

MTSU Wind Ensemble Korean Tour 2005

As noted by Sarah Schneider, junior

Friday, 12 August:

It is remarkable how in one day you can realize how alike and how different two cultures are. We have arrived in Jeju after an almost insufferable excursion across the ocean. It is well worth the 2 in-flight movies, handful of rummy games, and 5 hour nap that it took to make it to this beautiful Hawaii-like paradise. Everything seems strange and confusing here, although every now and again something familiar sneaks into frame. It is almost as if Korea joins a vast unfamiliar world with tiny points of familiarity. It was most notable to me while we were sitting in the airport this morning, waiting for our flight out of Seoul. We were all through security and seated in a small area looking through a large glass window at the plane we would soon be boarding when a large group of Korean people, probably visiting the island on vacation, stopped at the same gate area we were sitting in. To them, we seemed like circus freaks. In fact, it seemed almost as if we were behind the glass, not the plane, as the "locals" simply had not seen that many Americans, or perhaps any Americans, before. The children seemed bewildered. The teenagers seemed fascinated. The adults were just extremely aware. Now not only were we confused by the language, culture, and currency, but we were wholly being regarded as zoo animals, treated very kindly, but not without curiosity. This was the strange scene that was broken by one small child, about 7 or 8 years old. Obviously bored by the wait, she decided to entertain herself by sneaking up, not-so-stealthily, behind our chairs and try to scare us. She popped up quickly and shrieked something that sounded somewhat like "boo," although was not quite the same. We couldn't help but laugh out loud as she scurried away. It wasn't long before she had sneaked behind us again, but this time, I ducked behind the back of the chair and jumped out as well. It seems that peek-a-boo translates into every culture. It is most interesting to me that while for the first time we all seemed completely and collectively lost, one small child was just bored enough to make us feel a bit comfortable again.

Saturday, 13 August:

After being in Jeju for a full day and a half, I realize that it is a magnificent place to live- perhaps I will conveniently miss a flight or two. This day seemed to be the culmination of all the reasons I now love this place. We played our first concert at the Cultural Arts Center today to a wonderfully warm reception. Never before have I been treated so kindly, and never before have I been more respected for being a classical musician. Similarly, but almost to an extreme measure, our concert at Cheonjiyeon Falls later that evening was perhaps the closest I will feel to celebrity. An all girls school based out of Seoul performed before our group and stayed to listen to us. After the performance, which was, overall, rather strange sounding, as random microphones were sporadically placed throughout the ensemble, the students stayed fairly close to where we were putting away our instruments, yet they were too shy to actually speak to us. Once I turned around and impulsively said "hi," they all shrieked a slumber-party giggle and rushed over to talk with us. We took so many pictures and wrote so many e-mail addresses that my eyes were burred with white spots and my ink pen is still floating about Korea somewhere. The entire night, my roommates and I have done nothing but smile. As Lindsay put it best, "Who knew memorizing the piccolo solo in *Stars and Stripes Forever* would make us into rock stars."

Our 2 exciting concert experiences were offset by extreme serenity. We visited a temple nestled in the mountains in between the two concerts. This place was unlike anything I had ever seen. Even now, I can not even comprehend that I was there. We walked up the stone walkway, lined with beautifully carved statues and reached the temple houses at the top. To the right was a prayer house where people were devoutly praying. Straight in front were steep stone stairs that led up to unfinished new buildings. To the left was the most amazing thing I think I will ever see. Sitting quietly in top of a small plateau was a huge statue of Buddha and surrounding him was an amphitheater with hundreds of tiny statues of his followers, praying. It was a spectacular sight that words can not hope to describe, but the best was I can explain it is but the unbelievable feeling of calm I felt as I was sitting in front it. I often think that if Dr. Thomas had not rounded us all up to play the concert, I may still be sitting there.

Sunday, 14 August:

It seems like every day is an adventure here. We went to the market today (another place in which a fairly large group of American teenagers was spotted rather quickly). The majority of the market was separated into two distinct sections: the fruit and fish markets. While these were most notably distinguished by the odor, both were interesting to walk through

and imagine actually buying groceries from the booths as the local Koreans were. The fruit end of the market was colored with oranges, gigantic grapes (which tasted more like wine than any grape I've ever had), and a particularly curious fruit Dr. Thomas distinguished as "dragon fruit. Curious as my friends and I are, we had to try the strange food, and we bought a few to curb our interest. The outer skin was thick and a stunning hot pink with long curved "spikes" that were tipped with a light green tint. We were told to peel the skin before we tried to eat the dragon fruit, and after grabbing hold of the top and pulling off the pink exterior, the fruit actually looked like a white, oval dinosaur egg spotted with tiny kiwi-like seeds. It tasted unlike anything I can compare it to in America, but the only adjective I can use to describe it is "mild." As you can imagine, the other half of the market did not yield any sales on our part. The fish market was an interesting spectacle as at every turn, another fish was being gutted or another aquatic animal I had not seen was placed ravenously on a table for sale. The market was not extremely busy today (it is Sunday), but somehow, the fish market was full of constant activity, buzzing with something I can't explain.

Later this evening we played a concert at the Seaside auditorium, a beautiful pavilion overlooking the ocean. Again we were met with a wonderful disposition from a great crowd. I am constantly amazed at how receptive and overly kind these people are; again, another reason why, as the t-shirt says, Korea is the "best kept secret in Asia."

Monday, 15 August:

A most entertaining thought just popped into my head. I was considering how to start this journal entry, hoping to be as poetic as possible and avoid chronological order (so mundane and predictable), and I thought about the new type of food we ate today. Now, isn't it interesting that on the day when I not only swam in what I'm told is the South China Sea but also marched in Korea's independence day parade that I am first concerned with the food I ate. Is that a stereotypical college student's trait, or does it apply to all Americans? Well, regardless, I suppose I can relive the tastes of Korean bar-b-que. This food is regarded by most of the ensemble as the best we have had while in Korea (and I agree). It is essentially a small circular grill built into the two-foot high table we crouched around gawkily. The waitresses brought us large plates with raw meat to dump onto the grill, along with a gigantic pair of toothed scissors to cut it up after the meat was fully cooked (which happened surprisingly fast due to the extreme temperature of the surface). After it was cooked, we put the meat over rice or wrapped it in lettuce leaves and ate the wonderful

meat. There is something to say for eating a meal that you are literally picking off of the stove.

Besides eating this new food, we also went to the beach today, where we had a bit of time to relax and swim and get buried in the sand (an ancient Korean technique used to prevent arthritis). After that we were asked to march in Jeju's Independence Day parade. When I say "march," one usually assumes that a band member is walking and time and playing something. This was not what we were prepared to do, so instead we merely walked and handed out Korean candy we bought in huge bags earlier that day. It was one of the strangest experiences of my life to walk in that parade. We began by tossing the candy at the waving spectators, however the local people were more terrified of the flying object than anything, so we instead simply walked up to people and put candy into their hands. It was wonderful to do something so simple and see them all so excited to have us take part in their parade. The whole experience was unexpected, but wonderful and made us all smile and enjoy our evening that much more.

Tuesday, 16 August:

Today we had to travel from one beautiful place to another. It was sad to leave Jeju Island, but at the same time traveling to the outskirts of Daejeon towards Mokwan University was a wonderful journey. Dr. Waldecker, who was conveniently standing next to me in the aisle of the tiny bus, noted that we were going through the "Smyrna of South Korea," as there weren't any English translations on the few billboards that went by. He wisely remarked that he was happy to visit a rural area, because we would get a true feel for Korea. He clarified by saying that when people visit America, they see New York or Chicago, not Murfreesboro or LaVergne. He was definitely correct about seeing the real side of Korea. For the most part, Jeju was made up of Korean people who were on vacation (Korean tourists, so to speak). But here in Daejeon, the students and teachers we met were well accustomed to their normal daily lives, and, while most of the students were extremely kind to us, it did seem as if our presence upset the balance of normality to them. It was a wonderful and entirely new experience playing with the Mokwan University wind ensemble. It almost harkened back to my days at honor band festivals, when you are tossed into one big group with a bunch of people you've never played with and who come from completely different backgrounds and teaching styles and are supposed to create music in a severely rushed amount of time. And yet, on top of all of that, here we had to battle with language. It was quite an interesting struggle sometimes, but far more interesting was the juxtaposition of us American musicians to the Korean musicians. There were several differences in our ensembles, the first and most

noticeable to us was the fact that Mokwan placed little or no emphasis on intonation. While discussing this later with students at MTSU, we decided that it was almost as if they did not even think of it – not as in carelessness, but as in ignorance, not being taught that intonation was important or necessary. Several students also noted what fine instruments Mokwan’s musicians were playing on, although we could not figure out (nor did any of us have the courage to ask) why this was. All of the Korean students were also extremely interested in finding out our age before all else. This is a strange thing in American culture, yet apparently in Korea, age is extremely important to a description of a person. We quickly learned that when children are born in Korea, they are one year old on the day they are born, as the students tried their hardest to adjust their age to our system (we at first thought they were unsure of their numbers, as many would say “I’m 20,” and then get hit by someone next to them and shake their head and say, “I mean, 19.”). All in all, it was a most interesting day, and one to remember for a while.

Wednesday, 17 August:

I again did not know how to begin this excerpt, and I scanned to the end of my last entry and saw “it was a most interesting day, and one to remember for a while,” and I’m afraid that yesterday’s memory will pale in comparison to today’s. I woke up this morning in our dorm room with no air conditioning sweating and preparing for a day that, as it turned out, I knew nothing about. We took a harrowing taxi cab to the Technological Expo and saw an Imax film entirely in Korean surrounded by school children (my three friends, Stephen Smith, and I were more the subject of attention for the kids than the film, however). We then rehearsed with the ensemble again in a beautiful hall and ate and played a good concert (albeit a loud concert). What was to come was the most fun I have had so far on this trip. The students took us out (which we later found out meant that they actually raised money to buy all of our food and drink that night). We sat and mingled with all the Mokwan students, and while at first it seemed forced and strange, we all quickly became more comfortable and asked and answered a million questions. To think back on it now, it was surprising how little I thought about where I was, that is, how little I thought that I wasn’t hanging out with some new friends at home. It was apparent when we saw the dried and salted squid on the table as an appetizer, and when we had to ask the students to repeat something several times before we would understand it, but beyond that, it was simply fun. The table Lindsey, Katie, and I sat at was made up of three flute players from the university who insisted that we sit with them. One was particularly friendly, and it was not long before she seduced the others into opening up to us. We talked about their majors, where they lived, and most importantly to the girls, their boyfriends (or lack thereof). Throughout the course of the night, we heard some karaoke (which, from what I understand from the girls happens at almost every place in Korea), talked about our lives, and essentially discovered how alike we were. The

most memorable part of the night for me was when several students insisted that we get Korean names. We had to choose from five traditional last names and then they gave us a first name to match our character. My name turned out to be Lee Su-Jung, which apparently meant “crystal,” and although I couldn’t quite figure out its meaning, I imagine it is from my unbelievably pale skin (which is considered pale by American standards, so you can imagine how ‘crystal’ it seemed to the Korean students). We were also told by Dr. Thomas to bring small gifts for the students with us, which turned out to be wonderful, as the girls were so grateful to receive our little boxes that one ran away and appeared a while later with 2 gallons of Korean ice cream as a “thank you.” They were so grateful, they insisted that they could not accept our small gifts without giving something in return. Everyone was so kind and so much fun that we were all truly disappointed to leave that night. I can only say that I could not have had a better time with any of my American friends. I think that this country teaches you things, and on this night I was again shown by the students’ lives how similar our two cultures are, and yet shown how different they are by their unwavering gratitude and kindness.

Thursday, 18 August:

After last night’s excitement, we took it easy today. Although, even as I write the phrase “take it easy,” I know taking it easy on this trip is extremely different than taking it easy at home. It is the difference between taking a 2 hour bus ride to Seoul, going to a market, eating dinner with an honored conductor and watching TV. When we arrived in Seoul, we were taken to our hotel and then to a market to shop for traditional Korean gifts. I must say, it was wonderful to finally find some neat things to bring home. I was rather proud of my shopping excursion and found something for everyone at home. Most exciting was a tiny shop (only three or four of us could fit in it) in which an old woman made kimonos and beautiful shirts. To think that she sat at her little sewing machine and sewed each one herself was remarkable. The shop was covered in beautiful fabric, each piece a different color, a different design embroidered on it, a different size and cut. It was almost as if we were on the set of a movie, not really there in person. It was a wonderful place to get some wonderful things. Although the fabric shop was really interesting, my biggest find was down the road a bit. A quiet elderly man was sitting in a chair outside of his small shop that supposedly contained Eastern antiques. We were all interested, so we peeked in and found some beautiful rice paper prints. Even more exciting, however, were a few old books on a table nearby. When I picked one up and flipped carefully through the pages, the complex and beautiful writing enthralled me and held my interest for several minutes. When the man saw me so enthralled, he told me, after some confusion, that the book was an old Korean bible. It

was so beautiful that I bought it, and I later found out from our host at that night's meal that it was anywhere from 500 to 700 years old, as the writing contained some early Chinese figures that were incorporated with the Korean writing before the nation changed the language. It was a wonderful find that I am extremely careful with. That evening's meal was hosted by Mr. Kim, the conductor who visited MTSU two years earlier. His translator who came with him those years earlier was a flute teacher from Seoul, and she came as well. Being the only flutist still remaining in the ensemble from when she visited, she remembered me well and came up quickly and gave me a hug. At dinner she told me all about her life and teaching, her recent camp she had given lessons at, and her two daughters going away to college this year. Mr. Kim was as kind as he was in America and had us treated very well at the restaurant. All in all, it was very good to see a few familiar faces in a world I have been in for eight days and still don't fully understand.

Friday, 19 August:

Our last day was a very memorable one. We saw several notable scenes. First we walked through the war memorial, with its stunning statues and mournful artwork. It was particularly poignant in the rain. We then walked through the Palace in the center of the city, and while our tour was only brief, it was a beautiful scene, with the old colorful buildings and the mountains rising in the background, shaded with fog. Our concert was something great. It sounds rather conceited and piggish to say something as such, but I do not quite mean it in the way one would expect. It was great to play that concert. Not because we sounded extremely good, not because we got to play for a big crowd, not because we played in a nice hall, but because we brought the music to life for the people in the audience. It felt as if every ounce of every person in every seat was fully aware and fully appreciative. It is a remarkable and strange experience. I felt stunned by the thousand-some-odd people that filled the seats and the walls and the aisles, and yet I was unbelievably calm. Maybe it was because it was our last concert. Maybe it was because I knew no matter what we did, *Stars and Stripes Forever* would bring down the house. But I think it was beyond that, in some strange deeper way I still don't quite understand. When we finished our little concert, they cheered and cheered and tackled us for pictures and autographs. I have never signed an autograph in my life. It is all almost ethereal, like I'm remembering a dream or a movie. All I could say all night was a whispered, "very strange." After the concert, we had a short meal with the mayor. He gave a touching speech about how important we were and how special it was that we came. He also added in his thoughts on their recent Memorial Day

and American help in Korea. Before it was all over, several people were crying and all of us were silent and deeply touched. He then walked around to every one of us, singly, and handed us a gift. Three of the members of our ensemble cried from the thought of having loved ones that had passed away in the Korean War. When the mayor discovered this, he disappeared and returned with three more gifts for the girls, saying that he was wholly sorry for their losses, but truly appreciated their sacrifices. The whole night was enough to make anyone feel introspective and silent. It was a perfect way to end a perfect trip. And now I am only to think about everything I have learned. It seems like so much, yet it can be truly summed up into one thought: it is remarkable how you can discover in one trip how alike and how different two cultures are.