
2017-18 Field Notes

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person

10-12-2017

Bok

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Recommended Citation

Schmit, Jasmine, "Bok" (2017). *2017-18 Field Notes*. Essay. Submission 9.
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Jasmine Schmit

South Korea

October 12, 2017

Bok

*The following information was written based on one interview. The views are of the student I interviewed and my own, and do not encompass all views within Korean society.

**I am an American exchange student currently studying at Yonsei University (연세대학교) in South Korea. Korean culture is very interesting, and I had the chance to learn more about it through interviewing a local Yonsei student, 준하 (Junha). He was born and raised in Seoul, South Korea. During the interview, I learned a lot about the Korean culture, a bit about Junha, and I even learned a little about the United States (US).

One of the things that stood out to me while interviewing Junha was about the required 2-year military service for men in Korea. For most men, their service happens mid-university. They start university, get used to it, then partway through they are drafted into the military. They follow a military lifestyle for 2 years and for some men, when they return to university, readjusting can be difficult. They feel old or left behind which can lead them to feeling like they need to spend all their time studying to catch up. The duty of military service is also not viewed as an honorable duty, nor is it respected. This could be because it is mandatory, so it isn't an individually chosen action based from a moral standing. I was surprised to hear military duty would happen for most men during mid-university, instead of at a

possibly less disruptive time, though I'm not sure when would be better. I was also surprised that soldiers don't receive much respect from Korean society; it seems like they still deserve some respect for being trained to protect their country.

I was also surprised by just how intense the education system is in South Korea before university starts. Junha told me he would wake up at 6am to go to school at 7am, if not earlier, and he wouldn't return home until 10pm or later. This was because after school, students attend private academies to study more. So essentially, they have education from the time they wake up until they go to bed. He also mentioned that extracurricular activities are more of an American thing, and Korean parents don't stress them as much. The intensity and stress of studying all day long is something I can't really imagine.

Something else I learned that was somewhat unexpected is that **복** (Bok), loosely translatable to luck, fate, or destiny, is tied into daily life in Korea. It is ingrained in Korean culture through everyday language. For example, the phrase "I wish you good luck" or something similar is a very common thing to say. Parents may also visit Korean gypsies or fortunetellers to see if their kids will make it through the entrance exam or if their daughter will marry a good husband. The gypsies will perform rituals and give the person visiting them something similar to a good luck charm that brings good thoughts and/or good people to their life. There is also something called pregnancy dreams that mothers have when they become pregnant. The mothers will go to a gypsy to see if the dream is lucky and what it may symbolize for the child's life. Junha mentioned that his mother's dream for him is a part of his identity. It was intriguing to learn about Bok and how it is reflected in Korean culture.

An additional surprising thing I learned was that drinking is more socially acceptable than I had expected. Junha mentioned that, in Korea, drinking is more about the social aspects than about getting wasted. It is also almost encouraged, or even almost a necessity, to drink and learn what tolerance one has so that remembering the required social behaviors is possible when in the company of anyone that requires a certain level of respectful behaviors. Company seniors fall into that range of people, and they often take their subordinates out for drinks to facilitate a closer, or happier, environment. So, it is better to have experience in drinking before that situation takes place. This makes sense to me and is most comparable to office dinners or outings in the US, except the drinking bit isn't viewed as very socially acceptable in the US.

There are some similarities between Junha and me. One is that we both prefer living outside of a big city and love nature. We also both love listening to music and singing our hearts out. Another similarity is the importance of family. We both care for our families and enjoy the warmth, and feeling like a part of something meaningful, that occurs from family gatherings. A difference in family importance for us is that Junha prefers family gatherings to occur more often, while I am okay with them happening during holidays and occasionally in between. This may be due to a cultural, upbringing, or personal difference between us.

He seems to be more social, or people-oriented, in general than I am. He has a core belief of respecting and understanding other people, which I also believe in, yet caring for other people seems to resonate more strongly in Junha. He really wants to get to know people and be with them during both hard times and happy times. I think his love of 정 (Jeong) in Korean culture helps support that. Jeong's basic translation

to English is empathy or connection between people, and daily interactions in Korea are centered on it.

Some other differences that we have include food tastes. Junha will eat anything and does not have a particular food that he likes or dislikes. I am pickier; I have food that I absolutely will not eat and food that I love. One more difference between us is that Junha is more of an optimistic person than I am. He doesn't worry about life too much; he just lives it. He says that if he enjoys things and works hard, things will turn out and it doesn't hurt to believe and work towards that. He mentioned that even if things don't go as planned, something unexpected can lead to an experience he's never had before. Meanwhile, I tend to be more prepared for bad things to happen than good things, though I do believe in enjoying the small things in life and accepting that life will often not go the way it is planned and that isn't always a bad thing.

One of the most interesting things I learned from the interview that introduced a new aspect of both South Korea and the US to me was an analogy about Western and Eastern people. Western people are viewed as peaches and Eastern people are viewed as watermelons. Peaches are soft on the outside but hard in the middle, while watermelons are hard on the outside but soft within. So Western people are easy to get to know at first, but it is hard to ever truly get to know them. In contrast, Eastern people are hard to get to know at first, but once you get through, you truly know them. It kind of symbolizes how Western people are more social with new people but to be a good friend in Western society can take a lot of effort. Meanwhile, for Eastern people, they tend to be more withdrawn, less easily social with new groups of people in the

beginning, but once you pass the exterior, you really know them and have a strong connection for the rest of your life. He really likes the watermelon part of his society, because people really care about each other. It opened my eyes to a different part of Korean society and how American society can be viewed. I really enjoyed learning this analogy and I feel like it rings true.

I had a lot of fun interviewing Junha and learning more about him and South Korean culture. It was also interesting to hear about the US from an outside perspective and comparing that to the life within the US that I have known. I hope to continue learning new things about Korean culture and my own culture, and making new friends.