Closing the Gap Between South Korea and America:

A Reflection of a Korean-American’s Learning

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CLOSING GAP: KOREAN-AMERICAN

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At the age of eight, I realized that when children in the streets and public places, such as Walmart and the library, take a first glance at me, they do not see me as an American or Korean-American but as an outsider. I hated that I was different from everybody else. People teased me because of my ethnicity: when I marched in the high school marching band, an upperclassman said that I was a North Korean soldier marching, and my peers announced to stay away from me because I had a bomb hidden in my stomach, tucked away in my shirt. When principals and teachers called out “Ember Suh” for class rolls or awards, I always heard my last name as the name “Sue,” not my last name, “Suh” (it is pronounced like “duh”). Do not even mention my middle name, “Yeji.” One time, my middle school principal called the students by first, middle, and last names for honorary awards, but he stopped at the “Y” syllable of my middle name and passed to my last name, and, of course, it was pronounced like the name, “Sue.”

I felt that the only place I belonged somewhere was my home. My immigrant parents and natural-born citizen siblings call me by my Korean name, “Yeji,” and do not tease each other about our Korean identity, but the sense of belonging did not mean I liked Korean in the house. My mom taught us Korean history lessons and gave us spelling tests, and I always complained that it was unfair. Korean dynasties go all the way back to the 1300s, and I cannot memorize all that. I was a decent speller, but who likes spelling tests? Why did I have to learn Korean? We did not even live in South Korea; we were in the United States, where the primary language is English! Despite my complaints, my home eventually became the place where I first enjoyed the
Korean culture, and it is definitely not from the history lessons or from spelling exams. Then where did I get the appreciation of Korea? Here is a hint: what do little kids like and ask for every night? Children love stories.

I have always enjoyed stories, ranging from Aesop’s fables to small stories that my father created almost immediately. What I enjoyed the most were the fairy tales and Korean folktales in the colorful, hardcover books and the huge paperback books that expanded from my feet to my belly button when I was a child. Each bound book reveals a proverbial lesson that Koreans value, such as humility and hospitality (if not followed, goblins will strike us, and tumors will grow on our face). Because my sister and I shared a tiny, square room, my childhood beliefs in the Korean folktales and fairy tales all began on my brother’s queen-sized bed in his small room that was surrounded by his random drawings.

Every night after school and during the weekends, my younger siblings and I either leaned against my brother’s hard, wooden bed frame to peek at the book over my father’s arm or lay down on our stomachs on the bouncy bed to look at the book over his broad shoulders. Many people enjoy the back seats of movie theaters, and similarly, the bed was the best place to look at the book. The screen or the book’s pages were all in one view and not just a close-up of one side of the screen or one page. All of the pictures and details can be seen effectively and quickly with one scan.

From either the ground or the bed, my siblings, my father, and I entered the world of fairy tale and folk tales set in Korea when kings, queens, and crown princes and princesses oversaw the dynasties and the land. I always saw stern elite men with long, gray beards and with traditional hats called *gats*. The men’s long, pale, and dark robes called *hanboks* only revealed
their expensive, black fabric shoes. Their wives wore *hanbok* dresses instead, and their feet poked out when they gracefully walked down the dirt streets. The hunching poor men, on the other hand, had ragged, baggy shirts and pants while their wives had tattered, faded *hanboks* with their torn, straw-woven shoes. The rich class always sneered at the poor class. When a poor younger brother asked his rich older brother for rice at the gate, the older brother slammed the door and yelled at him to scram. I scrunched my small face and thought, “If I ever become rich or if I become a rich woman when I go back in time, I will help the poor people,” and learned about hospitality.

Sometimes, animals appeared in the fantasy life. Tigers usually threatened the poor people, and bears usually acted calmly toward the people and the gods in the heavens. A tiger ate a poor mother who was returning home after selling some of her rice cakes, and he trespassed into the family’s property. To lure the children to come out, the tiger covered his hand in white flour to mimic the mother’s pale hand, but the smart son and daughter, who found the mother’s voice deeper than usual, ran away and climbed a rope to the heavens. The older brother now watches the people at nighttime as the moon, and the younger sister warms and comforts the people as the sun. (She was initially the moon, but she switched places with her brother due to her fear of the dark.) Another tiger and a bear wanted to become humans, so they ate mugworts, or bitter medicinal plants, and garlic. The impatient tiger gave up and ran away, but the bear stayed and became a woman. Because she could not have children, the bear woman fervently prayed to the divine king of the heavens, and pleased, the king took her as his wife, and out of the marriage came the founder of the Korean nation.
Over all the people, animals, and guardians, my father’s voice enveloped the busy villages and mountains. His enactment of the characters gave them their traits and voices. To make the story more interesting, my siblings and I chanted “Fast mode! Fast mode!” My father read the sly tiger’s dialogue, “geureom ddeok hana joomyeon anjaba meokji,” (Heo, 1991, p. 7) (“If you give me a rice cake, I won’t eat you”) faster, and when we continued to chant to go faster than the current fast mode, he read even faster. My siblings and I giggled and repeated “Slow mode! Slow mode!” and my father slurred the Korean sentences to elongated syllables: “geeeuureeoom ddeeook haanaa joomyeeoon aanjaabaa meeookjii.”

I abhorred the unnecessary Saturday Korean classes but was motivated to copy my father when he read in the slow, normal, and fast modes, and I practiced reading with my mother sometimes but often practiced individually on the cold, wooden floor beside the bookshelf, stacked and filled with the Korean books. Unfortunately, as my father dealt with more occupational and family struggles, he lost his time to take us back to the fantasy and historical world, and I could no longer mouth along to my father’s fast mode reading. Luckily, I was the fastest reader out of my siblings, so I took my siblings back to where the rich families, poor families, tigers, and bears lived instead. As I read more and more, I was able to recognize the “alphabets” of the Korean language and eventually memorized the particular spellings of common elementary words.

Over the years, I accumulated not only my knowledge of spelling, grammar, and vocabulary but also the joy that Korean literature and culture gave me. Every Saturday and Sunday, I rested on the couch and watched Korean comedy and variety shows. I laughed at Korean word puns and jokes that pertained to the culture; I chuckled when I saw Korean
celebrities tease each other. Before my understanding of the language, my mother used to yell at us when we talked to her in English, but I now talk to my mother in Korean, creating a bridge between the Korean culture and the American culture. My relationship with her strengthened because I closed the gap between the two cultures, and usually, I walk over the bridge to the Korean lifestyle to relate with my mother, and sometimes, she crosses to the American side if she wonders about unfamiliar English vocabulary and confusing cultural differences.

I never imagined that the fantasy world from the books would create a connection to the real world. I constantly thought of South Korea and the United States as two different nations established in two separate continents. In contrast to my belief, in the November 27, 2017 episode of the Ellen Show, BTS’ RM, the leader of the worldwide famous K-pop boy band, shared that when he had to learn English as his secondary language on top of Korean, he thought that he “was kinda like a victim at that time,” but he realized that he was the “lucky one” instead. After I, too, recognized the true value and significance of both languages, I could say that I closed the gap between South Korea and America by rebuilding the Bering Land Bridge— the strait that once connected Asia to the Americas— to balance my Korean and American identities and now migrate, or adjust, from one place to another easily.
References
