Wan-wen Hong: Yonsei University (Semester 1/09 & Semester 2/09)

Programme: Bachelor of Economics

Although a one year exchange programme seems long at the start, it definitely feels very short at the end. The universal appraisal that exchange kids gives goes something along the lines of being able to travel to many far flung foreign countries and bonding with people all around the world. But for me, the most rewarding experiences about my exchange in Seoul is being able to slowly uncover and understand a society whose culture, language and way of life that is not very well known in the world. Many people understand Korean society through the Korean drama series that only scratches the surface of Korea. Of course, experiencing the stereotypical Korean barbeque or soju and street food runs are very exciting for me, but interacting with the Korean people and discovering their views on life adds more depth to what I understand about Korea.

The connection with Seoul was also established when I the street signs and restaurant names started to make sense to me. I went to Korea with no knowledge of anything Korean like language, food, pop culture, history and people. Learning Korean language in Yonsei University taught me some aspects of modern Korea and also the language skills to manage in daily life. The language classes were entirely taught in Korean, even for the beginner’s Korean class which was very intimidating to many of us Korea newbies. However, it gave me great satisfaction to be able to understand most of what the teacher is saying by the end of my exchange period. It gives me an even greater thrill to be able to chat with Korean shop keepers and taxi drivers in Korean. I felt like I’ve gone a long way and achieved something that I thought was beyond me.

As I am of Chinese descent, I thought that I would not suffer from culture shock as many Asian countries are very much influenced by Confucianism that spread from China in the past. However, I came to learn that there are very subtle but striking differences between Korean way of life and the Chinese way of life. This is also true for Japan as well. Sometimes it is the smallest deviation that makes the deepest impact on a person.

Classes at Yonsei University were fairly difficult compared to classes at UQ. The teaching method is very different from UQ. In the fall semester, the lecturers for all my courses did not have powerpoint slides nor do they provide notes. Learning was a very independent experience for me in Yonsei. I had to rely on my peers rather than tutors and lecturers for help concerning the class material. I could also sense a hierarchy between the professors and the students that did not exist in UQ. I also felt that the material taught in Yonsei is more open compared to UQ. In other words, the concepts and examples taught in UQ classes were in an Australian context and observed from an Australian perspective. It made me more appreciative of the teaching style in UQ, but at the same time, made me become aware that the world outside of UQ or Australia is a lot more competitive and independent.

There is so much more that I could say about my exchange experience, and about Korea, but it is impossible to tell the whole story in a testimonial. Even talking about it would take a long time. Go on
exchange and you will know what I am talking about. Even better yet, go somewhere surprising, somewhere unexpected. Somewhere like Korea.

Korean traditional wear: Hanbok (I’m in the blue hanbok)
Korean Street food