Trip to My Motherland

Jennifer Park

Townsend Harris HS, 11th Grade
Teacher: Raquel Chung
Principal: Thomas Cunningham
Superintendent: Judy J. Chin

Author's Statement:

My essay is written in the form of a letter to a friend telling her about my trip to Korea in the summer of 2002 through an essay contest sponsored by the Korean-American Youth Assistance Coalition. Through the trip, I was able to meet and interact with Koreans from all around the world and learn more about my heritage and culture. Some of the places I visited include the Korean Folk Village (Minsokchon) and the National Folk Museum. The most memorable experience by far, however, was my stay at Hongchon Military Camp where I was able to live the life of a soldier for two strenuous days. Through my visit to the military camp, I gained a profound appreciation for soldiers, especially the South Korean soldiers guarding the 38th parallel, upon discovering how difficult life was for them and how much they had to give up to defend our country. My visit to Korea augmented my patriotism for my motherland and helped me realize how important it is to keep the Korean tradition alive in America. I believe that it is vital that Korean-Americans be educated about their heritage because Korean culture has so much to offer to the world and because the sacrifices of our ancestors must never be forgotten.

February 14, 2004

Dear Kate,

Since you expressed a great fascination for my trip to Korea, I will tell you all about it in this letter. I was very surprised to hear that you have never visited Korea,
the birthplace of your parents and the place where your roots lay. I was lucky enough to have visited Korea in the summer of 2002 through an essay contest sponsored by the Korean-American Youth Assistance Coalition. On the trip, I had the chance to meet and interact with Koreans from all over the world and experience various aspects of Korean culture. I had previously visited Korea as a young child, but this was the first time I was able to learn such a great deal about who I am and gain insight into my Korean identity.

The most memorable parts of my trip were my visit to the War Memorial, the National Folk Museum, Korean Folk Village (Minsokchon), and my experience at Hongchon Military Camp. At the memorial, I was able to see the gruesome realities of the wars in which Korea took part. Wax replicas of war scenes were extremely realistic and moving, some even bringing tears to my eyes. As you probably know, Korea became a colony of Japan in 1910. The Japanese suppressed Korean culture and traditions to a great extent. Koreans were forced to give up their culture and adapt to Japanese customs and traditions, such as the Japanese language. The scene from the memorial that stands out the most in my mind is the bloody scene in which the Japanese were brutally torturing Korean civilians. The scene was extremely disturbing, showing graphic images of bloody bodies subjected to hideous criminal acts. The look of angst and pain on the wax figures left a permanent mark in my heart that will never go away. By visiting the memorial, I gained a greater appreciation for my Korean heritage after seeing the travails that Koreans had to undergo under Japanese rule.

At the National Folk Museum and Korean Folk Village, I was able to see ancient artifacts and relics of the Korean past. I saw the clothing of my ancestors, what kind of food they ate, and how they lived. The Korean Folk Village offered a view of Korean culture a little differently than the museum. It enabled tourists to take in the atmosphere of the Korean past by presenting different aspects of Korean life in a replica of an old-fashioned Korean village. There were even actors who were dressed in traditional clothing and demonstrated the ancient Korean lifestyle, such as the making of kimchi, a traditional Korean food, and the practice of traditional Korean calligraphy. The village also had a great marketplace that offered many traditional Korean souvenirs and foodstuffs.

My visit to Hongchon Military Camp was a very memorable experience. I experienced the life of a Korean soldier for two grueling days. I, along with my comrades, had to wear army clothing, live in the barracks, undergo harsh drilling, and eat “appetizing” army food. Another memorable part of living in the military camp was that two people had to wake up every hour of the night for sentry duty. This experience made me appreciate everything that Korean soldiers, and soldiers everywhere, undergo. Since Korea is still divided at the 38th parallel because the Korean War has technically not ended, tensions remain high in the DMZ surrounding the borderline, and many armed troops from either side vigilantly guard their borders. Experiencing army life for merely two days wore me out, and I cannot even imagine how much mental and physical exhaustion that the soldiers who work hard to protect the South from the North must feel.

The one thing that startles me every time I visit Korea is the homogeneity of the Korean population. Practically everyone in Korea shares the same background and
culture, which is radically different from what exists in New York City, often described as representing a "melting pot" or "mosaic." A benefit of the uniformity of the Korean people is that one does not encounter the discrimination and feeling of isolation that sometimes exist in diverse places such as New York City. In Korea, everyone can relate to your traditions, morals, and values, and communication is not a problem because everyone speaks the same language.

The reason I am telling you about my trip to Korea is to share my enthusiasm for Korean history and culture with you and to persuade you to, one day, visit the country as well. Visiting the Korean Folk Museum and traditional Korean village gave me the opportunity to see where I came from and to learn about the history of my parents' homeland. I also had the chance to see early manifestations of the Korean work ethic in the museums by seeing the hard work that everyday Koreans endured long ago without the existence of modern technology.

My visit to Korea rekindled my patriotism for my homeland and gave me greater insight into my true roots. Living in American society makes it easy for Korean-Americans to forget their traditions and culture, especially with the pressures of conformity that exist today. Korean culture is unique and has many things to offer to the world. I believe that it is vital to keep the Korean spirit alive in America by educating Korean-Americans about their rich culture as well as people of other ethnicities. Koreans' ancestors were subjected to great distress and trouble to preserve the Korean tradition, and Koreans everywhere must never forget the sacrifices of their predecessors. I hope this letter is informative and persuades you to visit Korea soon.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Park
Dear Professor,

Long ago, it was said, "one half of the world does not know how the other half lives". Perhaps that was true then. It is not true now. I feel it is necessary to tell you about my trip to Korea – my native homeland and the focus of my unique, indelible cultural identity – because my culture shapes every subject and passion in which I participate, every idea formed in my mind, and resonates with every inaction or action by myself, as well as all other Koreans and Korean-Americans.

The thing I find most fascinating about Korea in all its culture and its many millennia of history is the wonder of its spoken language. The Korean language, in its spoken usage and the mere experience of it, shapes much of who I am as a Korean. I don't think most Americans, such as you, can fully understand this. Do you know what the official language of the United States of America is? Not English. America has no official language. Living in New York for all my life, I fully experience the diversity of languages every day. Language, experienced constantly in saturated conditions, loses the uniqueness and cultural importance it has when it plays a dominant and influential role in its own community. In America, I might walk through a crowded street and see faces from a whole host of different races as I enter the subway, finding it littered with bilingual flyers. It's one of those damn Herbalife ads, I think to myself, reading: "Feel Good! Lose 30 lbs in 30 days! Sientase bien!...". Languages almost represent a diet for the mind, and in America, I cannot dine, but sample every language and fleetingly
glimpse every culture. For me, Korean has represented the genuine experience of language. Language is more than a set of phonemes and grammatical rules. Language is the tool with which two individuals, fully understanding each other's heritage, their sociocultural roles and the implications of the written and unwritten rules of conduct, communicate with each other.

Allow me to explain. I wager that an intelligent individual like you can learn to write, as well as read Hangul, the Korean script, in a very short time. However, attempting to use Korean will lead you to discover that it is a complex language that requires a Gestalt leap in thinking. It is difficult to imagine a structure where with a participle inserted into one verb, it is possible to express all tenses and imply all manner of moods from suggestion, supposition, wishing, demanding, and many more. The Korean language is wholly tied to the history, tradition and culture of Korea. For example, the Korean reflects a rigid hierarchy of the social structure in Korean tradition. Words must be very carefully chosen to appropriately respect individuals of different social positions. One does not speak the same way to their professor as they would a child, a stranger, or a colleague, varying in diction, manner, and grammar. There are different manners of speech appropriate for each social level. However, the perception of Korean speech differs from its mere sensation. There is an intangible but profoundly perceived implied force in every word, just through simple modification to the formal or familiar. When Korean troops are speaking in their native language in one scene in a James Bond movie, the English subtitles read: "Breach the Thermal Blast Doors!" while the simple spoken Korean command is "Mun yuh reuh!" or "Open door!" However silly, this moment was a revelation for me, seeing how a simple statement in Korean allows me to perceive such tremendous understanding of the authority and the mood of a situation simply from my acquired, unconscious familiarity with the Korean culture. Discovering how much is inherently understood by the simplest usage of Korean was the beginning of my appreciation of its beauty as a spoken language. Too often the oral and cultural significance of Korean is eclipsed by the greater international focus on the genius of the writing system. The influential force with which our use of Korean has shaped Korea is neglected.

I believe it was Renee Descartes who said, "I think, therefore I am". While philosophical quotations are your field, professor, you understand my assessment that being American is not the same as being Korean, nor is thinking in English to thinking Korean. Observe the example of how Confucian and traditional social values have strongly reinforced the strength of family and the rigid social structure in people's minds. Language reflects this particular characteristic of Korean culture in the practice of giving titles instead of proper names to people. In general conversation today, I called my father's friend "teacher". I addressed a young female as "big sister". A cab driver called me "student". This casual title calling would sound silly and be wholly inappropriate in other languages. The substance and the underlying values that identify the Korean way of thought manifest themselves in the Korean language. We are what we think. Korean culture and experience are what our intimacy with the Korean language shapes it to be.

I believe I have gotten lost in the descriptions of the metaphysical quality of the experience of Korean, a fine language. Language is the communication tool of those
with ultimate understanding. Our oral experience of Korean provides a most excellent tool, capturing the unspoken mutual knowledge of history, tradition and the subtleties of culture. It is a beautiful thing to watch Koreans use Korean. Truly, only those who identify themselves as such can use the language to its fullest, most wonderful capacity. I hope to enjoy the language, and all Korea has to offer, for the remainder of my visit and no doubt for the remainder of my life.

Cheers,

T.

Bibliography

Secondary Source Information:


Dear John,

Yeah, everything is going great here! By the way, don't forget to feed Lex and water my plants. I got your letter a few days ago, but I was too caught up in things to write back. Boy, I've got a lot to tell you. Where should I begin? Ah, my flight. I was practically restless during the whole fifteen or so hours. My seat broke halfway into the flight: it wouldn't recline. I tried to find another seat, but the plane was PACKED! I thought it was a little strange, since Jill had said that the plane she was on last month had quite a number of empty seats. The food was decent: I'll give it three stars. Next time, I'm definitely taking a first class trip.

Right now, my stomach is grumbling, pleading me to satisfy it. But, I'm going to finish this letter before I satiate my hunger, because I'm such an awesome friend, right? The day after I arrived here, I discovered why so many people were heading for Korea. Last Friday, February 6, was Daeboreum. I bet you're thinking "Daeboreum? What the heck is Daeboreum?" Well, I can't give you the essence of it in one sentence. It's going to be quite a long letter: bear with me will ya?

As you may have already surmised, Daeboreum is a Korean holiday. And, as with any holiday, there is a history behind it. Daeboreum's purpose is to celebrate the first full moon that rises, according to the lunar calendar, on January 15. However, since Korea switched over to the solar calendar, Daeboreum usually falls onto sometime in February.

*Daeboreum* is rich in customs and games. On this day, Koreans look up to the moon and pray for various blessings, such as an abundance of crops and excellent health. This act is known as *dalmaji*, which means "viewing of the moon." Another custom is known as *jisinbalki*, a traditional dance intended to soothe *jisin* (earth spirit).

Another quite interesting custom is *deowipalgi*, meaning "selling of heat." In the morning, a person calls out another's name, and if the second replies, the first exclaims, "Buy my heat!" By doing so, it is believed that the second person would receive all the heat that the first person would experience during the summer. However, if the second person says, "Buy my heat!" first, then the first person will end up with the burden of heat. This actually happened to me. A boy perhaps 12 or so caught my attention by
calling me mister. When I said, "yes?" he told me to buy his heat. Of course, I had no clue what he was talking about, until the day after when I asked a tour-guide. Looks like I'll have to buy an extra fan or two.

I didn't notice it before, but now that I think about it, it seems that fire plays a large role in celebrating Daeboreum. Take the burning of the daljib as an example. The daljib (moonhouse) is a wooden structure, and it is built atop a hill. As a ceremony to the god of the moon, this daljib is burned. Besides it being a reverent act, there are traditional underlying motives for burning the daljib. If it burned well, a good harvest was expected. However, if it did not burn well, then the opposite was expected.

Another example to support my little theory is the custom of jwibulnori, which literally means mouse fireplay. This is the most fun and exciting of all the customs! Well, I enjoyed it at least. And the cool part is that children are allowed to participate. Man, when we were little, our parents would have killed us if we played with fire. Okay, what happens is that the rice fields and vegetable gardens are burned to kill rodents and harmful insects. From what I heard, jwibulnori is also intended for protection against evil spirits and possible diseases. Sounds boring? Nope. The view is spectacular! Imagine a dark night housing a beautiful full moon, and rings of fire just like at circuses. Like they say, a picture is worth a thousand words. I frankly don't want to write a thousand words, so I sent you a picture of jwibulnori in action. Make sure to take a look at it!

It pains me to say, that Daeboreum incorporates a lot of foods. Mind you, I'm dying of hunger here. It is considered to be good luck if you dine at more than three houses on this day. I couldn't fulfill the three-house minimum, but I hope that doesn't bring bad luck. In the morning, Koreans eat bureom, special seasonal nuts, and drink a cup of wine. A well-known dish of the holiday is ogokbap, which means five-grain rice. This traditional dish is cooked with five ingredients: soybeans, broomcorn, millet, glutinous rice, and red beans. Sure, it sounds only like a platter of grains, but ogokbap is delectable. Yaksik, a sweet rice dish that accompanies Ogokbap, makes a mouth-watering combo. Another traditional dish is namul, which consists of nine seasoned vegetables. These vegetables had been dug out and dried the previous year, because it is thought that people can overcome the summer's heat by eating old vegetables. Honestly, the only type of namul that I liked was spinach. Gwibalgisul, which is cool wine, is never forgotten. It is believed that if you drink this wine, you will not suffer any earaches and have will have fine hearing. I had a few cups of it, but the only thing that happened was my ears turned bright red.

Wow, all this food talk has whetted my appetite even more! Well, I'm done with my babbling, but I hope you've learned something about Daeboreum. Seriously, everything that I've told you is a lot better when you actually experience it yourself, not vicariously. That's why you have to come here next year. So with that said, I bid you farewell.

Your friend,
Howard Kim

P.S. I'll be on my flight in two days, so there's no need to write back. See you soon!
Dear Anne,

Hi! Remember me, it's Soyoung. It's been a long time since I saw you in summer camp. I miss you so much. Anne, a Korean tradition called Dan-O is coming up. It’s on May 5th of the lunar calendar. Why don't you come and visit Korea and experience this awesome tradition? About a week before Dan-O, merchants come and sell products so you can play games, shop for necessities and eat various kinds of food. You can also see some traditional games: a dialect contest, wrestling, swing, masked dance and exorcism. Because the days around the period of Dan-O will be hot, Koreans drink a beverage that is made from many good ingredients (it's sort of a fruit punch) and eat rice cakes.

We Koreans say that this day is one of the days that have a lot of positive energy, where you can see performances of many different kinds. There is also a strange and funny custom of making caramels from wheat-gluten. Vendors sell these caramels and they are really good.

There are two very important traditions: The first is Sulnal, New Year's Day, and the other is Chusuk, which is also called hangawi. On Sulnal, we perform an ancestral-memorial service, then we eat rice-cake soup. Adults say by eating rice-cake soup on the day of the New Year, you add one more year to your age. Some children eat more than one soup to get older, but it's worthless because you only become one year older.

February 23, 2004

My essay is about introducing Korea to my friend who has never been to Korea and who doesn't know much about Korea. I introduce Dan-O, Chusuk, Sulnal, and first birthday party of a Korean baby, which are all famous and most important traditional event. I couldn’t describe many of Korea's famous traditions in one short essay. However, if you put a little bit of your interest on Korea, you will surely find tremendous fun and interesting events in Korea.
After we eat the soup, we bow to the adults saying, "I hope you get many good fortunes in this New Year. Then, the adults give blessings back to us, tell us how to behave, and give us money. If you have a big family, you can earn a lot of money in a short time. Also, we put a bamboo strainer in the kitchen hoping that it will bring good fortunes. And at night, we take our shoes inside and go to sleep early because otherwise, ghosts put on the shoes, if they fit their feet, and will steal them. That person, whose shoes are stolen, will then have bad luck for that year. Therefore we put a strainer beside the door hoping that the ghosts will try to count the holes in it and forget about stealing our shoes. Koreans also play a famous game, Yuchnolee (four-stick game) and play at seesaw.

The second famous tradition, Chusuk, is on August 15th of the lunar calendar. Of course, the food that we always eat when it is Chusuk is called Songpion. That is a rice cake steamed on a layer of pine needles. We wrestle, play tug-of-war and ganggangsuwallae. Ganggangsuwallae is a kind of dance where over twenty women make a circle and move to and fro wearing Hanbok, a Korean traditional cloth. I danced like this once when I was in 6th grade. You should try it if you decide to come to Korea.

Did you know I am supposed to be "the smart one" according to one of the Korean traditions at my first birthday party? Every Korean baby goes through this ceremony. Hear me out, it's really interesting. Parents put a pencil, thread on a spool or just the thread, money and other things in front of the baby and the first thing the baby picks will determine what the baby's future life will hold. If the baby picks thread, then he will live a long life, like the thread on the spool. If the baby picks the money, he will be rich and if he chooses a pencil, he will be the "smart one." What thing do you think you would have chosen if your parents set these things in front of you? I think you would have picked food (maybe the birthday cake) because you like to eat. Ha! Ha! Just kidding. Don't Korean traditions sound interesting and fun?

Call me if you want to visit Korea sometime. I will be glad to show you around. Best of luck to you and please write back.

Love,
So Young
Dear Mary,

I just found out about your engagement with my brother today! Congratulations! As your sister-in-law-to-be, I’d be glad to help you with your wedding preparations. I’m so excited that you were willing to take part in the Korean wedding tradition. We can go shopping for the Korean wedding costume and I’ll fill you in on the Korean customs so you’ll be more prepared for your big day.

Gifts are an important part of a Korean wedding. Traditionally, on the night before the wedding day, friends of the groom blacken their faces with dried squid’s ink and parade a box, or Hahm, filled with gifts. The bride’s family would then greet them with money and food. Nowadays, the families usually meet in a restaurant and exchange the gifts.

The bride in Korean is shinbu, and the groom is called shinrang. The two dresses worn by the bride are the wonsam and the hwarrot, which are embroidered with flowers and butterflies. This was once the costume of the nobles. Under this, you’ll wear the hanbok, which is the traditional dress of Korea. It includes a chogori, which is a short
jacket with long sleeves, and two long ribbons which are tied to form the *otkorum*. The full-length dress you will be wearing is called the *chima*. On your head, you will wear a black crown called *jokduri*. You’ll also wear white socks and embroidered boat-shaped shoes. You’ll also have a sash with flowers embroidered on them. On your face you’ll wear three red circles called *yonji konji*. These nickel-sized circles were traditionally made of red peppers but don’t worry. These days they are drawn on. They’re supposed to ward off evil spirits.

The groom, my brother, will wear a *samogwandae*. This is what high-ranking officials used to wear. The costume consists of a hat, a jacket, a belt, and boots. The hat is called *samo* and the jacket is called *dalryeongpyo*. There is an embroidered picture of two white cranes on the jacket. We call this the *ssanghak hyungbae*. Don’t you think my brother will look quite handsome in a *samogwandae*?

The groom also gives a goose to his new mother-in-law as a sign of faithfulness to her daughter because a goose takes only one partner in its life. This goose is called *kirogi*. Live geese were used before but now a wooden one is used.

The ceremony takes place around a table in an area set off by a screen usually in the bride’s house. The highlight is the sharing of the special wine called *jung jong*. This is poured into cups made from two halves of a gourd grown by the bride’s mother. The bride and groom each sip from their separate cups and then the wine is mixed together. It is then poured once more into the gourd cups and sipped again. This is the wedding vow.

In your wedding, however, we will only have a *peh beck* ceremony since your wedding will be a normal western one. *Peh beck* is a smaller ceremony performed usually after the wedding ceremony that family and close friends attend. You must offer my mother dried dates and jujubes, which are symbols of children. Then my mother will offer you tea. At the end of the ceremony, my mother will toss the dates and chestnuts at you and you must try to catch them in your large skirt. The more you catch, the more children you will get.

The main dish in the Korean wedding is the noodle soup called *kook soo*. These wheat noodles are boiled and added to a clear beef broth. Noodles symbolize long and happy life. Some tasty desserts are *dok*, which is a sticky rice cake. There are many kinds of *dok*. Some are sweetened, filled with bean paste, or dotted with sesame seeds. Another dessert is *yak shik*, which is a sticky rice ball sweetened with brown sugar and covered with various nuts and raisins.

In Korea, there is a great respect for lineage and a responsibility to continue the family. Family names are limited in Korean. There are only about 300. All families keep a record of their ancestry. My grandfather used to have many volumes of books that contained the names of all the ancestors in my family. However, he wasn’t able to save them during the Korean War. Therefore, he searched the government’s records of his family and started a new book of names.

Also, unlike Americans, women in Korea do not change their surnames after marriage. I know you’ve told me many times how much you like your last name. Therefore, if you want to keep it after getting married, I’m sure my parents wouldn’t mind.
It is not usual that my parents have allowed an American to become their daughter-in-law. As you know, it has only been a century since Koreans have first started coming to America. The first were Korean men who came to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations and to look for a better future than their life in Korea.

Have you heard about the picture brides? Korean women wanted to escape the suppression they felt from society as well as the Japanese who had annexed Korea in 1910. They threw away their family and home in their birthplace in search of a brighter future in America. These were the first Korean women that set foot on America. Korean men in Hawaii and Korean women living in Korea exchanged pictures. Many times, the reality was a disappointment. However, both Korean men and Korean women had learned to live together and work towards the success they came for. And this was the beginning of the Korean community in America.

I’m so excited about setting up this wedding with you! I’m sure you’ll want to know much more about the Korean culture. So I’ll be researching. I hope we both learn a lot about the Korean heritage and about ourselves through this experience. See you soon!

Your future sister-in-law,

Jane