and those who finished earlier were merely off to their next institute class.

While most of them seemed to bear the weight of school as a heavy burden, most displayed no outward sign of rebellion and seemed resigned to long days as their lot. I was surprised to find others, however, who took obvious pleasure in studying, and I was many times struck by how even students as young as nine years old could see school not as a necessary evil but as something of both pragmatic and intrinsic value, a surprisingly mature attitude that had taken me considerably longer to acquire.

The gung-ho attitude of Koreans extended even to leisure pursuits, and I got a definite sense that they believed there wasn't much point in doing anything unless you were willing to do it one hundred per cent. Groups of hikers would gear up for Everest only to trot up some local hill. Kids went to the pool not to perfect their cannonballs but to learn the butterfly stroke. PC games were not merely a pastime but a televised "e-sport", and teenagers with nicknames like "SlayerS_Boxer" earned tidy sums tutoring salarymen in the finer points of Starcraft battle tactics.

Even socialising seemed to require some effort, as a night out took us to many different stops, from restaurant to pub to a *noraebang* ("singing room"), where even the shyest member of the group was emboldened to belt out the high notes in Steelheart's "She's Gone" or die trying. Meals were bountiful and "excessive drinking" did not appear to be an operational concept, as the only observable limits to our nights on the sauce with Korean friends and colleagues were imposed more often by gravity and consciousness (or lack thereof), than by shame or taboo. Though the following is a fitting description of the Korean ethos more generally, Confucius could just as well have been describing the Korean attitude toward alcohol consumption in particular when he wrote that, "Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we do."

HELLO! NICE TO MEET YOU!

Koreans have always struck me as curious about the foreigners in their midst; in the early days it was virtually impossible to walk down the street without attracting some kind of attention. Middle-aged folks would strike up a conversation in buses, elevators, taxis and steam rooms, and

ask me where I was from, if I was married, and why I wasn't married. Groups of schoolchildren would shout, "Hello! Nice to meet you!" from across the street before dissolving into a fit of giggles. Stares were common from young and old; even infants would lock eyes with me, and one could imagine them thinking, "There's just something different about this guy…"

Outside of the capital, foreigners were more of a novelty then, and were only more so the further back one rolls the clock. Visitors to Korea in the 1960s and 1970s talk of being followed around by kids and having their arm hair plucked out by curious grandmothers at the local market.

> Or consider the experience of Hendrick Hamel, a Dutch merchant who was shipwrecked in Korea in 1653 and was among the earliest Westerners to arrive on Korea's shores. Though his treatment at the hands of his hosts was far more extreme than long-time expats have encountered in our own time, Hamel's account never fails to resonate, even if faintly, across the centuries: "We were daily invited to appear before several great men, because both the men and their wives as well as their children were curious to see us because the rumour had been spread that we looked more like monsters than like human creatures… In the beginning we couldn't show ourselves on the street or a crowd was following us, or people were surrounding us and were gaping at us… It came thus far that on a certain night the mob broke into our bedrooms in order to drag us, against our will, outside and made fun out of us. We lodged a complaint to our commander about this. He forbade anybody to harass us in any way. From that moment on we could move around freely, without causing the gathering of a crowd."

While the days of feeling like a Martian or a Beatle are gone, Koreans retain a general curiosity about foreign people and cultures, and are much more open to the world than Mr Hamel could have dreamed possible. Even fifteen years ago, it was rare to meet a Korean who wasn't a sailor, soldier or businessman who had been anywhere more distant than Jejudo, an island to the south of the mainland that was a favourite honeymoon destination for Korean newlyweds. Now, Korean families hit the beaches of Southeast Asia with their kids, university students strap on backpacks and ride the rails in Europe and today's honeymooner is more likely to head to Saipan, Santorini or Sydney than Seogwipo. In the past couple of decades, foreign food trends have swept the country one after the other, such that these days you can't swing a cat downtown without hitting a shop that can pull off a competent carbonara, curry or café latte. Strangers now ask me, "Where are you from?"—a subtle shift from the days when the default assumption was that all foreigners were American (much to the chagrin of my British and Canadian friends). In recent decades, as business, education, travel and large international events like the Olympics and the FIFA World Cup have brought more of us to these shores, Koreans are much more used to having us around.

I was struck then and now by the friendliness shown to me by strangers, and have often felt that as a foreigner I was the beneficiary of kindness that at times seemed to exceed the kindness they might have shown even to another Korean. On my very first night on the town in Seoul, my roommate and I, having forgotten the alley in which our cheap guesthouse was hidden, were escorted there in the wee hours by a passerby who walked ten minutes out of his way in a snowstorm to find a place he had never heard of and deliver us to the door. I could be wrong, but it was hard to imagine him doing the same for any old couple of stumbling idiots.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

First impressions of Korea tend to be mixed and can vary widely from person to person, setting to setting and year to

year, to the point where conversations on this subject will often leave you wondering if you are talking about the same country. Straight off the bat, Korea presents the new arrival with a seemingly never-ending series of paradoxes that defy easy explanation, many of them seemingly both valid and contradictory: Korea is fast; Korea is slow. It's a country mired in the past; it's a country racing headlong into the future. The people are thoughtful and warm; the people are pushy and inconsiderate. They do everything by the book; they do whatever the hell they want. Whenever I thought I had stumbled on a solid formulation of "the real Korea", it was always soon followed by a wealth of counterexamples that sent me back to the drawing board.

I saw, for example, a country that was extraordinarily proud of its achievements, culture and natural scenery—even its very climate, as if the Korean peninsula had been uniquely endowed with seasonal temperature variations and the people themselves had had a hand in it. Yet alongside this pride I sensed insecurity—a sense that despite having pulled off a historic political and economic turnaround, Koreans seemed to feel they hadn't quite made it to the Big Time. This insecurity was often exposed whenever I was asked where I was from. Telling someone that I was from New York, a place that has long been a destination for Korean immigrants, almost always flattered the listener, yet it often lent their next question—"Why did you come to Korea?"—a tone that made it perfectly clear that anyone who left a place like that to come to a place like Ulsan apparently had some explaining to do.

Part of the challenge in characterising Korea lies in the inherent difficulty of describing any country in broad strokes, an undertaking that is perhaps more tempting and more problematic in Korea, where ethnic homogeneity often serves to mask the same broad range of characters that one finds anywhere: the free spirit and the fuddy-duddy, the workaholic and the slacker, the conformist and the rebel, the hipster and the nerd, the straight arrow and the Bacchanalian.

Another challenge is related not to person or place, but to time. Like all countries that have jumped on the development train, South Korea is a perpetual work-in-progress (After all, what "developed" country stops developing?), with customs, habits and lifestyle forever evolving in tandem with technological change, demographic shifts, social transformations and economic vicissitudes. However, unlike almost every other country, Korea's development has been swift, recent and radical, such that one's impression of the country and the people is very much a function of the year one arrived. "No man ever steps into the same river twice,"

Decked-out supporter of the Korean national football team during the 2002 FIFA World Cup.

said the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, whose words aptly describe the impressions of the repeat visitor to Korea, who, after an interval of many years, returns to find little that he recognises, as the old waters are every moment replaced by the new. Though something one may call "the Korean character" runs as a perceptible undercurrent in this rushing river, this too, as we shall see, moves with the flow. Like Heraclitus's river, the only reliable constant is change.

The last five decades of rapid transformation also helps to make sense of many of the apparent contradictions in the norms and sensibilities we label as typically "Korean". Every generation is a product of its times, as our parents and grandparents are fond of reminding us in lectures that usually began with "Well, in *my* day…" and the same is true of Korea, though the rapid transformation of the country has made the inevitable generation gaps more intense than they otherwise might have been. Consider: today's 75-year-old was born into a Japanese colony and raised by parents who were likely to be poor farmers. The 50-year-olds were born into a country ruled by a Korean military dictatorship that was hell-bent on building an industrial society and were working their fingers to the bone. Their children, today's 25-year-olds, have known nothing but democracy, peace and relative affluence, enjoy a better-than average chance at a university education and have cutting-edge technology at their fingertips. While they all share a language and many other cultural touchstones, all were born into vastly different societies with different concerns, and each was instilled with values and habits appropriate to their times, while shedding those that were out of step. A common trope says that there is an "Old Korea" and a "New Korea" and that they exist "side by side", and while this contains an important germ of truth, it really only hints at a more complex reality: there are not two but many Koreas, and as new streams enter and diverge from the main currents, there are new Koreas being born all the time.

TWO KOREAS?

Despite the difficulty of describing Korea in terms of opposites, there is nonetheless one sense in which Korea has roughly conformed to a binary split—the Korea of people you know, and the Korea of strangers—and it is this dichotomy that I suspect accounts for many of the contradictory impressions, and which lies at the heart of the love/hate relationship some expats experience.

People in the street have often struck me as indifferent or oblivious to the people around them: bumping into others without an acknowledgement or a word, blocking aisles and doorways to stop and stare at a phone or chat as if no one else would dream of using the same door, and in general treating the people around them as if they weren't there. There are of course exceptions, and a relatively tiny number who are genuinely mean or callous, but there was (and is) a perceptible feeling of social invisibility or irrelevance around people I did not know.

However, among those with whom I had any kind of relationship—friends, co-workers, bosses and the staff at my regular haunts—the contrast could not have been more stark, as they treated me with respect and consideration that was at times extraordinary: paying keen attention to my mood, helping me to solve problems and get things done (sometimes at great inconvenience to themselves), trying very hard to ensure that I was comfortable in my new surroundings, behaving like paragons of manners and

generosity at the dinner table when we went out to eat and a thousand other acts of kindness, consideration, loyalty and generosity that have only deepened as the years go by.

Unfortunately, the new arrival knows few or no locals, so it is the rough-and-tumble Korea of strangers that strikes the foreign visitor straight away, which, to my mind, is probably one of the reasons that relatively few people (myself very much included) fall in love with Korea at first blush. This is not to say that Koreans are not fond of travellers in their midst. "Is it not a pleasure when friends visit from distant places?" said Confucius, whose aphorisms have enjoined countless generations of Koreans to be agreeable and benevolent hosts, as many foreign travellers will attest.

But if Korea is fond of the traveller, it privileges the long-term resident: the person who stays, digs in, forms relationships and commits for the long haul. Many foreign residents do end up developing a deep and abiding affection for Korea, and over the years, I've had the pleasure of meeting hundreds of foreigners who have lived here quite happily for anywhere from several months to several decades. In almost every case (including my own), their affection for Korea—as with any true friendship—is the product of time invested, relationships forged, commitments made and kept and goodwill offered and received. I've also known many others who have moved on from Korea and found themselves missing it, sometimes to their surprise, and it is precisely these personal bonds that they often cite as the object of their longing. You may still grumble occasionally, as I do, about being momentarily inconvenienced by the indifference of a stranger; but as time goes by, it is the other side of that equation, the Korea of the in-group, that wraps its arms around you and doesn't easily let go.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Bocskay hails from Westchester County, New York and has been writing and teaching in South Korea since 1998. He lives in Busan with his wife Aeran, and his daughters Cheyoon, Cheyoung and Chewon. John writes a column on expatriate life and Korean culture for *Busan Haps Magazine*, and his other work has appeared in *The Korea Times, Stripes Korea, The Kukje Shinmun*, and *Branding in Asia Magazine*.

Follow him on facebook@johnnicholasbocskay.