

My Mobility

Students from Ca' Foscari Recount their Learning Experiences Abroad

Discovering the beauty of Korea

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Federica Fortuna finds herself the centre of attention in Korea, and doesn't understand what's happening when an old lady on the subway takes away her bag full of food and chocolates.

Korea is less studied and visited compared to its neighbors China and Japan. However, it is a unique Country with a beautiful landscape, where modern and traditional buildings stand side by side in a very powerful harmony, a rich and unfortunately troubled history, strong traditions, delicious (and spicy!) food, and much more. I was personally very fascinated by such a Country, so I chose to learn about it more at University, and then I applied for the Overseas Program. When I got accepted for it I was on cloud nine and when I arrived in Korea all my expectations, and a lot more, were met.

With this short text, my aim is to describe my unforgettable experience in Korea and give an insight into it. I would like to give a representation of such Country, filtered through my eyes and symbolized by two particular events that happened to me and that I consider emblematic.

The first episode that I will never forget happened when I was in a small city outside of Seoul. While in Korea, I took part in the English language club at University, one of the extracurricular activities organized and managed by the students. During one of our field trips, we went ice-skating together in a place where there were not as many foreigners as in the metropolis of Seoul, so I had all the eyes on me, full of curiosity and surprise since I was the only foreigner with a group of Koreans. After skating for a while, when my friends took a break and went to sit on the side of the rink, some young boys addressed me and joyfully said: – Hello! Hello! – while giving me high-fives when gliding next to me. I was surprised but I found it quite funny, so I smiled and greeted them back. Then, as I was leaving the rink to reach my friends, those boys together with so many others – a whole middle-school class – approached me, or better surrounded me, and a lot of voices started to talk, asking me a variety of things: my name, my home country, if I knew this or that Korean pop singer or actor, and so on. When some girls came to me and asked to take pictures together I felt like a real star. Only the autographs were missing. Then, all the hugs and hand-

shakes started, with my friends looking at the scene and laughing loudly.

It was a very bizarre and unimaginable experience for me, which I will always remember and recount with great delight.

Aside from Korean people's curiosity towards foreigners, what struck me was their kindness and generosity, sometimes unexpected.

Back to Seoul, on November 11, when in Korea what is called Pepero Day is celebrated, as the recent tradition wants I was carrying many bags of chocolate sticks (pepero) and pralines to hand out to my English club friends as a sign of friendship and affection. In fact, in Korea on that day, couples and friends exchange chocolate and spend time together. My university club organized a small party, so I went to buy some sweets for the occasion. I hopped on the subway to go to the appointed place and I immediately looked for a seat, but since it was rush hour I could not find any, so I just stood with all my bags in the corridor, facing the people who were sitting comfortably in their seats. My attention was caught by the middleaged lady sitting in front of me, who was insistently staring at my bags full of chocolate and delicious goods. My mind was wandering when suddenly the woman pulled my bags and said: – Give it to me –. I looked at her startled, not understanding what was going on and utterly puzzled, but still fiercely holding on my bags. She then explained kindly: – Your bags look very heavy, give them to me and I will keep them for you here on my lap until you arrive at your destination –. I thanked her and hesitantly handed my bags, standing right in front of her, ready to grab my chocolates in case she tried to escape with my precious goodies. However, when I arrived at my stop, the lady gave me the bags back and just smiled.

These two episodes, which at first sight could seem insignificant and not so relevant in the description of a whole and complex Country, are actually a symbol of what I perceived Korea to be. The young students, so curious, enthusiastic, and enterprising, represent the younger generations of the Peninsula, who are getting more and more open towards the external world, and ready to welcome different and new cultures. The second event narrated, instead, illustrates the traditional Korean culture of helping the others, expressed in Korean by the term *jeong* (정). This word is extremely hard to define, even in the Korean language itself, and is a very broad concept meaning love, but also affection, compassion, sympathy, community, and attachment. It incorporates a sense of caring for other people, relatives, friends, neighbors, or even just members of the community or whoever in need. The woman who kindly 'stole' my bags, therefore, was expressing a form of *jeong*, she saw that I was in need and helped me, even if I did not ask for it.

These, and of course a number of other amazing experiences I had the chance to have thanks to my exchange period in Seoul, reinforced my passion for this unique Country and paved the way for my future visits to Korea. Lastly, these experiences made me aware of the great importance

of challenging ourselves without any fear of the new, going to another Country, seeing and trying various things, exploring different places, and meeting new people. Traveling really opens up a whole new and exciting world and makes us live extraordinary adventures that we would never have the chance to experience if we stood still in the same place.

