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KOREAN REPORT:
Disclaimer: These are my perceptions, so they may not all be accurate. I am trying to figure things out from my American-based cognitive schema. Those may or may not work here.

CHOPSTICKS:
Did you know that if you use chopsticks your brain gets wired in a different way? This makes users of chopsticks smarter. That’s what I’ve been told. Children start to use chopsticks independently by age 3. They are given “training” chopsticks which are a bit shorter. When children first start to use chopsticks, they grasp them close to the points and eventually move up the chopsticks to gain more leverage. Guess where I am in my level of chopsticks development? I think I may be moving into the preschooler phase.

Chopsticks are used for everything, as far as food goes. They are serving utensils, they are knives, and they are eating utensils. When a meal is served in a restaurant, each person gets his/her own dishes, own silverware (a pair of chopsticks and a spoon), usually own bowl of soup, and own bowl of rice. However, all those side dishes of vegetables and seafood (called bachon) are served in small dishes that are commonly shared by dipping your chopsticks in and grabbing a serving which often goes directly into the mouth—-that is, if you are skilled in the use of chopsticks and you can actually grab the veggies/seafood and get them to your mouth before you decorate the table with them. Yes, this also means that each person leaves a little of their germs for the next person who dips into the bachon. Also, there are no napkins, typically. There are usually boxes of Kleenex-like papers on the table to wipe your mouth with. There is typically not an effort made to wash hands prior to eating.

DINING OUT:
There are many different kinds of restaurants that specialize in different things; anyway, it seems that way to me when I am asked what kind of soup I would like. If you want mushroom soup, you go to the mushroom restaurant. If you want army soup (soup with ham and vegetables in it), you go to the army soup restaurant. If you want noodle soup, you go to the noodle soup restaurant. I have no idea how you distinguish which restaurant is which, except that the mushroom restaurant had icons of mushrooms on its outside décor.

Everyone removes their shoes in the entryway, takes a step up, and finds a table. Some tables are in a broad open area adjacent to the entryway; other tables are located in other smaller rooms. Typically, I am taken to one of those smaller rooms. Is it because of my elevated status here or is it because the fewer people who see me dropping food from my chopsticks make it less embarrassing for my hostess? Of course the tables are maybe 18 inches high, so you find your mat and sit on it on the floor. Water is always served, but I don’t drink it because I want to make sure that it has been boiled. Sometimes a little appetizer soup is served. Next comes rice and the bachon. A large community-size bowl of soup is delivered and placed on the burner that is conveniently located in the table. Fresh mushrooms or other vegetables are added to the soup at the table, the lid is placed on the soup, and after it comes to a boil, the soup is ladled into individual bowls. Sometimes tea is served at the end of the meal; green tea is often served, but I have also had jasmine tea and cold mushroom tea. I really like the mushroom tea; it is spiced with cinnamon and reminds me of Good Earth teas.

I have also had Bibimbob. It is a salad with fried egg, bean sprouts, carrots, zucchini, radish, dried kelp, rice, and a spicy red sauce. It is important to mix everything together before eating it.

KOREAN PEARS
Wow! Korean pears are huge---they look like a large grapefruit; big, round, yellowish, crisp, and juicy. I thought that my best pear was from Beijing, but these have those beat.

PEOPLE SIZES:
Not only am I in a time warp, I am also in a size warp. I am tall here! Unfortunately, I am also fatter here. Although there is a range of sizes, so many of the women are teeny-tiny----maybe size 1 or 3. Many of the women are several inches shorter than I am. All look very thin to me. One of the English conversation students described herself as “chubby”----I would take that definition of chubby any day! Men also come in a variety of sizes, but many are just a little taller than me and some are shorter than me. I did see some who might approach 6 foot, but I can’t label any of them as fat. Needless to say, it is unlikely that I will be doing much clothes shopping here.

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN:
70% of Korea is mountainous, so I will NOT be climbing every mountain. However, there are some mountains conveniently located in the backyard of the campus. So after a 15-minute walk across campus, I can be on a mountain trail. There is a small group of faculty women, including my chair of the Foreign Language Department, who call themselves “The Beauties”. (As some of you know, I get attached to these different women’s groups like the Loonies from the LeSueur area and the W.A.C.I.’s who are primarily from Texas).
Well, the Beauties have asked me to join them. They go hiking in the mountains every Thursday evening and introduced me to the trails. So, I have been taking some hikes with them and by myself. The wide, tree-lined trails start out moderately and then escalate to the puffing and panting, heart thumping variety. The Koreans have thoughtfully inserted rest stops along the way with little benches and sometimes shelters where I stop and catch my breath. As one ascends the mountain, the paths get steeper and steeper so that those trees become nice objects to hang onto as you pull yourself up. The tree roots careen across the path and also serve as good steps. The higher one goes the less likely one is to see a banner strung between trees in Korean han’gul script---probably advertising kimchi at some restaurant. When nearing the summit, ropes are strung near the edge, a warning that there is a BIG drop off. It is exhilarating to push myself to go higher each time; I even made it to the top once. Near the top, where there is a bit of a plateau, there is an exercise area for those who are not challenged enough by the mountain hiking. The exercise area is a kind of outdoor gymnasium with parallel bars, a bench press, hula hoops, inclined planes to do sit-ups on, etc... Coming down is more of an adventure because gravity wants me to run down the mountain, but those nice trees help me to slow my pace on the descent. I am really glad to have purchased those good hiking/walking shoes in Daegu recently because they grip well on the rocky dirt path. After two or so hours of my version of mountaineering, I return to campus. When I come back to the dorm, I feel that good pain on the back of my legs that tells me that I really did get some good exercise. (Thank goodness I packed Advil and Aleve!)
Unfortunately, I also wonder if I can walk again after sitting down for awhile. Oh, how I long for a bathtub after hiking, but there is no bathtub---just my bathroom which in its entirety is also my shower room since there is no separate shower stall. And, after 3 weeks, one would think that I could learn to turn the dial after my shower so I wouldn’t get doused when I turn the faucet on in the sink, but, no, I still am getting unexpected showers when I thought I was just going to wash my hands. Hopefully, if I can do mountain hiking on a regular basis, I will be in great shape for the Black Hills in August.
I saw and heard some wildlife on the mountain: lots of magpies, a pair of pheasants, and a butterfly. Lots of Koreans go hiking on this mountain----people of all ages. One older gentleman was resting on one of those benches with me and then said: “OK, Let’s go!” and motioned for me to follow him. It seems that when I say Good Morning in Korean that it opens the door for a whole conversation in Korean, but, unfortunately, my skill in Korean ends with that one word. One little girl could not understand why I would not answer her in a language that she could understand. Another 10 year old boy greeted me with his rote English greeting. His mother giggled, covering her face with her hands; she was so proud of him!

TV IN KOREA: ARMED FORCES NETWORK
I have a TV in my dorm room and there is one channel in English: the Armed Forces Network. I get weather reports for every base in the Pacific arena, so if anyone wants to know what the weather will be like in Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, the Phillipines, or other Pacific locations of military bases, just let me know. Another daily feature is the exchange rate for money from dollars to won and the price of gas on base. I also get lots of military commercials and news about military bases. I know when military personnel can sign up for various trips or recreational classes. 

I am warned about where to sit on an airplane or a bus or train to be less vulnerable to terrorists. And did you know, sexual harassment is against Department of Defense rules and that one should report any cheating that is going on within the military?

I get some TV shows that are on a variety of networks in the U.S. Many shows seem to be running a month or so behind what I already saw in the states. Shows include CSI, Lost, Survivor, Dancing with the Stars, the Simpsons, Heroes, Jeopardy, Oprah, Numbers, Family Man, Two and a Half Men, some ESPN sports, David Letterman, Jay Leno. Of course, I don’t know when what is on and I don’t really watch TV so much as have it on as background noise. One of the shows that I typically watch at home is not on---or at least I have not seen it; that is the Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson. I also haven’t found Medium, which is another show I like. Occasionally, I can get CNN News, but I’m not sure when. It is a good thing that I am not a TV addict who has to see certain shows on a regular basis.

KOREAN WEDDING:
On Saturday, there was a wedding in the campus chapel. My first clue was seeing a woman dressed in the traditional hanbok, a full-skirted dress with a short jacket. Luckily I had my camera along, so I approached her and asked if I could take her picture. She agreed! The dress was red with long, horizontally striped sleeves. I asked her if she was the bride, and she told me that she had married several years ago. Later, as I returned from my weekly shopping trip in Hayang, I stopped at the church to rest on a bench and sit in the warm sun. (65 degrees here now!) I happened to be there when the wedding ended and the bridal party was leaving the church. Another photo op! The bride was dressed in a western-style white wedding gown; the groom was dressed in a white tux. Some female members of the wedding party wore hanbok of various colors; the men were dressed in dark suits. There was one little boy who had on traditional clothing, a bright red outfit with an unusual hat. A Korean man sat on the bench next to me and we chatted.

MORE SIGHTINGS OF WHITE PEOPLE:
I have now seen five Americans and met four. Last week I met Jason and Mike, who both teach English and helped me get organized for my English Conversation class. This week I met Sean (from Florida) and his wife (from Texas) who is very pregnant. Sean also teaches English---at the academy on campus. I also sighted another man, but he was in a conversation with someone so I didn’t walk up and introduce myself. I’m hoping to host a get-together in my dorm since there is a room down the hall that I am assuming is a room for entertaining.

WRITING IN HAN’GUL:
Korean script is called han’gul. It was developed by King Sejong in the mid 1400’s. I am told that King Sejong is credited with everything good that has come out of Korea. (There is a joke that King Sejong also invented Hyundai cars, the internet, etc...). What I have learned about the Korean script, which is not an alphabet---(they have no alphabet and therefore no ABC song and no alphabetizing ---makes you wonder how they do filing!), is that this system of symbols is more phonetic. When writing, instead of writing left to right in a single series of symbols, they group symbols by syllable sounds so that one symbol is written over the other and then the following syllable is placed next to it to the right until all the syllables make up a word.; there is spacing between words. For those of us who work with emerging English writers, I can now tell you that children probably do not reverse letters in the U.S.; they are merely writing in han’gul and we westerners didn’t know it. For example, to write a western “L” in han’gul, just draw what we think is a
backwards “S”. When we see young children making a capital “F” and the arms of the “F” are not aligned with the top of the line so that the line extends over them, that child was probably making a han’gul “ya” sounding vowel. And if the children reversed that capital “F” that extended beyond the line, they were making a han’gul “Yo” vowel sound. Needless to say, I am struggling with this. However, there are no upper and lower case letters, no print versus cursive letters, so this should be easy. My current exercise is just to remember which symbols make which sounds and then trying to decipher Korean syllable sounds on various signs around campus. I am no where near putting them together myself or reading han’gul fluently, let alone knowing what it says. I am at the rote memorization stage of using just a few words: Good Morning/Good Afternoon, Thank You, and Excuse me. However, I said “thank you” to a student who took me to lunch on Thursday, and she told me that I was using the formal “thank you” reserved for people older than her; I was over-thanking her, I guess. I wonder if I will ever get beyond the very basic basics in Korean.

안녕 = Goodbye