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Year abroad report

From February 2023 until December 2023, I was doing an exchange year in Korea, Seoul. While learning the language in the country where this language is native, I also got to discover how beautiful and fascinating Korea is itself. The exchange year is a great opportunity to meet new friends, discover something new about yourself, and widen your knowledge about the country that you are interested in. I am very thankful for this opportunity and all the things that I got to experience while living in Korea.

While looking for the university to study Korean Studies, I mostly focused on whether the university offers an exchange year or not. Surprisingly, most of the universities do not provide this opportunity. However, in the university of Tübingen the exchange year is an integral part of the Bachelor major. Moreover, the Tübingen university pays for the tuition at the university in Korea. When I read this information, I thought to myself that I would not find a better university to study Korean Studies at, so I immediately applied for the university of Tübingen.

The first three semesters were filled with language and content courses. These prepare you for the exchange year. In the content courses you learn about the history and culture of Korea. In the language courses you learn the grammar and vocabulary that later you will use while being in Korea. Language courses are divided into two courses. One course where you learn grammar and vocabulary and one course where you can practice your speaking. I personally was very satisfied with the language books. The structure was very good, and I thought that all the topics were helpful for the upcoming courses in Korea and daily life in general.

The exchange year happens during the 4th and 5th semesters. At the end of the 2nd semester, in August, I started to decide at what university in Korea I want to study. The choice consisted of 8 universities. Thankfully, there was a meeting where students of higher semesters gave presentations and introduced us to the universities. They told us about dormitories and languages courses. At that time, I already chose 3 universities where I wanted to study Korean. So, in August I only had to choose one among them. I decided on the Sungkyunkwan university. It is the oldest university in Korea and the campus fascinated me when I looked at the pictures. The campus has the old buildings where you can go for a

walk, feel the atmosphere of the past days, and take beautiful photos. The campus is quite big and there are a lot of new buildings. About the classes and courses itself I will talk in the next paragraphs.

I want to start by discussing the exchange year's preparations. Probably the hardest part was getting all the documents ready. However, since we got the list of all the needed documents, even this hard task did not take a lot of time and was well organized. Some of the required documents were CV, transcript of records from Tübingen, letter of motivation, visa etc. Firstly, I decided to focus on all the documents except visa, because it was still too early to apply for it. Before I started to collect the documents, I created a list where I wrote all the necessary actions to take before the exchange year. This list helped me a lot in my preparation and helped me stay organized. Near each step a date until when this step should be completed was written. The letter of motivations and transcript of records I had to send to the Koreanistik office in order to be assigned to a university in Korea. I sent the documents in the middle of August and got the results to which university I will go around the beginning of September. I got assigned to SKKU exactly how I wanted. Then I truly started to prepare for the exchange year. I started looking into the requirements for entering Korea and the paperwork required to create an ARC (Alien Registration Card). I found many websites that explained the process of creating the ARC, however in my case it was a lot easier than I thought. The process of creating ARC will be explained later.

What got me the most worries was the plane ticket and the date when I would go to Korea. I had many options and questioned what the best time to go was – as early as possible or later, closer to the date where the classes start. I hesitated for a long time but decided to buy tickets for the 13th of February. It was a couple of days after the semester ended. I thought that I needed a couple of weeks to adjust to Korea and prepare myself properly for the classes. So, in the beginning of December I purchased the flight tickets. I chose the company AirFrance as the date suited me and I was satisfied with the price.

After I purchased the flight tickets I started to think about visa and what was the best way to apply for it. As I am not resident of Germany, I hesitated about whether I should apply for visa D-2-6 in Germany or in my home country. After some time, I decided to get my visa in Germany. At the end of December I mailed my documents via post to Berlin. It was only a matter of a few weeks until I got my visa. My advice is to apply for visa not later than December, because many of my friends who applied in January had to wait longer.

International students have quite many options on where they can live in Korea. It can be either dormitory of your university, Airbnb, oneroom etc. In my case, I discussed with two of my friends whether we want to live together. After some discussion we came to conclusion to rent a place on Airbnb. We spent couple of days on Airbnb until we found a place that was near Dongdaemun. Also, we had a zoom meeting with the place owner to discuss the price and how long we will be living there.

We got very lucky with this apartment as it was near the SKKU, and the neighborhood was very nice itself. I highly recommend renting a place together with friends, as the price could be a big burden while living alone.

When I arrived to Korea everything was very new and interesting. It was my first time in Seoul and previously I have only seen this city in the videos and movies. In the first couple weeks I wanted to go everywhere, eat, and see everything. I was so fascinated and excited that adjusting myself to this country was very easy. I did not have the culture shock like I was expecting. The preparatory course for the exchange year in Korea that I took in Tübingen also helped me a lot. There we discussed the culture differences and what is awaiting us during the exchange year.

The first thing that I noticed in Seoul was how organized and clean everything was. I have rarely seen any garbage on the street. Also, people themselves pay a lot of attention to organization. For example, what is very different from where I am from, is that people while waiting for a bus or subway stay in line. Nobody rushes to the door. Everyone comes in in order that they were staying. I found it very fascinating and wish that this system was present also in my country. People in Korea in general like to wait in line. It can be seen almost everywhere that people stand in line outside some restaurants and cafes. I always thought that I am a patient person but waiting in line for a long time to enter a restaurant was not for me. Apart from that, in my opinion people are very friendly in Korea. There were a couple of times when they helped me even though I was not asking for help. One old lady even gave me some sweets on the street while complimenting me on my appearance. I always caught stares on the streets, but it was not something negative. People were looking with interest, and I understand that my appearance is different from what people are used to see. So, I did not consider it to be a bad thing.

While preparing myself for the exchange year I was having a lot of thoughts about whether people in Korea could speak English or not. I thought that my Korean level was still not enough to feel myself comfortably. When I came to Korea I was trying to speak as much Korean as possible to gain confidence. There were also times when I did not know how to explain things, so I spoke in English. However, people did not understand me, so I had to use the translator. It happened only couple of times in the beginning of my exchange year. Of course, in the places where there are many tourists it is very easy to find a person who can speak English. Moreover, even in the subway there are signs in Korean and English, so it is almost impossible to get lost in the subway.

Many people have concerns about the food, so did I. I was scared that in restaurants most dishes will be spicy. Of course, there are a lot of spicy dishes, but there are also many not spicy ones. If you are scared that the food that you selected is spicy, you could always ask the waiter. But even spicy dishes are worth trying. In my opinion, Korea is one of the countries with the most delicious food. It is very

hard for me now to try and find something similar to famous Korean dishes. I recommend trying as much as possible in Korea. For those, who like to cook at home it will be useful to know that vegetables in Korea are quite cheap and there are a lot of premade dishes that you could easily buy in the supermarkets. However, all the fruits are very expensive, so I had to wait until I come back home to eat them.

In the beginning of March my language courses started. I bought books in the university's library and came to our language institute. Everyone was taking placement test on the first day. However, I have already done this test online in December. Only SKKU university did it. SKKU language courses are called the intensive ones. Each course lasts 8 weeks and between courses there are only couple of days to rest. It is a very small amount of rest days compared to other universities. Courses at other universities often run for 10 weeks with 2 weeks off in between. I started with level 3. After the end of level 3 I immediately started with level 4. Level 4 I finished on 23rd of June. After that I did not have any courses until October. I had almost three months to visit places that I wanted in Korea and get to know this country more.

One of places that I really enjoyed was Busan. I always wanted to visit this city and enjoy the sea. Busan was very different from Seoul. It seemed like this city was very laid-back and people were more open. I visited Busan in summer, and it was not so hot like in Seoul. Sadly, I did not get to try famous Busan dishes, but I will definitely do it when I come back someday.

Level 5 I started at the end of October. It was not much different from Level 3 and 4. All the teachers were very friendly and supportive. They always explained everything if I had questions and I did not have a hard time keeping up with the materials. Since most of my classmates were Chinese, communication was first rather challenging. But as time went on, we became more comfortable with speaking Korean to each other and were using it for communication. Following the field trip, our bond grew even closer. Even now I keep in touch with some of my classmates.

The only difficulty with the classes was that that course in SKKU is rather short, only 8 weeks. It means, that the materials should be studied very fast. We only had 4 weeks before the intermediate examinations and 4 weeks before the final exam. In addition to preparations for exam, we also had to complete assignments like presentations and four essays to be written in eight weeks. Usually, the test happens on a single day. First, we do writing, reading, and listening tests together. Then, after short break the speaking test starts. For me it was a big benefit that we had only one day devoted to the examination. Given the limited amount of time students must study for the tests, they have to be extremely conscientious and disciplined. I am thankful that I had this experience, as I learned how to organize my time better. Another advantage is that the day after the examination we already got results.

Then, the teacher discussed with us the right answers and answered our questions. After everyone understood their mistakes, we continued with the lesson. Overall, I think that the examination system is very similar to language courses in Tübingen, so it will be very easy to adapt.

The classes start at 9:00 and end at 14:50. There is one lunch break and several little ones. The lunch break lasts 70 minutes, while the smaller ones last ten minutes apiece. During the lunch break I usually went with my friends to school cafeteria. There are two main cafeterias. The prices are the same, between 5,000 and 6,000 won. The food portion is quite big, and you are free to add as many side dishes as you like. If you'd rather not eat there, there are plenty of restaurants and cafes close to university. There are cafes and convenience stores on campus where you may get food as well. In one cafeteria the menu changes every day, in another once every 3 days. However, I was never tired of the menus and was never disappointed with the food. In my opinion, the food in the university cafeteria were not worse than in the restaurants.

During the courses we also had field trips. Every time it was a field trip in a different place. These are mostly the cultural events designed to help you better understand Korean culture. This is a short trip – two to three hours – after which you may return home. I was always very glad to attend those, as after it ended, I became closer with my classmates and had a great time. It was a wonderful way to relax a bit after taking the examination. Speaking of excursions, I attended almost every trip organized by TUCKU. My knowledge of Korean history and culture has increased as a result of the trips we took with TUCKU. A few of the places that we visited were the historical museum and a kimchi museum where we even prepared kimchi. Also, very informative was the meeting with the Tübingen alumni. Every event prepared by TUCKU left a big impression and deepened my knowledge about Korea.

I would also like to give a small advices to those who will go to Korea. Something that helped me a lot during my stay was that I used very helpful applications there on regular basis. These were KakaoMetro, Naver Map, Kakao T, Naver and Wise (if you pay rent). Also, you will require the KINGO-M app if you attend SKKU for your studies. Another advice from me is to open a bank account when you arrive in Seoul. I did not do it and later felt regret about it. My international cards still did work at most of the shops, but I was unable to do online orders, utilize Kakao Pay, or use Kakao Taxi. Lastly, I would recommend making your ARC together with your university. In my case, SKKU offered to help international students to make their ARC and I gladly used this opportunity. So, I did not have to go to immigration office and make everything on my own. It was fast and without any inconvenience.

I am very thankful for the opportunity to spend a year in Korea and study the language there. I was not disappointed with this country, and my love for it only grew. I think that this experience helped me

understand Korea and Korean people more. It would have been impossible without this exchange year. After returning to Tübingen I will implement what I learned to finish my studies.