

DON'S DIARY

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Tuesday

I am waiting to fly from Australia to South Korea to visit my Ph.D. student David. . As an anthropologist and historian I now have a set of models of how various civilizations work. Where will Korea fit?

Wednesday

In Seoul, we spend some time wandering through the under-ground and street markets. The whole thing very familiar, though not exactly the same as either Japan or Beijing. A haunting analogy is in the back of my mind, which suddenly crystallizes – of a recent trip to Istanbul. The same energy, the same mix of a recent rural past and rapidly ‘westernizing’ consumerism. A brief transitory moment when two civilizations are in balance, old agrarian and modern industrial.

Thursday

By train for three hours down to the southwest. Much of the countryside an extended building-site. Half-built bridges, motorways, irrigation channels, cement and stone everywhere. A haze emphasizes the brown bare ploughed fields, and grey and black plastic which is everywhere, with splashes of blossoms. Ubiquitous little burial mounds with stone memorials. Only occasionally a new house is built in the old style with a curved roof of tiles and verandas.

Friday

A walk through a beautiful national park, just like a Korean painting. Our Korean interpreter says Korea is strict and conservative in sexual matters. She has only seen one person kissing in public. Confucian pressure led to the segregation of boys and girls in the past at 11. All very different from Japan, where the sexes overlap. Mixed adult bathing was common, historically, in Japan, but deeply shocking for the Koreans.

Saturday

Visited a girls middle school and I am allowed to film a class learning Korean. I want to test my thesis that the eyestrain of education on the Mongolian eye is causing increasing myopia. There is certainly strain. These children start school at 8.30, finish at 4.30, then go to ‘crammers’ where, in bad light and general noise they continue to study until 10 p.m. We were told that when they return home they often engage in Internet chat until 2 am. So their eyes have about 5 hours rest. About one third are wearing glasses and others seem myopic also. Much higher than in the west, but lower than the fifty per cent by age 15 in Japan.

Sunday

A visit to an excellent folk museum in Seoul. The houses were notable for having a woman's room, separate from a man's room. The man's room for visitors, who were never allowed into the woman's room – a sort of mild purdah. The house roofs often of thatch, frequently with little holes for magpies, a favourite bird, to enter. (Is this one reason why there are so few other birds in Korea?)

Monday

Flying back to England. Talking to Korean anthropologists, it would seem that over the thousand years up to 1900 Koreans abandoned much of their flexibility and equality and became more bureaucratic, centralised, hierarchical, familistic, and ritualistic. With a land bridge and constantly marauding neighbours, Korea became an ancien regime state. But it is built on a on a different foundation from China, just as its subsequent history diverged from the island histories of Japan and England.

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