

American English

A Teacher's Journey in Seoul, South Korea

Sample: Chapter 1

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I got my first impression of Korea from watching the female flight attendants check in their baggage at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. They were tall and gorgeous. I didn't yet know that the position of stewardess is one of the most competitive in Korea, and the women normally must be young, taller than average, and very attractive. The flight attendants I was watching had black, shiny hair and lean legs.

When I got on the plane bound for Seoul, I started to wonder just what I had gotten myself into by accepting the position to teach English in Korea. I was totally ignorant of anything Korean. I'd never even met a Korean before my journey, I couldn't speak a word of Korean, and I knew nothing of Korean culture; I'd never eaten at a Korean restaurant. There were almost no white people on the Korean Air Lines flight; this was a little strange for me since I'm from an area of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania which is still nearly all white. Minorities in my senior high school class of about 250 numbered only eight, and I attended Penn State University, which, when I was there, had a minority population of under 5%.

Nevertheless, I was optimistic, and it was one of the first times in my life that I knew I was doing something fascinating while I was doing it. So I made mental notes to myself such as: "Remember this meal. It's your first impression of Korean food." (Yes, I often speak silently to myself in the second person, and, more disturbingly, sometimes in the first person *plural*. For example: "We better write this down.") I knew I was embarking on an odyssey. It was 1995 and I was 23. I had nothing to lose, no attachments, no possessions, and no career, even though I had just graduated with a degree in Accounting and International Business

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from Penn State University.

The alternative to becoming an English teacher was the Penn State career placement interview center, and more mornings spent in half-hour interviews with boring recruiters, while cold, acidic sweat trickled down my sides under the dark-blue suit that might as well have been a straitjacket. I had talked to enough of these recruiters as well as to some friends of mine who had made the jump from the fantasyland of Penn State to the Real World to know that things after the Career Placement Center usually didn't get much better. It was just hard to explain to people, especially my parents who had footed the majority of my college bill, that the reality of most post-graduation business majors didn't quite jibe with my eighteen-year-old freshman ideas of jet-setting around the world with Gordon Gekko and Donald Trump while holding a martini in one hand and a cell phone in the other.

My college roommate was a disillusioned business major as well, and one day he came home after an interview, shook his head, and dropped a paper on my desk; it was an advertisement for a \$50 book called the *Asian Employment Guide*. The advertisement promised it was possible to make good money as an English teacher in Asia. My roommate had given me the paper as a joke, but I called the toll-free number and ended up sending in a check for the book. It soon provided the addresses for hundreds of language schools in Taiwan, Japan, and Korea. I learned from the guide that I could make the most money in Japan - up to \$60 an hour! So I sent out twenty resumes: ten to Japan, five to Taiwan, and five to Korea.

I waited and continued with the Penn State interview process, but the interviews were getting me nowhere. My grades were okay, but the recruiters knew I didn't want to be there. As the interviews rolled along and the semester was drawing to a close, I thought more and more about teaching. Why not? I had lived for a semester in Germany and loved being overseas, and now I could be making a living doing it. Anyway, I had nothing else. Most people would love to live overseas, but they can't because of kids, health, career, relationships, etc. When you're young and have nothing you can do anything.

But my response from the language schools wasn't very positive at first. The Japanese schools that gave me replies (only

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three) said they were looking for education majors, or that all their positions were full. The three Taiwanese schools that replied could only offer me about twelve or thirteen thousand dollars a year. While the cost of living in Taiwan is the lowest of the three countries I had selected (Japan, Taiwan, and Korea), I needed more money than that to help pay back my student loans. Many of my resumes came back stamped "Return to Sender." I could imagine a tattered envelope with my resume in it thrown in a ditch by some Taiwanese mailman who could only read Chinese characters and not the Roman letters I used to form the school's address.

One day after returning from my auditing class I got a phone call from Stuart Spangler, an American managing a program called the English Conversation Course at the Hyundai/Sisa Language Institute in Seoul, Korea. He offered me, upon graduation, a job that paid a little under \$20,000 a year for teaching thirty 50-minute English classes a week. Overtime was normally available (and sometimes mandatory) at the rate of about \$17 an hour. The round-trip airfare would be paid for; I could pick up the ticket at the airport. Other benefits were the one-week paid vacation, the one-month severance pay upon the completion of my one-year contract, and especially the rent-free studio apartment. Mr. Spangler seemed to be a professional, reliable American who I could trust to be a fair boss, and he promised to send the required visa application materials as soon as possible.

I had to send my passport, college diploma, and a bunch of paperwork to the Korean embassy in New York and wait out the bureaucratic delays. But I had no major problems getting my one-year Korean work visa, and I was scheduled to fly on Korean Air Lines to Seoul at the end of June 1995, about one month after my graduation from Penn State.

As my plane flew into the hazy summer sky, towards the "Land of the Morning Calm" (as Koreans call their country), I decided that as of that moment I was going to put a stop to my lazy incubation period that had started at graduation and included reading a few novels (but nothing on Korea), lying in the sun, doing some yard work for my parents, watching cult movies, and partying with my high school and college friends. The idea that I could be an English teacher, or any kind of teacher, seemed

ridiculous. I had no teaching background or experience. But I swore to myself that I would begin putting forth the effort to become a good conversational English teacher, while at the same time looking for other career opportunities, especially connected with business (which was, after all, my major). And I committed myself to studying Korean; I didn't want to be culturally ignorant, or an "ugly American." One of the first things I planned to do was sign myself up at some language school in Seoul.

I was so optimistic about leaving that I almost didn't notice how horrible the flight was. It took about sixteen hours to fly to Seoul from Pittsburgh, including the one-hour layover in Chicago. Korean Air Lines (KAL) showed two or three movies on the plane, but I wasn't even interested. I was reading the Lonely Planet's tourist guide to Korea.

When I got tired of that I started reading one of the several books I had brought with me: *Best American Short Stories of the Eighties*. I wanted to be well-read. No more wasted time watching TV, unless it was Korean TV, which could help me learn the language. Anyway, I assumed there would be no English-language TV there. So I had purchased some real literature from a used bookshop in State College. Some of my selections were *Wuthering Heights*, *Don Quixote*, *War and Peace*, and Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*.

I also tried to imagine what my life would be like for the next year. I imagined the food I'd be eating, my cozy little studio apartment, and tried to imagine what kind of relationships I would have with Korean people. Of course I wanted to have Korean friends, and, almost every time one of the exotic stewardesses sashayed by, I tried to imagine what it would be like to have a Korean girlfriend. But it was a little scary. I'm not very imaginative, and I knew *nothing* about Korea, so it was like I was flying in the dark into the unknown. And once the plane took off, there was no turning back.

I slept on and off in my cramped window seat. Such a long, crowded flight is not comfortable. Most people were quiet, still, and looked like they were trying to fall asleep. But it was hard, especially with the gorgeous stewardesses walking around offering peanuts, lunch, dinner, drinks, snacks, and hot towels. I felt like I had to accept everything they wanted to give me, and

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partly because they were so beautiful. I didn't drink, because I knew from experience that drinking and flying gave me headaches. Between movies, KAL displayed a map on the video monitors and screens showing our flight's progress from Chicago to Seoul. Almost everyone on the plane was Korean, and the deeper we got into Asia, the more excited and anxious they became, speaking faster and louder in their language because they were getting closer to home.

Finally we arrived at Kimpo International Airport near Seoul. Everyone on the flight was ignoring the bilingual announcements that said to remain in your seats while the plane was taxiing to a stop; they all suddenly seemed desperate to be the first person off the plane. I took my time and followed the bilingual signs that guided me towards the baggage claim.

I waited a long time to get my two big, black suitcases off the luggage carousel and slowly pulled them through immigration and customs. The man at customs smiled and asked me a few general questions like "Why do you come to Korea?" I told him. He laughed and asked, "Can you give me some English lessons?" I said, "No, your English is already great!" He didn't bother examining my luggage.

I was scheduled to meet my new boss, Stuart, at the exit. Stuart said he would be waving a sign with my name on it, but that I would have little problem identifying him in the crowd anyway, since there would be very few white people around.

I scanned the crowd over and over, but none of the few whites was holding a sign with the name "Andrew Luxner" on it. Surprisingly, I spotted my name on a sign held by a Korean man, and I approached him. He said, "You Andrew?" He pronounced it "En-duh-ryoo" with three syllables instead of two, but I understood and nodded. He made a slight bow and handed me an index card. The hand-written note read: "This is Mr. No. He can neither understand nor speak English, so don't try to communicate with him. Just go with him, and he'll escort you to your officetel. I had an unexpected, urgent appointment that prevented me from meeting you as planned, but I will visit you at your officetel this evening. Sincerely, Stuart C. Spangler."

I nodded again to show I understood, and followed the

man outside towards the seemingly endless line of silver taxis. It was three o'clock in the afternoon there, the sun was trying to burn through the haze, and the air was saturated with moisture. I was wearing cutoff jean shorts and a T-shirt but sweat was starting to roll down my forehead. Everyone was heading toward a fast-moving line of taxis, and we hopped into one after waiting for only a couple minutes. The cabby helped us put my bulky suitcases into the silver Hyundai's trunk. Mr. No called out some directions, and then we were off towards Seoul. After about thirty minutes, we arrived at a very large office building in Mapo, one of Seoul's many districts. Mapo is located about three miles southwest of Central Seoul. I soon learned that the name of the building is "Sam Chang Plaza."

During the whole trip, I didn't talk to either the driver or Mr. No, both of whom had grim, yet almost expressionless faces. I was disoriented, all the people and cars were making me dizzy, and almost no signs were in English. Mr. No paid the cab driver 10,000 won and we entered the big office building. The currency exchange rate at that time in 1995 was about 800 won to the dollar.

Again I followed Mr. No, who pulled along one of my suitcases with one hand and carried a manila envelope and a key chain in the other. I dragged the other suitcase and had my carry-on backpack slung over my shoulder. We waited for one of the three elevators, and, when one of the doors opened, we had to jump around to dodge all the people in professional business attire rushing out at us. The building has sixteen floors; we stopped at the thirteenth. The dimly lit thirteenth floor was made up of two long hallways with a lot of numbered beige metal doors, mostly closed. My door was 1345.

A very common living arrangement in Korea for swinging singles like me is the "officetel." These are small, studio apartments in office buildings that could also be used as business offices. My officetel was only about 25 square meters in area, but it was efficient. I had a normal, western-style bed (over half of Koreans still sleep on the floor on sleeping bag-style beds called *yeoh*), a sink, a gas stove, a washing machine with a spin dryer, a nice bathroom with a toilet, tub, and showerhead. I had a small refrigerator and a thirteenth-inch Samsung TV. There was a

freestanding closet and a big desk with a telephone sitting on it. There was also one large window, which afforded me a good view of the main street, Mapo Road, which heads straight into Central Seoul.

Mr. No gave me the room-key, plus two other keys that I had no idea what to do with, and the envelope. He bowed, turned around, and walked back out my door. I sat down on the bed, uncertain what to do first. I finally opened a suitcase and started hanging some of my shirts in the closet. Soon I tired of this and decided to take a shower and shave.

As I stepped out of the shower and was drying off, I heard a knock at the door. I shouted, "Wait a minute!" This made me feel stupid, but what else would I say? I couldn't even say "Hello" or "Goodbye" in Korean yet.

I stepped out of the bathroom and looked around for a clean pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Suddenly, the door flew open, and a middle-aged Korean woman walked in my room, looking around. The woman gasped and said, "Oh!" when realizing that she was looking at a naked white man.

"Can I help you?" I said. She turned around and walked quickly out the door.

I was a little shaken, but I had to laugh. I figured the woman got what she deserved for being so rude. No sooner had I gotten dressed, than I heard a loud knock at the door. I shouted, "Come in!"

This time it was a tall, overweight white man with red hair and a red face; he seemed to be in his late thirties. The man immediately strode toward me, firmly shook my hand, and introduced himself as Stuart Spangler, my new boss.

"So how do you like your new apartment? All the comforts of home, huh? Complete with a refrigerator that's big enough to hold about two beers!"

"It's alright for me." I told him of my experience with my last visitor, and he laughed.

"Yeah, that'll happen. It's not considered rude here to just walk into closed rooms, sometimes without even knocking. She must have had the wrong address. I advise you to keep your door locked at all times, or you may end up having people walk through your door while you're playing 'hide the salami' with your

girlfriend. Are you hungry?"

"Uh, a little."

Because of the thirteen-hour time difference between Pittsburgh and Seoul, my eating and sleeping habits were all confused: the most severe manifestation of jet lag. I wasn't sure if I was hungry or not. Or tired. The stress of the new environment was making me feel at once wide-awake and on the verge of sleep.

"Come on, I'll buy you dinner," Stuart said.

We walked out of officetel and he made sure I could lock the door with my new key alright. He told me that the envelope Mr. No had handed me contained some information about our language institute, the names and phone numbers of the seventeen other teachers, some cultural information about Korea, a couple maps, and 300,000 won, which the institute gave every teacher as a "relocation allowance." The allowance was equivalent to about \$375; besides that, I was broke, though I had credit cards.

We rode one of the big elevators down to the basement of the building. Like almost every big Korean office building, Sam Chang Plaza had a bowling alley, a number of restaurants, a couple bars, a video store, a key store, and a market in the basement. The huge basement was laid out in a confusing maze that I never figured out, though I would spend a lot of time there. It seemed that almost everyone we passed did a double-take at us; we stood out.

Stuart led me into a small restaurant with small, clean tables and chairs. On each table was a box of chopsticks and soupspoons. There seemed to be two middle-aged women working there, and as soon as we sat down, one woman brought us two small plastic cups and a bottle of mineral water. Then she came back with a tray filled with various side dishes: some big bean sprouts, processed fish bits, a kind of seaweed, and some red pickled cabbage that I figured from my reading was *kimchi*.

"Have you tried kimchi yet?" Stuart asked, popping a bunch of the slimy stuff into his mouth with the chopsticks. He told me what I had already read in the Lonely Planet guide: Kimchi, along with steamed rice, is the staple food of the Korean diet. Almost every Korean eats kimchi at every meal, every day.

I shook my head no, and gingerly brought a piece of kimchi to my mouth; I wasn't yet skilled with the sticks.

Looking back, Stuart probably was expecting me to grab madly for the water bottle on the table and to drain the whole thing in order to extinguish the fire burning in my throat. But I like spicy food, and, having read that most Korean food is hot, I was prepared.

Stuart was watching me. I said, “not bad,” but what I thought was “I will *not* be having this for every meal, every day.” Kimchi is an acquired taste.

Kimchi is cabbage pickled in hot red pepper powder, garlic, salt, onions, and other seasoning, that is allowed to ferment for any length of time; it can keep a whole season or more, and many Koreans prefer older kimchi. Though I became skilled at making some Korean food, I never learned to make kimchi. It’s a long process of washing the cabbage, salting it for some time, washing it again, and then adding all the seasonings to each individual leaf of cabbage. Korean housewives (*ajummas*) spend whole days preparing a load of kimchi for the family; then they visit their neighbors to share and compare kimchi. Of course in today’s hectic Korean society, where households are increasingly becoming dual income, some *ajummas* just don’t have the time or effort to prepare kimchi anymore, and end up buying it in the market. Most of my students were to claim that kimchi is very healthy food, and I agree. It’s too salty, but the raw cabbage and cayenne pepper combination makes kimchi some of the healthiest food on earth.

Now the *ajumma* was back at our table, expecting us to order. Stuart ordered *bibimbap* for the both of us. This is one of the most common dishes and consists of noodles, a fried egg, some fresh vegetables including cucumber and bean sprouts, and hot red pepper paste which you must mix up with your chopsticks and a spoon, then eat with your chopsticks. Most foreigners like it.

Stuart apologized for not picking me up at the airport, but he never explained what happened. He told me that one of the teachers would be dropping by that evening to invite me to my first party on the roof of Sam Chang Plaza, and he added that many of the Hyundai/Sisa staff took part in these parties during the hot summer months. It was Friday evening. I was to start observing other teachers on Monday, and begin teaching the following week.

Stuart told me a bit about his background. He had grown up around San Francisco's bay area and gone to school for TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), finally earning a master's degree in the field. Then he had gone on to teach in Mexico, Chile, a couple other places in South America, then spent a year in Spain, and a couple years in Japan (which he hated). After getting all stressed out in Japan, he took a few months off and drifted around Southeast Asia before settling in Korea. He had been there for four years.

"Yeah, Korea's not a bad place to be. The weather sucks, but it's not hard to make a comfortable living here."

"It seems pretty nice today," I said. But I was talking to a man from California.

"Oh, just wait!" he said with a laugh. "We're just getting into the rainy season."

"How good is your Korean?" I asked, changing the subject. I really was serious about studying the language.

"Well, I'm married to a Korean, and I've been studying since I came here. My Korean's pretty good. Not perfect, but pretty good." I later found out that he was being modest; his Korean was excellent. I told Stuart I was serious about studying the language, and he told me I could take lessons in Central Seoul's big English Language Schools (ELS) Building for half-price, since our institute was owned by the huge YBM company that also owned ELS.

We finished our dinner and walked around the underground shopping plaza. Stuart recommended a few restaurants that all looked the same to me, and he told me to avoid the Japanese restaurant specializing in sushi and other raw fish until fall arrived. There was always the danger of contracting some horrible cholera, or at least food poisoning, from raw fish in the summer. We turned a corner and saw a couple young girls with make-up painted so heavily over their faces that they looked like clowns. They were also wearing gigantic high heels and micro-dresses.

Stuart said, "That reminds me, this basement also has a couple of touchy-feely bars the Koreans call 'room salons,' and I would bet those girls work there".

"You mean, like brothels?"

“Well, not exactly. You buy the girls drinks and they’ll touch your arms and legs and giggle. But the drinks cost a lot. You’ll find out more about them later, just be careful. You can go to those places when you’re drunk and wind up spending a lot of money.”

We waited for the elevator (one of the primary ways I would be spending time at Sam Chang Plaza was waiting for elevators) and Stuart gestured with his head toward a beautiful young girl in her early twenties also waiting. She wore a mini-skirt, high heels, and a tight blouse. She was chatting and saying goodbye to a friend who was about to have dinner at a Chinese restaurant.

“Can you imagine a girl looking like that - and dressed like that - and she’s still a virgin?” he asked rhetorically, with a sigh. I could see Stuart was trying to teach me something about Korean culture.

“How do you know she’s a virgin?” I asked.

Somehow I felt comfortable carrying on this conversation with my boss, whom I had just met, about a girl who was standing not three feet away from me. As early as my first day in the country, it became apparent to me that very few Koreans could comprehend a conversation between native English speakers.

“They’re a little more conservative here,” he explained simply.

“Oh yeah? I think I read something about that.”

“Yeah. Most girls still wait until marriage. As a matter of fact, if a woman is found not to be a virgin on her wedding night, it’s grounds for divorce.”

“That’s pretty conservative!” I said. Now Stuart was bringing me down; I wanted a Korean girlfriend.

“Well, if you have any questions, call one of the teachers on the sheet. All of the Americans who work in the institute live in this building except me, and my number is also on your phone list. Joe Thomas will pick you up at your room on Monday morning to take you into work, and I think one of the teachers will come by tonight to introduce you to *soju*, the local brew.”

“Soju, huh? Is it any good?”

“It’s nasty, but very cheap. And if you drink two bottles, you’ll be fucked up. Can you find your way back to your room

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okay?” Stuart asked. I was holding the elevator door open at the ground floor, while Stuart was backing out of it. Koreans filed in and out, and others stood inside, watching us say goodbye.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I’ll see you Monday, Stuart.” We waved goodbye and I rode the elevator up to my new apartment.

