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Everyday life experiences in South Korea – same same but different

This final report is supposed to give an insight into the life of Sandra Rebekka Hohnecker while studying as an exchange student at Jeonbuk National University during the fall semester of 2011. Whereas the report is not meant to criticize different aspects about the life in Korea it can rather be considered as an expression of gratitude to be able having various kinds of experiences.

I. Initial Arrangements

1. Application and Enrollment Process

The process of applying in order to come to Jeonju as an exchange student did start about a year ago. Thanks to Misses Waltraud Hermle who was in charge of my application back in Tübingen, I could easily find the papers required for applying at Jeonbuk National University (JBNU).

It was only about four months before I finally flew out to Seoul though that I filled in the enrollment papers for studying at JBNU. During the first couple of months I was kept busy waiting for a reply. In other words, I did not receive an answer right away due to the fact that there had been a major change of person working at the International Affairs Office who was supposed to take care of my application – as I learned later. When my e-mail finally got answered though the reply was a lot friendlier than I had initially expected. Ever since then I've been taken good care of by the person who was in charge of me during my time here – namely, Mister Seungbin Jo.

The only downside considering those enrollment matters was the somewhat colliding time schedule between the summer semester in Tübingen and the fall semester in Jeonju. To be precise, due to the late arrival of the certificate of enrollment via snail mail I could not apply for a student visa back in Germany which caused me some initial problems at the

immigration office over here. But then again, thanks to Mister Jo's extraordinary efforts this problem could get resolved as well and I was finally allowed to fill in the application form for the Alien Registration Card.

2. Arrival at Incheon

Shortly after I had arrived in South Korea the first meeting of our scholarship program was held at a location in Incheon. There, I got the chance to meet my friends from our university back in Germany and also to get to know other students who were involved in this program as well. Back then, it was also the first time that I personally meet my future roommate, Mister Jo and another professor who had come up to Incheon in order to pick us up. At the conference, besides having several meals together, we basically listened to different kinds of presentations – mostly held by other students - all day long. It was interesting to get an insight into the various things those students had experienced during their time in Korea. Moreover, it helped us getting prepared for the time we would be going to spend here. After the seminar the person in charge of my roommate and me, she herself, the other professor and I headed down to Jeonju all together. After the four of us have had dinner together they brought us to the place where we were going to stay for the following semester.

3. Accommodations

When I first arrived at the girl's dormitory I was amazed by the room they had prepared for us. Already having seen some other dorms back in Seoul I was very glad and even more grateful for finding that I was going to live in such a neat room with a beautiful panorama on the lake nearby the campus.

Besides, all buildings seemed to be fairly new and very comfortable to have classes in. Only at the beginning of winter time it seemed liked the university had some initial problems to figure out how to turn on the heating systems. In other words, I figured Koreans in fact do know how to economize – which is a good thing for sure :)!

Also, getting three free meals (and even some snacks during the midterm and final exam period) was another important point that I got to highly appreciate ever since I had come here. Even though many students – mostly international students who are not used to the taste of Korean food – like to complain a lot about the meals, I myself loved getting the opportunity to explore different types of Korean dishes. At the cafeteria you even get the chance to choose between 양식 and 한식 every single day. Plus, the ladies who serve the food are very friendly what can be told by the fact that they try to get different kind of side

dishes for you in case you are a vegetarian or do not eat pork.

4. Choosing my Classes

The first couple of days at JBNU I basically spent applying for all types of different things and classes I was going to take during the first semester. I was surprised though that I did not have to take a level test in the beginning. At the Language Center of JBNU I was simply asked to figure out the level assessment on my own. For this reason, I initially only chose to take speaking, reading, writing, grammar and listening comprehension classes for beginner level as I figured this would be best due to my poor speaking and listening ability in Korean. However, after having attended the first couple of classes though, I figured the beginner level would not be challenging enough. So I ended up also taking classes for intermediate level.

At first, being relieved not having to take a level test but later on finding that such a test could have helped a lot to figure out which courses suit my language ability best, I would like this statement of mine to be considered as some kind of suggestion for improvement.

5. Initial Adjustments at School

Coming from a rather small city where I used to study within the last three years I was overwhelmed by the size of the campus of JBNU. For this reason it took me about a week to figure out every single building around the campus that was supposed to be necessary for me to know.

When I first arrived at the dormitory it took me quite a while to get adjusted to the life on campus as I was not used to only living among students all the time – especially never having had a roommate before. Back in Germany as a student I had always lived by myself. So even though before I came here I already knew that I am going to share a room with another person it still implied a challenge for me to get used to staying together with the same person pretty much all day long. In my case though, I was fortunate to have such a great roommate as the two of us got along very well right away.

Still, sharing a room with another European girl instead of a Korean did not necessarily help to improve my Korean speaking ability. So it was a bit sad when I became aware it is not high likely to find a Korean student (unless you make friends with one of them right away) to share a room with since they do not necessarily want to leave their comfort zone – basically speaking about the possibility of eventually being forced to communicate in English every now and then.

This is another point that I would like to highlight when it comes to ideas for improvement.

I seriously wonder how a Western student is supposed to improve his/her Korean language ability if he/she never really gets the chance to speak and listen to Koreans all day long?

II. First Impressions of South Korea and Jeonbuk National University

1. General Life in Korea as a Westerner

Experiencing everyday life situations in Korea as a European or generally speaking being a Westerner definitely has its advantages as well as its disadvantages.

When I first arrived in Seoul I could not necessarily tell that I was treated as an exception – considering my outter appearance. This was mainly due to the fact that so many foreigners live up there. Coming down to Jeonju though was a complete change of situation. Since there are not many Westerners living in Jeonju, besides English teachers and some tourists, most people around here are not used to Western faces at all. Plus, most foreign students who come to study at JBNU are Asian – either coming from China, Mongolia or some part of South East Asia. However, this in fact helped me a lot with encountering different kinds of Asian cultures. Also, coming from Seoul I was suddenly forced to speak at least some Korean whenever I had to go to some kind of official building. The reason for this is that most Koreans around here are too shy to encounter a Westerner in English.

So referring to speaking Korean as a Westerner my experiences so far pretty much ranged from Koreans being very surprised by the fact that I know some Hangeul, to people who asked me why I do not speak in Korean more often if I have been studying this language for the past couple of years. Honestly speaking, within the last few months I have been torn between trying to speak in Korean whenever I actually got a just to and simply just being too shy to speak at all. Although, regularly eating out and meeting up with friends has definitely helped me to overcome my initial fears of encountering someone in Korean.

However, there is this other problem regarding the speaking pace of a Korean native speaker you first have to get used to. For this reason, I am often still finding myself in the middle of at the least roughly trying to figure out what the person in front of me is actually trying to tell me.

So, generally speaking, the language barrier had been the issue I have been most struggling and actually keep on fighting with ever since I have come to Korea.

2. Life on Campus

Apart from the fact that most Korean students at Jeonbuk National University first had to get used to a strange face like mine I really enjoyed getting to know a lot of new people within the first few weeks. One of the main reasons why it worked out that well was the so-called 'Buddy Program' which was organized by the International Affairs Office of JBNU. It really helped me a lot being allowed to take part in it.

The main idea of this program is to apply for a buddy who would either like to learn English or your mother tongue, like Chinese, some other commonly spoken language or in my case, German. I myself ended up having three buddies – one girl who would like to improve her German language ability and two guys who want their English to become more fluent.

Originally, the Buddy Program got mainly started in order to help the students who had just arrived in Jeonju to get used to life on campus. But often it turns out to be a great opportunity to make new friends. In addition, the Korean students are supposed to help the foreign students with initial assessment problems that might come up – like applying for a Student's ID or getting a bank account, cell phone and so forth.

In my case though, the person who was in charge of me during the semester helped me to basically get all school related things done in time. Due to his perfect English speaking ability I could easily adjust and meet all the deadlines. For this reason I would like to utter a special 'Thank you' to him.

So I did not necessarily need the help of my buddies. Still, it was good to know that whenever I had a trivial question coming up there was always the opportunity of getting back to them.

Moreover, having a roommate from Europe (in my case, from France) - and for this reason being able to communicate without any kind of language barrier - did help a lot to get occurring problems - regarding our initial assessments - fixed right away.

However, having her by my side all the time did not necessarily help to stop drawing attention to us. In other words, as soon as we arrived together at the university the two of us started out experiencing exactly what an Asian must feel like when coming to Europe – only the other way around. No discrimination though but rather a strong attraction to keep focusing on the two foreign girls who definitely stuck out like a sore thumb.

III. Courses

1. Types of Courses

The first day I arrived at JBNU – which was actually only a couple of days before the semester got started – I had to choose my courses. Since I arrived at Jeonju quite late and started my studies in fall semester (when, compared to spring semester, not many classes in English are offered) unfortunately, there were not many courses left to choose, besides language classes. For this reason, I could only apply for Korean Language Courses instead of taking advantage of history classes or any other type of courses related to my major. Initially, I had also applied for a Hanja and an International Business class but learned right away that those were mainly held in Korean due to the fact that only Korean students attended them. So back then because of my poor listening comprehension it was obviously impossible to follow those kind of courses.

Fortunately though, the International Affairs Office was friendly enough to put me on the list for a Traditional Korean Cultural Experience Class that took place on the weekends all throughout the month of November. Besides learning a whole lot of interesting new things about Korean culture, I could also obtain some credits for this class.

Like mentioned before, not having taken a level test when I first arrived at JBNU was definitely a downside. For this reason I was not quite sure whether or not I should choose beginners or advanced level. That's why I ended up taking classes on both levels. This however, caused some problems referring the credits I was about to get for this semester. Due to the fact that as an exchange student you are only allowed to obtain 18 credit points for the period of one semester, I finally ended up disposing some classes because I had chosen too many in the beginning.

2. Evaluation

My first impression of taking language classes at JBNU was basically about becoming aware of the different learning methods that are used here. Generally speaking, when you first travel to an Asian country – given the fact you get the chance to attend some classes there – one of the first things you notice is that the act of repeating after the teacher seems to be very common. This is opposed to the German learning style. So to be honest, it took me quite a while to get used to the teachers' command '따라하세요' (Please, repeat after me).

Then again, a huge disadvantage was definitely the above mentioned lack of a level test. It is quite hard for a new person suddenly having to tell what level you are on if you have never traveled to the country of which you have been studying the official language only in your home country within the past. Therefore, by trying to find out the proper level, it is not surprising to me if this person ends up choosing the wrong courses – either feeling overwhelmed or underchallenged.

However, it helped a lot to have very friendly teachers to whom you could refer whenever you had a question about basically anything. That is another thing I noticed right away: The relationship between Korean students and their teachers is a lot closer than in Germany. Needless to say, I was very surprised to even get the phone number of my teachers on the very first day. Also, listening to the teacher sharing about rather personal things, plus, respectively being asked myself about my private life, was a total new experience to me. This for sure, not only helped to improve our relationship with the teacher but also created a friendly ambience that helped us to learn more easily. In other words, due to the relaxed atmosphere at class there was no other option besides feeling very welcomed and comfortable right away.

3. Grades

The grades are composed of all the language courses I took within the fall semester.

듣기 (초급과 중급)

말하기 (초급과 중급)

쓰기 (중급)

읽기 (초급)

문법 (중급)

(한옥마을에) 한국의 전통문화 경험

IV. Activities related to the EU-ICI ECP Scholarship Program

1. First Seminar

The first group meeting related to the scholarship program was the one I mentioned in the very beginning which was held in Seoul/Incheon. It was nice getting a chance to get introduced to the program by listening to some kind of experiences other students had already made within the last semester. Moreover, it was especially helpful in the beginning to learn more about Korean customs by listening to those presentations.

Also, being picked up by someone from JBNU was quite a warm welcome instead of traveling down to Jeonju all by myself.

2. Second Group Meeting

The second group meeting took place at Jeonbuk National University in Jeonju at the beginning of November. For this special occasion all students from the scholarship program who stayed up in Seoul came down with their buddies in order to spend a couple of days at JBNU. It was very good to finally get to see each other again and being allowed to compare notes with each other on our campus lives. The first night we met we all had to give a presentation about our universities. It was quite interesting to see in what way life in a big city like Seoul is different compared to a rather small city like Jeonju.

Besides, you could clearly tell that we were all trying to figure out which university does have the best language program. By discussing the advantages and disadvantages we could find many similar things but also quite a lot of differences between each university. Seeing how much the other students had improved their speaking ability so far, this meeting also helped me a lot to incite my eagerness to study even harder than before.

The program for this meeting was basically focused on visiting the Traditional Korean Village (한옥마을) close-by. Over there, we first got introduced to our personal tour guide who showed us around on the compound. It was really interesting and furthermore enriching to learn more about the old history of the city of Jeonju. The meals that got prepared for us were very delicious as well. So even though I like the food at the cafeteria at JBNU it was a nice alternative to explore some new dishes outside of the campus.

In the afternoon our group was taught how to make traditional books including Hanmun (classical Chinese writing) by using Hanji (traditional Korean paper).

Unfortunately, the group had to leave right away for going back to Seoul after having spent the whole afternoon at the Traditional Korean Village. So it was rather a quick goodbye which made me look forward even more to traveling up to Seoul for another meeting being

held only about a month later.

3. Third Group Meeting

The third and last group meeting took place at Sookmyung Women's University in Seoul. After having taken the final exams at JBNU my roommate and I went to Seoul in order to meet up with the other students from the scholarship program. Unfortunately, some could not make it because they either had already left the country or were still in the middle of their finals. Therefore, we were rather a small group compared to last time, meeting up on the campus of Sookdae.

The day we spent together was extremely well organized by the girl who was in charge of it. In other words, it was very packed – basically running from one activity to the next. For this reason the group could experience a lot throughout the day.

In the morning our tour started out by visiting the famous temple 'Bongweonsa'. Right afterwards, our team leader brought us to the National Museum of Seoul where we learned a lot about different aspects of Korean tradition and its customs (like for example about how the traditional ancient wedding was celebrated back in the old days of Korea).

Later on in the afternoon, we spent some time at the university where we were shown around by two students who gave us a tour through Sookmyung Women's University's own museum. They explained the meaning of the school's motto to us and elaborated in what way exactly the school's history got started in the past.

After the tour we were brought to a small dancing room where a professional dancer was waiting for us. She herself in fact had graduate some years ago from this university. While she was teaching us several traditional Korean dances she also told us about her time at this school back in the days when she used to be a student. Due to the fact that she was a very natural and friendly person we had a lot of fun together. After we were done dancing she asked us about traditional dances in our home countries. One could tell she was obviously very interested to get to know new aspects of other cultures. That is why we had a great time together - indulging in our memories and sharing them with each other.

After having had dinner, the last activity for this day was to get some tickets for the so-called 'Nanta' which is some sort of Korean cooking show. Even though the tickets were quite expensive the price was totally worth it. The group had a lot of fun watching those Comedians dancing around on stage. Two times during the show they asked some people to come up on stage as some sort of highlight. It was obvious that they were out for the foreigners. Needless to say, I was one of them – obviously sticking out between all those Koreans. Still, I can highly recommend to watch this show some time.

So all in all this day can be summed up as another very good experience.

Generally speaking, I am very thankful for all the opportunities that were offered by the scholarship program in order to get to know the Korean culture in a better way.

V. Overall Assessment

To close this final report about the EU-ICI ECP scholarship program I have been on during my first semester at JBNU, I would like to point out the overall advantages as well as the disadvantages.

What I figured most is that it definitely helps to adjust more easily when there are several people who take care of you. If in addition, you can communicate fluently with those people it is even more comfortable. So I was very grateful to see how much the people in charge of me were concerned about my well-being over here at Jeonju.

On the other side being able to 'communicate fluently' points out on the above briefly elaborated fact that I was never really forced to only speak in Korean. Therefore I suppose, unless you are able to speak Korean fluently, living in Korea as a Westerner does only allow you to get involved into the culture in a very limited way. This is how I found out that '열심히 공부 하세요!' - what is most of the time rather casually said among Koreans - in fact does have a deeper meaning to most people around here. For this reason the overall notion truly can be summed up to: Unless you study very hard yourself you will never become a part of this ambitious society. However, having gotten used to such surroundings over the years while growing up in Germany, it was not necessarily challenging to adopt this way of thinking. That is why I can earnestly say: 한국 진짜 마음에 들어요!

I would like this report to conclude with giving another special thanks to both – my professors and Misses Waldtraud Hermle back in Germany who were the ones helping me making it possible to come and study at JBNU as an exchange student. As well as my teachers and Mister Seungbin Jo who sometimes bend over backwards in order to help me out during the period of my first semester over here at Jeonju.