



Academia Abroad

by Thomas R. Klassen

A Canadian professor discovers that scholars are the new royalty in Korea

The global scope of scientific discovery suggests that academic life is the same the world over. In an age when university faculty regularly communicate and collaborate with colleagues in other countries, publish in the same journals and might teach exchange students from any number of continents, it is easy to believe that universities are uniform in all developed nations.

However, a year spent on research leave at Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea, shattered this notion. Immediately noticeable upon arrival in the country was that education in this East Asian 'tiger' is a unique blend of formality and competition. Without natural resources and a land mass only one percent of Canada's, Korea spends a greater proportion of its gross domestic product on education than any other country.

Historically under Confucian tradition, scholars ranked only after the now-abolished royalty in social status. Today, university professors continue to be viewed as role models for

citizenship and ethical behaviour. They have little trouble moving between the academy and positions in government, often as elected officials, or the private sector.

In the classroom professors are accorded a level of deference unknown in North American or even European institutions. Students often bring small gifts to faculty members during the national teachers' day or just when visiting for office hours. It is not uncommon for faculty members to be invited to weddings and other personal functions of students. In a country where bowing is the standard form of greeting, university faculty receive particularly deep and formal bows both on and off campus.

The respect accorded to teachers means that they are permitted to work until age 65. Nearly all workers in the country—including in white collar jobs—are forced to retire by their early or mid-fifties. Retired at such a young age, usually with little savings and in a yet underdeveloped welfare state, they envy university faculty who invariably continue to

work until age 65.

Most notable is the quantitative ranking that imbues education in Korea. The selection of students to university is based on a standardized nation-wide exam, along with supplementary university administered entry tests. Examinations are widespread during studies, with compulsory mid-term and final exams in most courses.

For students, exams continue post graduation with nearly all employers utilizing tests as part of the employment interview and hiring process. Jobs applicants for government positions must undergo highly competitive multi-stage week-long national exams.

The ranking inherent in standardized exams extends to other realms of social life. One of the most common questions that colleagues in my host department asked was my age. In formal situations, as well as some informal ones, age determines speaking order, the form of address one might use and how deep one bows. Age also determines who pays for lunch (the oldest person pays).

Also publicly discussed is one's publication record. Korean faculty members are little interested in authoring book chapters or even books, but rather focus on journal articles because these are easily quantified and ranked. As such, it is not uncommon for a colleague to be introduced as "the most published member of the department according to the Social Science Citation Index."

Not only are students and faculty members ranked, but also universities. Although there are no formally published studies, there is general societal consensus as to the top universities and their order. As I was to learn, my host university was 'number two.'

That one can travel to Seoul, the capital where the top universities are located, from any other locale in the country in a few hours, heightens competition on the part of students to attend the premier schools. Unlike Canada, there is little friction of distance in deciding what university to attend. It is not uncommon for families to move to new neighbourhoods and cities to be nearer to the best secondary and post-secondary schools for their children.

Slightly over 40% of the 50 million Koreans live in Seoul, making it one of the most densely urban areas in the world. Combined with nearly universal car ownership, traffic and parking are often nightmarish, even with an efficient 300 station subway system (which opens one new station per month). Among the best, and most closely guarded, fringe benefits of professors in Seoul is highly subsidized on-campus parking. Obtaining my university parking permit involved producing, along with other documents, my marriage certificate and my wife's birth certificate!

Competition is fierce, both on the part of faculty and students, to join the more elite universities. Parents invest heavily in tutors and supplementary programs for high school and university students. Individuals planning to become professors invest in obtaining a graduate education at universities in the United States. A doctorate from an English language university, preferably from the United States, is a

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requirement to be hired into a tenure track position at the top universities.

Once hired, new faculty members join academic departments that are far more homogeneous than in Canada, in part because of the homogeneity of the society. In my host department, the dozen faculty members—all of whom were male—had attended the two top Korean universities, and all but one had completed doctoral studies in the United States (the exception studied in England).

Learning English language skills—particularly from native English speakers—permeates high school and university education. Korean students and teachers, at all levels of the educational system, realize that as individuals they must compete in a world where English is the common language of science and business. When I arrived in Korea I expected that my very limited Korean language skills would be a detriment to my research, teaching and related work. However, my English language skills were valued to an extent I would never have imagined, while my lack of Korean was dismissed as an insignificant matter.

A final remarkable feature of academic life in Korea is the existence of women's universities. Such institutions are restricted to a few small undergraduate colleges in Canada and the United States. However, in Korea, the female only universities (which hire male faculty) can be large, with graduate and professional programs, such as medical and law schools. As one might imagine, in a country in which the role of women is changing dramatically, there is considerable debate about the future of gender segregated post-secondary institutions.

For the supporters of such institutions, they provide a place where the strongly patriarchal system of values that historically dominated the country matters less. For instance, women's universities have a glass ceiling for male faculty who will never attain senior administrative positions.

As I returned to Canada at the end of my research leave, what remained with me most vividly is the extraordinary degree of passion for education I experienced in Korea. I hope that I might impart a strain of this 'education fever' to my new cohort of Canadian students. ■■

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