# How to Embrace a Country—*and find yourself in the process*

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## Being a 1.5-generation Korean Has Its Own Problems.

I was born in Korea, but I've spent seven years of my life in the States thus far. I've gone back and forth between the two countries—I spent two years in Indiana for preschool and Kindergarten, then four more years from 4th to 7th grade—and this places me more or less in the awkward category of 1.5-generation Koreans. Just to ponder on the number 1.5 for a moment: it indicates that I'm *half* of something—that half of me is Korean, and the other half is American, perhaps. Or does it mean that I'm fully Korean (this is where the number 1 would come from) and that I'm on my way to becoming an American as well (0.5, or halfway there)? I'm sure that every 1.5-generation person out there would agree that being 1.5-anything entails multiple identity crises.

I can't say exactly how being a 1.5-generation Korean has affected my relationship with Korea. At times, it has made me feel a strong connection, even patriotism; other times it has pushed me closer to a critical observer's position. But one thing is true: every time I experienced an identity crisis, the Korean side of me won. It was probably within the last two years that I really started to question my identity, and how I viewed Korea as a country. As I wrote applications for American colleges, went to college, and plowed through freshman year as an international student, I started to give serious thought to what it meant to be a Korean citizen—

its personal implications, national duties, and responsibilities, if any. This is a story not just about Korea, but also about how my unique perspective has shaped the way I have interacted with Korea.

## Not Knowing My Country Led to Guilt, and More.

For a long time, I was oblivious to the concept of Korea as a country, and how foreigners would view Korea. For me, it was just another home—a place where my family was, and a place where there were more people who looked like me. One brief crisis that brought into question my identity was when I had to enter a "preferred name" on my Common Application. I had an English name, Kristine, which I used when I was living in Indiana, but to say that I *preferred* it over my given Korean name somehow seemed wrong at the time, as if I were betraying my Korean background. Of course, the Common Application didn't mean to set off any deep questions by providing that space; it was simply asking if I literally had a preferred name or not. Nonetheless, I consciously chose to leave the space blank, as if I were trying to prove to the college, and to myself, that I was as Korean as could be.

Yet what did it mean to be Korean? Could I call myself Korean even though I barely understood its history, its foundation, culture, and politics? When I started to meet people who were genuinely interested in Korea, I found, to my chagrin, that I couldn't confidently answer any of their questions. They asked about the Korean War, policies toward North Korea, about reunification, the president. My answers would be as vague and general as possible. I felt guilty every time for not being able to be more specific, but I would appease myself with the knowledge that I hadn't been able to study Korean history and culture properly in a Korean setting.

But there came a point when the amount of guilt added up to be too much. This summer, at a Taoist temple, a friend pointed to the different Taoist symbols on the wall and asked what their relationship to the Korean flag symbols were. When I realized that I couldn't even draw the Korean flag, let alone explain what those symbols meant, my guilt was at its peak. After attempting to explain what I thought the symbols meant, I gave up, and shocked myself by labeling my inability to answer as *shame*. I had, for the first time, admitted that it was actually shameful to not know even the basics about my country. Shame was a much more powerful word than guilt, and in that moment, I felt even more compelled to get back in touch with my Korean roots.

Looking back on this summer, I think I took my first active step to "get back in touch" by purchasing a book about Korea as I was waiting at the airport for my flight. I was browsing the bookshelves of a small store, when I came across the title, *Korea: The Impossible Country*. It was written by Daniel Tudor, the Korea correspondent for *The Economist.* While I had made conscious efforts to stay up-to-date with Korean affairs by following Korean news online, I felt that my knowledge could benefit from an objective point of view (I highly recommend it to anyone looking for a comprehensive overview of Korea). At the time, I didn't put much thought into my little purchasing act, but now I think I may have been responding to the increasing guilt, the need to understand my background, and the need to better represent Korea.

## At Times, I Was Patriotic.

Although I felt like I barely understood Korea, I was surprisingly patriotic at times. These days, Psy has become such a big hit that every mention of Korea is followed by praising "Gangnam Style" (after a hesitant "He *is* Korean, right?"). Automatically, the person strikes a

pose by crossing the wrists, spreading out the feet, and swinging the invisible lasso overhead. I would strike the pose along with them, overcome with an odd sense of pride that Psy was Korean. Even on YouTube, Psy's video tops the chart—with over 1.7 billion views, he trumps Justin Bieber by more than double the number of views. My previous perception of Psy, to be honest, was one of a retired musician who had long since disappeared from the music scene; but his amazing comeback made me respect him all the more, and it made me thank him for shining the spotlight on Korea.

My patriotism is also evident in sports. I still remember the day when Korea beat Italy in the 2002 FIFA World Cup Round of 16, ensuring a spot in the quarterfinals. Everyone was out on the streets, clad in red, on rollerblades, bikes, scooters, waving the Korean flag, wearing the flag around their shoulders. Even the cars slowed down for us so that we could race through the streets. I was out celebrating until my voice was gone, my own flag tied around my neck. Since then, I've made a point of not missing Korean soccer, wherever I am—even if the match takes place at 4:00 AM, I wake up in time to watch it live. Even in trivial moments, my patriotism would reveal itself, like in my persistent request for someone to play as the South Korean team in a game of FIFA 13 (a soccer video game).

Soccer is not the only thing that brings out my Korean pride. Any time a Korean actor, singer, author, or athlete makes their presence known on the international stage, I swell up with pride. Whenever Kim Yuna won another medal in the Olympics for her ice-skating, whenever Korean stars like Rain or the Wondergirls went on global tours, whenever best-seller authors like Ha-Joon Chang and Kyung-sook Shin emerged, I felt proud of their accomplishments as if they were my own. When I was in New York, it made me proud to see the *bibimbap* commercial created by a group of Korean comedians from the TV show "Muhandojeon" playing in Times

Square. I was especially glad when I found out the American version of *Oldboy*, a 2003 Korean film by acclaimed director Park Chan-wook, was to be released in 2013. I viewed every success achieved by Koreans both as proof of Korea's development and as another opportunity, another platform upon which Korea could enter global dialogue.

It wasn't just through people that I felt patriotism. I took pride in the unique language, culture, and landscape of Korea. During the months before college, I volunteered as a tour guide for foreigners. I enjoyed taking foreigners on walks around the Gyungbok Palace and watching them taking pictures, marveling at the distinctive architecture styles. On Gwanghwamun Square, I would point to the statue of King Sejong and explain how he founded the Korean alphabet, the most scientific language system in the world. "The next language you should learn," I would tell them, "is Korean; you can learn to read it in a matter of days."

In conversations with foreigners, a defensive kind of patriotism would emerge; I felt obligated to somehow *defend* Korea from its generalizations and stereotypes. I close my eyes and try to imagine Korea's image from a foreigner's point of view today: Gangnam Style, North Korea (these two would be dominant), extremely diligent students and overbearing parents, *kimchi*, dog meat, plastic surgery, K-Pop… Even this list would be considered above average; I'd be surprised if one person were able to hold a conversation covering all of these topics. However, like I said, the beginning of our conversation would be dominated by explanations—*no, we don't live in constant fear of being nuclear bombed by North Korea; no, not every student lives on four hours of sleep; no, eating dog is definitely not common; no, not everyone has had a complete makeover through plastic surgery,* and so on. It was in these kinds of moments that I would feel most Korean, as if I were protecting the country from any negativity, although I am not sure where exactly my defensive stance was stemming from.

There were moments when my patriotism felt challenged, living in the States. I was involved in a progressive non-profit organization called the Roosevelt Institute, dedicated to developing progressive ideas and leadership for America. When I was attending a conference about natural disaster policies after Hurricane Sandy, I began to feel a strange sense of alienation from the group. The senators, governors, and NGO workers were giving speeches about "our country, our nation," how we could better protect "our people" from inevitable disasters ahead. Even when we were discussing policies in small groups, I found that I couldn't refer to America using the pronoun "our." This was a strange moment for me, because I realized that I didn't consider America to be *my* country. No doubt, I loved living in America and I loved the country; but in the corner of my mind, I was disappointed that I couldn't be doing the same for Korea. But did I really feel so much loyalty towards Korea that I should be caught off-guard in moments like these? Would it have been different if I were a U.S. passport holder as well? Nevertheless, the fact that I was raising these questions proved to me that I still felt strongly bonded to Korea.

## Other Times, I Was a Critical Observer.

When I wasn't patriotic, my years of living in America provided me with a third-person, critical point of view from which to observe Korea. Indeed, Korea has been a very interesting country to study, with its turbulent history, its unpredictable neighbor to the north, and its Buddhist and Confucian foundations. While Korea had made astonishing progress and had undergone multiple transformations in such a short period of time, in my mind, the success story came with a hefty price tag.

Every time I was back in Korea, I was shocked by the level of competition, the strict hierarchy, and the culture of respect. It all stems from Korea's foundation on Confucianism.

Although the culture of respect and deference made for a very honorable and humble lifestyle, I felt it was too binding and restricting at times. There were different levels of speech and you had to "raise" your level as well as use a different tone when speaking to an elder, even if he/she was only a year older. I found myself preferring English over Korean, so that I could avoid adding awkward suffixes to "raise" the level of my speech. The unhealthy obsession with education also never failed to shock me. Having attended an International Academy school, I had luckily been able to escape the worst of the Korean education system. Whenever I saw my Korean friends struggling through the grueling process of preparing for *suneung* (the Korean equivalent of the SAT, except it's only held once a year), I felt fortunate to have been raised with the American system. But then again, this Confucian ethic of merit and constant hard work is what has brought Korea out of its poverty and war-torn years.

As a critical observer, I have also been able to make my own judgments about Korea's political system. Like any country that has gone through rapid transitions, Korea has had its share of military dictatorships and oppression. I would say that Korea is still experimenting with democracy, what with the most recent presidential election sparking protests and controversy regarding the National Intelligence Service's (NIS) covert involvement in shaping public opinion. The ability of past leaders to plow through with controversial policies is another reason why I remain skeptical about Korea's democracy. Because I was interested in environmental issues, I carefully followed the progress of the previous president's (Lee Myung-bak) brainchild, the Four Rivers Project. The project consisted of reconstructing four major rivers in Korea, flooding farmland, building parks, and constructing dams. Despite intense opposition and scholarly advice, the project was implemented in full and completed last year. It became a close topic of study for my research papers in sociology class, as I analyzed the project from beginning to end, the

politics behind it, and why the opposition movement had failed. I don't know why I chose this topic in particular, but looking back, I think my preoccupation with the topic was a manifestation of my desire to learn more about Korea. I may have also thought of it as my responsibility, as an international presence in college, to bring Korea into our class discussions.

I must say that as disappointed as I was with what I found during my research—the corruption, lack of democracy, purely profit-driven motives—the results did not drive me further away from Korea. Rather, it drew me nearer, as if it were a challenge awaiting the next generation of Koreans. I wouldn't say that these disappointments made me less proud to be a Korean, but rather made me more accepting of Korea, motivating me to study and understand it more.

Being a critical observer didn't always mean casting Korea in a negative light. Within its rapid transitions are many positive success stories as well. As the first country to graduate from an IMF aid-receiving country to an aid-giving country, Korea has given remarkable donations to nations still struggling with poverty, through organizations like Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). When I went to El Salvador two summers ago on a research grant with a group of friends, we were welcomed by a host of people who were filled with gratitude for the aid that Korea had been giving them. They guided us through the national university, the computer labs, science labs, and engineering classrooms, pointing out the Korean products in each room. On a local vegetable farm, we met a Korean agricultural scholar who was teaching farmers sustainable cultivation techniques. I was both surprised and humbled by how much Korea was reaching out to foreigners, especially when our own poverty was not that far behind us.

## There Is Always *Jeong* in Korea.

Perhaps one defining characteristic of Korea is the concept of *jeong*. Many people have different definitions for what *jeong* means—I wouldn't be able to describe it in words. My high school English teacher described *jeong* as Chocopie (I'm still not entirely sure what he meant by this), that he could feel *jeong* in this national favorite snack, which was often given in the form of donations, a friendly gesture, or a consolation treat for the Korean army undergoing training. In his book, Daniel Tudor describes *jeong* as an "invisible hug" that bonds the Korean people together. I would say that this is a pretty adequate description, considering the fact that it is like an unseen bond that keeps Koreans looking out for each other, whether or not they have personally interacted on an individual level. There are various accounts of foreign businessmen feeling "cheated" out of a deal because of the strong *jeong* shared by Koreans.

*Jeong* also accounts for the strong sense of collectivity within Korea. For a long time, Koreans lived in communal villages where mutual cooperation was necessary for survival. Geopolitically, Korea was always a target for foreign invasion, becoming a playground for China, Japan, and communist and capitalist powers. Every time, unity was stressed as the winning strategy. I believe that by placing the society above the individual, Korea was able to avoid dissolving into the power struggles of foreign countries. Although it definitely places less emphasis on the individual, I wouldn't say that this sense of collectivity is the opposite of being independent—rather, it is something that gives each individual a sense of empowerment, knowing that one is never alone, but supported by this protective shield that is *jeong*.

Despite all the cultural shocks and differences I felt in Korea, I always felt *jeong*. There was an odd sense of being home, even when I was around total strangers. I feel *jeong* when the street food vendor *Ahjumma* (a title used to address older women), noticing I'm a student, gives

me an extra serving of soup or rice cake, telling me to do well on my exams. *Jeong* is also felt in the language: I remember one time when I mistakenly referred to my mother as *"nae uhmma"(my mom)* instead of *"woori uhmma"(our mom)*; my Korean friends laughed at me, and I couldn't understand why I would say "our mom" when she had only given birth to me. Now that I look back, it was a result of *jeong,* the strong sense of "we" and collectivism being reflected in our everyday language.

With western culture permeating Korea, there is less and less *jeong* to be felt. It is sad to see *jeong* on the decline, but I'm glad to have experienced it, and I know I can always depend on it to provide a sense of being home whenever I go back.

## There Are Many Challenges Ahead.

My overall relationship with Korea has been a very turbulent one. Being a 1.5-generation Korean has entailed multiple identity crises, but it has also helped me mature as a human being, in questioning my background and making conscious efforts to understand my country. Especially in the past two years, I've learned to embrace Korea for the country it is, without prejudice, without condescension. There are moments when I am proud and other moments when I'm less proud, but these experiences have only made my exploration all the more interesting.

Over this past summer, I realized that I wanted to delve deeper into my background, enlarging the boundaries to include all of Asia. This has led me to pursue a second major in Asian Languages and Civilizations. Perhaps this is an extension of my renewed interest in Korea, or perhaps it is an indication of my acceptance that my first and foremost identity is rooted in Korea. Whatever the underlying motive, I hope to find out more about myself in the process.

Maybe, wherever we are, the truth remains that we cannot escape our roots. I look to Korea—its challenges, its alarming achievements, its controversial past, its questionable democracy, and its *jeong*—and I'm able to embrace all of it; somehow this amalgam of the good and the bad makes it all the more fascinating. In this act of embracement is a mixture of respect, deep affection, sympathy, as well as determination. Being a 1.5-generation Korean has made my relationship to Korea more precarious and ambiguous than anything, but without this status, I doubt I would have been able to share this dynamic story, of how I have come to accept Korea as an inseparable part of who I am, a part that I am prouder than ever to represent. Still many challenges remain, both for Korea as a country, and for me individually, as a Korean student in the States, but I am confident that I am prepared for whatever lies ahead.