

THE KOREA FULBRIGHT **INFUSION**



Seoul as an Invisible City

David Keffer, Senior Scholar 10-11

“Arriving at each new city, the traveler finds again a past of his that he did not know he had: the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.”

-Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, 1972,
translated by William Weaver.

When Calvino has Marco Polo describe the cities he has visited to Kublai Khan, the theme repeatedly emerges that each city he visits teaches him not so much about the city at hand but rather about all the other cities he has previously visited. Moreover, Calvino remarks that the discovery of each new city brings with it a more poignant discovery of new traits within the traveler himself. When I was a student and I read this book for the first time (about 1990), I delighted in the creativity of the city descriptions and the finesse

of the language, but I did not fully appreciate the more subtle themes. I brought a beaten copy of this book with me to Seoul, since I judged it to be ideal reading for bus and subway traveling due to the short, distinct chapters, which could be easily digested even when broken into one fragment on the 171 bus and another after transferring to Line 6. Little did I know that I was holding in my hands, a book, which by describing this process of self-discovery through travel, provided a tutorial for me to experience it myself. Other travelers might find such a guide superfluous, but I am trained as an engineer, good at following a well-designed plan, and I benefitted greatly from this example.

I brought my family from Knoxville, Tennessee to Seoul for a year not only to teach and study sustainable energy strategies at Yonsei University,



“Rainbow Seoul.” A multitude of colors lights up the horizon on a busy Seoul night. Photo: Benjamin Kester

but also to experience life in Korea. The differences are almost too many to be named. There is not just the obvious difference in language and culture between Seoul and Knoxville, but also the difference between dense urban living (Seoul pop. 10.5 million) and small town living (Knoxville, pop. 170,000). There are also institutional differences between a private university like Yonsei and a public, land-grant institution like the University of Tennessee. Taken together, these changes have provoked a variety of revelations, large and small.

We attach importance to features in our lives, like living in a house with a yard or having two cars in the garage, not so much because they are necessary but rather because we simply have grown accustomed to them. In moving to Seoul- living in an apartment complex, relying exclusively on a public transportation network- we found that family life goes on much the same as before. Instead of traveling by car to a forest and hiking through the mountains, we used the subway to reach a palace, museum, gallery or arboretum. The important activities, including a broad education of our children, continued or were even accelerated. The exposure to other well-traveled children prompted my daughter to remark one day after school that she wanted to visit all the countries in the world- a thought that had never occurred to her in Knoxville and in truth would have previously seemed out of character for her. We quickly discovered that many things we had felt were essential were clearly not so. In Seoul, we were much better able to meet our goals of living sustainably; we had a greatly reduced carbon footprint, having eliminated all energy usage due to driving a personal vehicle (or two) and the inefficient heating of a single-family dwelling.

In *Invisible Cities*, Marco Polo describes each city

without casting judgment on the activities that define it. Certainly, he makes no attempt to alter the city to better suit his preferences. This idea resonates within me. Adrift in an enormous city in which one speaks very little of the language (my talent for languages is limited to computer programming) I have learned to relax and cede some measure of control over my life. After accepting that it was my own short-comings (e.g. poor command of the language) that were responsible for many of the obstacles that arose, I was able to more easily embrace the fact that in a restaurant or a shop or even a taxi, the end result frequently did not coincide exactly with the original intention. I just had to smile, chalk it up as a learning experience and move on. It's a lesson that may have been impossible or at least very difficult for me to have learned any other way.

I know that my visit to Seoul (and the treks outside it) have redefined my perception of Knoxville. I think then of our children, Ruth, eight, and Joseph, five, who are already better traveled at their young ages than I was when Ruth was born. In the future when they travel, each new city will not only redefine Knoxville for them, but also redefine Seoul and Beijing and the other cities we visited while here. It seems clear that the children do not have the same conscious realization of the impact of a year in Seoul that I do, but I feel certain that the seed has been planted. As our return to Knoxville approaches, I picture us taking our usual after-dinner walk along our street under a canopy of oak and dogwood leaves. I can already hear the chorus of assorted song birds prepping for their performance at dusk. I can hear the sough of the wind in the trees. There is a whisper in the air remarking on the striking resemblance that these strangers bear to the family who left a year before. ■