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Person to Person in Korea

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Field Notes From Abroad: Person to Person in Korea

Although I didn't conduct an interview per se, I have a language exchange partner that was assigned to me at the beginning of the year. Hanna Kim is a second year Yonsei University student who is majoring in French studies. We meet about once every other week or so because of the constraints of our schedule, but during those times we are able to discuss a bit about the cultural differences despite the language barrier that we have.

With East Asia as my passion, there weren't details that we have been able to discuss that have been particularly surprising. Many of the lifestyles and attributes of the Korean people are quite similar to that which I had expected and also very similar to the Japanese culture in which I am very familiar with. Although many Koreans don't particularly enjoy saying this, much of the Korean culture has Japanese origins from the time when Japan had rule over the country. Since that time there have been some subtle shifts in the lifestyle, but not any that were distinct enough for me to have been able to grasp at this moment in my study abroad.

One of the main differences that I see between the American culture and the Korean culture is the emphasis on education and dating/marriage. These are two very important attributes of the Korean culture. Some of the biggest surprises about education were the reasons why education was so important in the culture. I didn't realize that Koreans have to go through a long process of examinations, interviews, and personality tests in order to enter into any company in Korea. There is a point system used in Korea that ranks the applicants in order of the qualities that they desire from their new employees. Thus education and your ability to test well are extremely important, which is why education has so many levels of pressure in today's Korean society. A child's parent, society, and desired future are at the footstool of any mistakes that are made while they are going through their education. Today parents are

enrolling their children in private and international schools in order to prepare their child to enter the United States Ivy League schools. It is crazy what the youth of this nation have to go through from the beginning of their life.

Dating and marriage is the next biggest ideology of Korea. Some international students including myself have called Korea, "couple land." There is literally not a time where you will not see a couple walking by. Especially as the sun is starting to come out you see couples around the entire city. It is very important in Korean culture to have a boyfriend or girlfriend. It is almost a status symbol of how settled into your future you are. How prepared is a person for their future life?

During my time with Hanna, I have been able to recognize some of my perception changes. Although I truly love the Asian countries, Korea especially has a very rough lifestyle for their people. No matter how old you are, the majority of the people are always working hard to be better than their peers. Even after you get into a company and have a settled job, you must continue trying your best to maintain that position in order to prevent from being replaced by younger and brighter employees. The family structure begins to be skewed. Children begin to draw the family without fathers because of their time out of the house for work. Even the child doesn't know for sure whether the father is considered part of the family as early as kindergarten. Thus despite the many attributes of Korea that I dearly love, including the variety of food, the café culture, and the proximity of things by being in the city, there are the downsides of living in such an industrialized city that is always living off of the competitions.