

Understanding Modern Korea through Oral Testimonies¹

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Abstract

The story of a people's lives can be read as the story of the place in which they live. In April 2012 I conducted research in the cities of Seoul, Gwangju, Mogyeon and surrounding areas in South Korea. I collected personal narratives from the residents of these areas in an effort to understand how Korea has been and is ruled, and the social ordering of the South Korean society. This paper argues that oral testimonies are an invaluable source of information on a society and that the collective autobiographies of a people can be translated into the biography of their nation. I show that the narratives of the people of South Korea offer insightful reading into the development of the nation over the years and are an important archive of the social history of this society.

Key words: Oral Testimonies, Urbanisation, South Korea, Japanese Occupation, Culture

Introduction

Korea is on the North Eastern corner of the Asian continent, bordered on the North by China and Russia and to the East and South it is bordered by the islands of Japan. Korea is divided into North) Korea and South Korea. Young Ick Lew in *Brief History of Korea* says that:

the Korean people belong to the Tungusic branch of the Mongoloid race.... The Chinese culture has had [a] profound impact on Korea; Chinese elements found in today's Korean

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culture are a result of the Korean people's conscious and deliberate emulation of Chinese culture from mainly the second century BCE to 1895 CE. (2000: 6)

This means that the Korean and the Chinese cultures are similar in many ways. The continuous interaction between the Chinese and Koreans has led to a kind of blended culture in Korea, bearing Chinese influence in areas such as political institutions, Buddhism, scholarship, art and the spread of Confucian thought.

The Library of Congress—Federal Research Division outlines the profile of South Korea, which attained independence in 1945 from Japanese occupation. According to the library, the word ‘Korea’ comes from the Koryo Dynasty (918--1392) which was founded by Wang Kon. Wang Kon shortened the name Koguryo to Koryo. The Koryo Dynasty established a tradition of aristocracy which is still present in Korea. The Koryo Dynasty declined due to invasion by the Mongols. Thereafter the Choson Dynasty rose and lasted from 1392 to 1910. The Choson Dynasty which was founded by Yi Song-gye had its capital in Seoul. *The Library* notes that “Choson was faced with major Japanese invasions and warfare between 1592 and 1598 that brought widespread devastation to the peninsula” (2005:3).

In an attempt to understand the Korean society of today, I collected twenty oral testimonies from people living in Seoul, Mogyeon, Gwangju and the surrounding areas in the month of April 2012. These women and men represented Koreans of various age groups, gender, religious affiliation, occupations, and education background. My interviews were aimed at listening to the experiences of the residents especially with regard to family, culture, education, urbanisation and development. I asked them to narrate their stories recollecting their childhood, schooling, marriage and the changes that have taken place both in their various home towns and in Seoul or their current cities of residence since they started living there. Of the twenty respondents I interviewed, seven were male while thirteen were female. This is largely due to the fact that since I conducted the interviews during working hours, most men were not available since they have to work to support their families. Indeed, out of the seven men I interviewed, I conducted five of the interviews at the men's places of work: a church, where I interviewed a pastor; a motor vehicle garage, where I interviewed a garage owner and a mechanic; and the town office

where I interviewed some teachers employed by the town management. In contrast, out of the thirteen women respondents, only about three granted me interviews at their places of work, and of these three, only one was self-employed and I interviewed her in her hardware store in Mohyeon. My interaction and interviews with the respondents revealed that most South Korean women, especially those over the age of 50, are housewives. The respondents' age varied between 38 and 90 and a majority of them have lived in Seoul, Mohyeon, Gwangju, and surrounding areas for periods ranging from five to 20 years.

Most of the people I interviewed were not born in the areas where I conducted the research; they had moved there to work or to attend school. Others, especially women, moved to the respective cities after marriage to be with their husbands and families. Their narratives reflect different aspects of life and matters that have to a large extent affected their lives, individually and collectively.

Oral Testimony as Biography

In this paper I argue that oral testimonies of a people in a particular region are embalmed with the actual life of that place. Through the voices of the ordinary people, the portraiture of South Korea today – and partly over time – can be painted. The history of Korea can be understood better through the narratives of individuals who may not have been in the public service or who are not known public figures and yet experienced the different times and events that define what Korea is today.

My research focused on the Seoul Metropolitan Area since it was part of a project on urbanisation in Seoul. A biography of the Korean society can be extracted from the testimonies of the residents of the selected regions in the country. In this case, a biography is taken to mean reflections on the defining moments of Korea by its citizens. Nicolson Harold in *The Development of English Biography* defines a biography as “the history of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature” (1959:7). He further states that a “biography must be a truthful record of an individual and composed as a work of art (1959:7). However, in this paper, the task is not to compose a story meant to define what the Korean society is but to highlight the lived experiences of ordinary Koreans through time and space. Lived experiences are different from

the kind of imagined experiences that one would encounter, for instance, through a reading of Korean fiction. The narratives of Korean people which inform this paper have both autobiographical and anthropological value. In the paper I hope to demonstrate that such experiences are integral in constituting the history of a country.

Oral testimonies are packaged with what is most important to a people living in a particular region and time. Through memory, the narrators are able to capture certain events and give their personal interpretation of national matters. The *Panos Oral Testimony Programme* observes that oral testimonies may be “subjective, anecdotal, selective, partial and individual” but quite significant in documenting a biography of a place because “what some might call ‘flaws’ in the evidence are in fact strengths, for the way people remember or describe something tells us what is important about it to them” (1999:1). This means that oral testimonies may be more reliable than the ‘factual’ accounts of a historian. A professional historian may concentrate on matters that affect important public figures, such as politicians, and events of high magnitude but fail to understand simple matters such as food scarcity in a certain year, an arranged marriage that turned sour, lack of education opportunities for people in a particular place ... things that might have affected people in a marginalized area. Such omissions in history may be corrected through the oral testimonies of the people.

In order to assess the life of South Korea, I focused on the oral testimonies of people who have lived in Seoul, which is one of the largest cities in the world, and the surrounding cities for different periods.

Reflecting on Urbanisation in Korea

My interviews revealed that urbanisation in many parts of South Korea has brought about changes, most of which the residents think are positive. According to Hae Un Rii and Jae-Seob Ahn in “Urbanization and Its Impact on Seoul, Korea,” the city of Seoul began to experience modernization in the late 19th Century and increased economic development in the 1960s led to an increase in the population, rapid urbanization and changes in the infrastructure (2002:47). Roads have been improved from the initial dirt roads to paved streets which have impacted on the transport system. While there were only a few public buses before the roads were improved,

the residents now enjoy buses at regular and short intervals which has made their movement convenient. In the health sector, there are more hospitals compared to the 1970s when one had to travel to Seoul or other cities to seek medical care because the public system was not as sophisticated as it is now. There are more public elementary and high school and private academies too, making it easier for residents to get education. The older generation of women in Korea has only basic education and some did not attend school at all but more women in Korea today receive education just like the men. This has improved the lives of families because both men and women are able to work and support their families.

For example, the presence of the Mohyeon campus of Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, according to the residents of this area, has contributed immensely to the progress of the people of Mohyeon and the surrounding areas. They narrated that the university has not only made it easier and more convenient for them to access university education without having to go to other cities and to improving the image and status of Mohyeon but also by creating business opportunities for shop owners and landlords. Lee Myung Kim, for example, is happy with the presence of the university because the students rent rooms from her and she is able to make some money to take care of her family. The road construction business and building of office and house blocks have been good for the people as it created employment and business opportunities. Sellers of land and building materials have significantly benefited from the development. The residents praised the establishment of the Town Hall immensely because it enabled them to access services which would previously have been difficult or impossible to access. Some of the services offered at the Town Hall include literacy classes for the older generation of Koreans who did not get a chance to attend school. In addition, the Town Hall management has employed teachers for children's and adults' dancing and music classes, yoga, painting and computer lessons.

However, there are a few negative impacts of the urbanisation as well. For instance, 63 year old Yang Won Suk complained that due to massive migration by people seeking employment in the developing cities, the cost of land has risen and although land owners are making profits, those seeking to buy cannot afford it. The increased population has also put a strain on housing as the owners often cannot meet the demand and therefore the cost of housing has risen too. There are more high-rise apartments as opposed to the single unit bungalows that existed before, which

some people said has affected the sense of community that they had before the rapid urbanisation. Ji Chun Nyeo, who was 73 year old at the time of this research, mourned the loss of traditional elements of Korean people's existence in the sense that she and her neighbours can no longer meet to eat together or just talk because people have become individualistic.

Heo Haeng Ran, a teacher, was particularly concerned about the environmental degradation that has happened in the process of urbanisation. She complained that the demand for land to build roads, residential and business buildings has reduced land available for farming, which leads to high food prices. The improved infrastructure has meant an increase of motor vehicles on the roads and therefore air pollution from the fumes these vehicles emit. In addition, since land has to be cleared to pave way for construction, people can no longer enjoy the benefits of forests and fresh mountain air. The views of these Koreans on the negative effects of urbanisation in a way lend credence to the findings of Rii and Jae-Seob in their article. Lee Sang Bok, a middle aged man, said that he was only in Gwangju because he had to work and support his family; otherwise he would have preferred to live in a rural setting where he can enjoy fresh air. However there are those, particularly in Gwangju, who felt that there were too many restrictions on building so the city was not developing as fast as it should have been. The administration of Gwangju has strict restrictions on the building of apartments in this city because it is home to the dam that supplies water to Seoul, Gwangju and the surrounding areas. However, South Koreans agree that the positive effects of urbanisation far outweigh the negative effects and that their lives are more convenient than they were before urbanisation started.

Kab Sook Kang who was 69 years when I interviewed her was happy that the health facilities in Korea had greatly improved. She recalls that when she was growing up in Daegu there were no hospitals. Kang says that "then, people fell sick but they just took medicine at home and didn't go to hospital. There are now less sick people than then and more people died in the past than now because there were no hospitals in the village. If one was sick, they would just die easily" (personal interview 6th April 2012). In this context urbanization has led to better living conditions for Koreans. The presence of a hospital in a village means that many lives have been saved. Several decades before, as Kang recalls, lives were easily lost to treatable conditions.

Talking about Homelessness in Seoul

The rapid development of Seoul has led to poor people becoming homeless. The Seoul Train Station and the House of Freedom have become a refuge for homeless persons in the city. The House of Freedom refers to a former textile factory in Seoul, Pangmin Factory, which was renovated and opened in 1998 as a shelter for homeless people. Jesook Song in “Historicization of Homeless Spaces: The Seoul Train Station Square and the House of Freedom” examines how homeless people in the urban landscape emerged as a subject of concern to the South Korean government. Song observes that the Seoul Train Station which was built in 1925 by the Japanese colonial regime and which has been renovated “into an international airport-like space” (Song, 2006: 195) has become a shelter for the homeless. This shows a deplorable situation in Seoul. It is a very worrisome case for a mega city such as Seoul to be crowded with thousands of homeless people in a public space, although this situation is not specific to Seoul; many cities all over the world struggle with providing housing for people.

As better apartments were put up, the rich got better housing; as for the poor, they were displaced from the spaces they originally occupied due to economic factors. In an estate where they could previously afford the rent, they realized that they could no longer afford when the changes happened. To address this issue which is a national disaster to South Koreans, the government provides free housing for old people who cannot afford to buy houses or pay rent. Jae Hee Kim who was 85 years old migrated to Seoul from Jeollabuk near Cheonju and is an example of the extremely poor people in Seoul. Her husband and two sons are sick and confined to a mental hospital. She attributes the mental illness to poverty: “we lived a very poor life and he (husband) developed a mental sickness because of poverty...It is the Korean disease” (personal interview 8th April 2012). Due to her desperate condition, Kim is housed by the government. The old woman explains her situation:

I live in a nearby apartment. I don't pay for it. It is given for free by the government because I'm a pitiful old woman. I have come here to eat every day for twenty years. The apartments were constructed twenty two years ago. (personal interview 8th April 2012)

When Kim says that mental illness has become a Korean disease it shows the appalling situation that the homeless in Seoul have sunk into; despite the grandeur of rapid development, a large part of the population has resigned to fate.

Kab Sook Kang, 65 years old, migrated to Seoul from Eusong near Daegu and observed that house rents in Seoul have been rising drastically. This has made her move houses frequently. Kang said, “the expansion of the city has affected mostly people who don’t have houses and they have had to suffer the ever-increasing rent rates. Those who own houses can live comfortably” (personal interview 8th April 2012). This testimony shows that in a capitalist society such as Seoul, the poor people are the most affected when the city develops.

Cheol Soo Bae, who was 66 years old, also noted that there is a housing problem in Seoul City. Bae, who graduated as a journalist and has resided in Seoul for 45 years, noted that:

With the rapid expansion of the city, the quality of life of the poor people will be largely affected and they will perpetuate a cycle of poverty, thus creating a bottleneck in the economy. Since they do not have a decent income, they cannot buy houses and will continue to pay more money in house rent, money which should be spent on education and other such important things, and the gap between the rich and poor will continue to widen. (Personal interview 13th April 2012).

This means that Seoul is a society where the situations of the less fortunate keep deteriorating.

From the oral testimonies that I collected one notes the helplessness of the poor in Seoul as the city, like a huge balloon, expands. Forty years ago, the poor ran to the city to look for employment opportunities. The opposite is likely to happen as the cost of living continues to skyrocket thus rendering the poor unable to survive in the city. With thousands of Koreans sleeping in the railway station tunnels, I am persuaded that the Korean government will be forced to settle such people in other regions. This is because half of the population of South Korea lives in Seoul and its environs.

Recalling the Japanese Occupation

The colonial era in Korea is dotted with innumerable crimes against civilians. Janice C.H. Kim in “The Pacific War and Working Women in Late Colonial Korea” notes that Korean girls who were taken to work in factories in the 1920s and 1930s were the “early victims of a capitalism brought by Japanese imperialists” (2007:83). Some women were taken to serve as “sex slaves for Japanese military during the Second Sino-Japanese War” (Kim, 2007:83). Despite the Korean people being suppressed politically, culturally and socially, they were also exploited to satisfy the greed of the Japanese ever expanding empire in the Pacific.

The sentiments against colonialism are also expressed in the oral testimonies of the residents of Seoul city. Jae Hee Kim, born in Jeollabuk near Cheonju and 85 years old at the time of the interview, reminisces on the days of Japanese rule and rejoices that the Japanese are struck by the tsunamis time and again. She believes that the Japanese behaved wickedly against the South Koreans and thus the calamities Japan suffers are punishment for the atrocities that the Japanese committed against the Koreans. Kim said, “Every good thing we had was taken away by the Japanese; even balls for playing...Even now the Japanese should feel guilty and because they get tsunamis, that’s like payback” (interview 11th April 2012). Through this oral testimony, the resentment against cultural and political dominance by a foreign country is evident. Kim recalls that when she was a girl, the Japanese robbed the Koreans of everything. People planted food and it was taken away by the Japanese. The colonial regime was determined to smother the Korean culture by prohibiting Korean language. Kim says the language of instruction was Japanese and any school-going child was punished if found speaking Korean.

Every country that has ever been colonized retains memories of injustices of occupation. Sang Byung Choen was born in 1924 in Wonju, Kangwon Province and recalls the evil of colonialism:

At that time when I was young, we were under Japanese rule and this lasted for 35 years. We cultivated rice but we had to give it all to the Japanese to the extent that we didn’t have enough for ourselves. This was called *kongchul*. The younger people do not have the real experience so they wouldn’t know, but 70 and 80 year-old people detest the Japanese. At that time, many people hated the Japanese...People were tired of the

Japanese and whenever people met, they were always talking about the situation.
(Personal interview 10th April 2012)

Memories of colonialism are very difficult to erase. Choen still mourns the evil deeds of the Japanese. However, there are other people in Korea who think that colonialism helped them to develop. For instance, Cheol Soo Bae who was born in 1947 argues that Korea had developed because of the Japanese colonization. He says, “We are able to manage this rapid growth, because of the past colonization by Japan” (personal interview 10th April 2012). For people like Bae, colonization propelled South Korea into a position of economic competitiveness with the developed nations. But Bae’s remarks may be due to his attitude towards Japan, a situation that Choen refers to when he suggested that “the younger people do not have the real experience so they wouldn’t know, but 70 and 80 year-old people detest the Japanese” (personal interview 10th April 2012). Bae, who was 66 years old at the time of the interview, did not have the ‘real’ experience of the colonial regime.

Japan ensured that it left behind major landmarks that would always remind South Koreans of the colonial period. The Seoul Train Station is one such monument that is embedded in the history of Korea. Jesook Song observes the following about the station:

It was built in 1925 by the Japanese colonial regime (1919-1945) as a hub for the numerous railroads connecting the Korean Peninsula to Manchuria, the route to the continent. In spite of many repairs, the original station buildings retain the typical architecture of the colonial period with its Renaissance style, a style that otherwise is very rare due to the nationalist movement to eradicate colonial shadows. (2006:194)

Such landmarks are what probably make Koreans who never experienced colonialism think that the vice was necessary and that it fast-tracked development of Korea. Yet records show that the Japanese colonialists were quite repressive in the first three decades:

The first three decades of Japanese occupation alternated between cycles of strict repression and periods of relative openness. In the first decade of occupation, Koreans were not allowed to publish newspapers or form political groups. Korean resentment of

such treatment led in the spring of 1919 to a series of protests that became known as the March First Independence Movement. The colonial authorities responded with violence, killing an estimated 7,000 Koreans. (The Library of Congress, 2005: 3)

This revelation partly explains why Koreans find it very difficult to relate well with the Japanese many years after the injustices. Korea also had to survive the excesses of two powers—Russia and Japan. After the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05) over the control of Korea, there was still more bloodshed. *The Library of Congress* notes that:

...in the 1930s...Japan's military leaders made Korea a staging ground for the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-45), and later World War II. Koreans were conscripted as laborers and later soldiers in the Japanese Imperial Army, and a period of unprecedented repression followed. Japan established assimilation policies forbidding use of the Korean language, shut down Korean-language newspapers, and built Shinto shrines throughout the country. Koreans were encouraged to take Japanese names, acknowledge the divinity of the emperor, and otherwise deny their own long and rich heritage. The "36 years" of occupation, as they came to be known, remain an obstacle in Korean-Japanese relations, and the subject of Korean collaboration with the occupying Japanese forces remains extremely sensitive. (2005:3)

The unprecedented repression and oppression are evils that many Koreans of the older generation cannot forgive the Japanese. This explains the hatred that Jae Hee Kim, earlier mentioned, harbours against the Japanese when she rejoices that Japan nowadays is continuously struck by tsunamis. Her curse of the Japanese can be understood as the only way of fighting for a helpless victim of the crimes of so powerful a nation as Japan in comparison to Korea.

Remembering the Civil War

The age of the Koreans I interviewed during this research varied between 38 and 90 years. The older people had some recollection of the war including the cruelty of the Korean army, dislocation and separation of families as residents were pushed to the southern parts of the country; hunger; death of family members; disease due to harsh weather; and poverty. In

addition, those who were born or lived during the war did not receive education and they had to work from an early age to support their siblings and old or ailing parents.

One woman who was born in Seodaem, Seoul, in 1942 recounted the experiences of the Korean War. Most of the people in South Korea saw the war as an attack by the Communists. The woman, Ahn Suk Hee, recounted that she had to hide with other people in the mountains because even the United Nations' Forces that joined the combat to save South Korea were raping women. Girls as young as ten years were victims of the combating armies. Hee explained that she did not attend school for a year because of the war. After a year the situation was calm and the Koreans who had taken refuge in the mountains resumed their normal life. That was the time to count the damage to their possessions. She remembered that after the war her father's company was completely bankrupt and their family struggled to survive in Seoul.

Another woman, Ji Chun, who was ten years at the beginning of the war, recalled seeing scary war planes and people running for their lives while shouting—"Communism, Communism..." (personal interview 8th April 2012). The word 'Communism' was like the trademark of the Korean War. The oral testimonies of the people who witnessed the unfortunate encounter reveal dread for the word Communism. The word carries connotations of a period when food was difficult to find and life was unpredictable.

Jung Yun Cha who was born in 1939 in Incheon has not yet forgiven North Korea for waging war against South Korea. When the South Korean government, in an attempt to create harmony with its neighbour and rival gave rice to North Korea, many citizens from the South lamented bitterly. Cha said that there was absolutely no reason for giving rice to North Korea yet there were enough poor people in the South. He recalled the fact that North Korea shot a missile at South Korea. Cha also noted that North Korea was always planning to produce Nuclear weapons and for that reason the US soldiers remained in South Korea to spy on the activities of its neighbour. Cha's statement revealed that unhealthy suspicions existed between the two Korean nations, making any possibility of unity quite remote.

The Korean War began about five years after the end of Japanese occupation. The rivers of blood had not stopped flowing on the Korean soil when the North Korean Communist Army invaded South Korea. Tae-Hung Ha in *Guide to Korean Culture* recounts the devastating war in detail:

On June 25, 1950, the Soviet trained and Soviet equipped North Korean Communist Army invaded South Korea by surprise attacks at nine separate points across the 38th parallel. On the same day the United Nations Security Council branded the assault aggression. The ill-prepared and poorly equipped ROK Army was no match for the enemy of whelming superiority in man-power and modern war machines including tanks and big guns. After three days the ROK Army fell back across the Han River and Seoul was occupied by the Communists on June 28. (1968:61)

Ha's account shows that the Korean War was characterized by innumerable atrocities committed during the combats between different forces. Seoul was captured first by the North Korean Communist Army, then the United Nations Forces, and while the UN Forces were in hot pursuit of the North Korean Army, the Chinese Communists captured Seoul in January 1951. On 18th March 1951, the UN Forces recaptured Seoul. Korea thus is a nation that has tasted the brunt of war in many ways.

The effects of the endless battles on the ordinary people of Korea are immense. Ha also observes that the plight of the Korean refugees remains memorable. He says, "early war refugees poured southward by the hundreds of thousands in a never-ending line. It was the greatest tragedy of Asia, the like of which cannot be found in the annals of any war history" (62). As the big powers were wiping out each other on Korean soil, it was the ordinary people who suffered the most.

Celebrating Education

One woman, Byung Soon Choi, speaking on education said, "I didn't go to school. My siblings went a little. I cannot read or write so even if you write down 'you will die' I wouldn't know" (personal interview 12th April 2012). This reveals the acute awareness of the consequences of illiteracy among the older generation South Koreans. Even in her illiteracy, the woman understands that the inability to read or write is tragic in the contemporary society. Choi is not

the only person who admits being illiterate. Sook Ja Lee notes that she never stepped in school: “I did not go to school but my brothers and sisters attended school for a few years. I only worked. I was the first daughter so I had to work. I never attended school. It was normal for women not to go to school then. But even for men, this was also normal because it was a village” (personal interview 12th April 2012).

In the case of Lee, there was minimal access to education mainly because the motivation to study was lacking in the rural areas. What was important to the population then was the ability to find basic necessities such as food and clothing. There also lacked examples of people in the society who had benefited significantly from education.

Another woman, Won Soon Lee, who was about sixty years old at the time of the interview, said that she had dropped out in the fourth year of elementary school. She testified that she hated school when young. In her hometown in Gyeonggi-do Province, schools were very far from where children lived. Being a mountainous region, Soon Lee found trekking for several miles to get to school very tiresome. The scarcity of schools led to low levels of education, especially for girls who were charged with other responsibilities. Among the Koreans in the past, girls and women had to carry out kitchen chores. Soon Lee recalls that she stopped schooling in order to take care of her ailing mother and support her siblings. This revealed a childhood ruined by unbearable responsibilities. Among the poor in Korea, children perceived education as a secondary requirement. This was because the poor were faced by more urgent difficulties which rendered education somewhat unnecessary.

Furthermore, Lee says, “My friends who came to Seoul and worked as servants always looked good and happy and it seemed to me they were prettier, so I joined them thinking it would work out for me too” (personal interview 14th April 2012). This revelation showed that role-models play a major role in changing the worldview of a particular society. In the formative years of Lee’s life, the excellent women she was exposed to were domestic servants from Seoul. As much as the woman had no regrets in life as she noted in her narrative, it was notable that she would have achieved more had she encountered schooled women in the village. One realizes that people’s attitude towards education enables them to make a decision whether to embrace it or

not. Had Lee encountered educated women in her village as she grew up, she would probably have discovered the value of education.

Unlike Lee, Myong Hee Park regrets that she never got an opportunity to go to school. She lamented, “We lived in a small room with my mother-in-law. I didn’t get any work because I didn’t have any education. It was difficult for me to experience things. Few people attended school – only the rich” (personal interview 14th April 2012). Park lamented that education was a preserve of the rich. It is obvious that Park’s village was submerged in poverty and isolated from the knowledge which illuminated the urbanized rich areas.

Commenting on Religion

The religious affiliation of the Koreans I interviewed varied from Buddhist, Christian, to those who did not profess any religion. Most of the people I interviewed were Buddhists and there were a few Christians but this was not surprising since the Korean society is largely Buddhist especially because of the Japanese influence.

Ye Jin Jung, who was 46 years of age when we spoke to her, remarked that she quit Buddhism when she encountered the Christians in Guchokdong in Seoul. According to her, Christians exhibited unity and cared for one another more than the Buddhists. She said,

I haven’t always been a Christian; I turned to Christianity seven years ago. I used to be a Buddhist. In Buddhism, you focus on yourself in terms of individual development of your soul, but not worshipping with a community of believers. In Christianity, you fellowship with others and you also meet with the pastor and the pastor’s sermon guides you and gives you encouragement. I went with my husband to the Church and found the Church community was so united and close, so we became Christians. (Personal interview 7th April 2012)

As much as individual nourishment is important, Jung and her husband found that a communion with other believers was more fulfilling than Buddhism.

Jung's case is one of the few isolated ones because many Koreans who converted to Christianity in the early times faced rejection from family members. For instance, Won Soon Lee narrated that she grew up in a Christian family but when she got married her religion was never tolerated by her husband and his family, "We all went to church except my dad and he didn't want me to go. There was a small church in the village. I am a Christian. I want to go to church even now but my husband does not want me to go so I don't go. My parents are Christians so they go to church. I don't even pray in the house" (personal interview 7th April 2012). This testimony showed the desperation that some Koreans experience as they seek a balance between different religious beliefs and practices.

Lee, quoted above, spoke like a person in bondage just because her husband did not embrace Christianity. In her testimony, she even vowed that she would not marry her husband given another chance to live anew. She said, "Given another chance, I would want to live again from the beginning. I would marry late and I would marry someone else" (personal interview 7th April 2012). Religion is an integral part in the lives of people. For the case of Lee, Christianity became part of her life in her formative age. Despite the opposition from her father, she still fought for the right to worship. Abandoning what she considered as a treasure in her life proved to be torturous to her.

Han Kyung Chun, who was about 70 years old when I interviewed her and a Christian, narrated the challenges she faced because of her faith. She said she was abused by her husband and his family for insisting on going to church against their wishes since they did not proclaim any religion. She got married in 1973 and since it was an arranged marriage she did not know her husband before the marriage and neither was she aware that her religious background would cause her untold pain. Chun recalls the days when her husband would lock her outside the house and she would be forced to sleep out in the cold as punishment whenever she went to church. Despite the extreme harassment that she was exposed to, Chun still maintained her faith. It was only after her husband's death in 2002 that she was able to attend church freely. She regretted that the match-maker of her arranged marriage did not inform her that her husband and his relatives were people who could not tolerate Christianity. This case showed some of the challenges that women who got married through arranged marriages faced when they

encountered different religious and socio-cultural practices in their new homes. There were some things that the match-makers never revealed to the partners. Furthermore, it also showed that the women did not have any bargaining power in the relationship with their husbands. However, although these cases may not necessarily be representative of the relations between the different faiths that exist in the Korean society, they are still an indicator of the challenges that rapid urbanization and modernization pose for different people.

Through the Confucian rituals, the blood knot among family members is strengthened and cemented. Suzanne Han in *Notes on Things Korean* observes as follows:

The Confucian rituals or ceremonies through which Koreans pay homage to their ancestors (*chosang*) are collectively known as *chesa*. The rites are an integral part of the Korean ethos which emphasizes a vertical order from the eldest down to the youngest including the dead down to the descendants. The rites are a reaffirmation of blood kinship between the living and the dead through which family ties are strengthened among the living. (1995:19)

Confucianism remains a strong pillar of Koreans' existence but this has not stopped Christianity from spreading steadily among the people. Cho Jun Hyung, an assistant pastor in the Methodist Church in Korea, narrated that the congregation in his church has continued to grow and that they have not faced resistance or hostility.

Concerns about Marriage

Kab Sook Kang observed that young people were reluctant to marry these days. She stated, "Young people nowadays have different marriage rituals. Also, many people don't get married at all. Again, now females have to provide more than jewelry and they have to spend more money on the weddings" (personal interview 16th April 2012). Kang revealed that marriage, which was an important institution in the Korean culture, was losing its significance. With more freedoms that come with education, more young people are opting to stay single. The usual arranged marriages have been fought over time and the custom has thus faded.

Sook Ja Lee, 71 years old and lived in Seoul when interviewed, recalled that in the past years marriage was mostly arranged, “Marriage in those days was mostly arranged. I moved from my hometown and got married in another town. I was introduced to my husband. At the time, he was working at a rice processing place and could handle the rice-processing machine very well” (personal interview 16th April 2012). Lee showed that the Koreans did not have a problem with arranged marriages. The connectors only recommended a young man to a young woman. In the case of Lee, she too was attracted to the man she was introduced to. She admired his expertise in handling the rice-processing machine; coupled with the praises of the man by her connector, Lee got married.

When the term ‘arranged marriage’ is mentioned in Africa, it often conjures images of elderly men conversing in whispers, discussing the bride-price of a girl who would probably be an adolescent. When a herd of cattle finally arrives in the homestead, the young girl would be obliged to go to the home of a man, who in some cases is older than her father, as a wife in some cases against her wish. On the other hand, arranged marriage in the Korean society involves introducing young people and letting them decide if they can stay together. Since the connector must be a person who is trustworthy and reliable, their word is believed. The most important aspects in the union are the values and morals upheld by both partners who are ready for marriage. This explains why arranged marriages in the Korean society were often successful.

Byung Soon Choi who was about 90 years old when I interviewed her and who was raised in an orphanage gives another side of marriage in the days when she was young. Choi was taken up by an orphanage to be saved from an abusive father. She recalled that her father had a second wife and innumerable concubines. Choi says, “My father had a second wife and many concubines. My father kept beating my mother. The second wife had eight children and we didn’t like each other” (personal interview 16th April 2012). Choi identifies with the turbulence that comes with polygamy. Apart from wife battering, there is mistrust and hatred among step-brothers and step-sisters. Despite Choi’s parents being alive, she found a home in an orphanage because ‘home’ was most unwelcome. In the few words that Choi used to recall her troubled childhood, she revealed the fact that polygamy adversely affects marriage and eventually makes children and partners who can no longer tolerate the humiliations that come with it fugitives.

Kab Sook Kang, who was 70 years old when we talked, had an arranged marriage. She says that parents used to rely on the word of the connector to decide if their child should marry someone else. Kang remarked, “I didn’t see my husband at all before we got married. This was normal at the time” (personal interview 16th April 2012). Kang said that arranged marriages are still there in Korea. The case for Kang brings to the fore one complexity of arranged marriages – marrying a stranger. When Kang admitted that she did not know anything about her husband before she married him, it appears as if she was entering a dark room with blinds on. It is just by luck that she lived a good life with her marriage partner.

Won Soon Lee, aged about 60 years old and was born in the mountainous area of Gyeonggi-do Province, says she got married at the age of 20 when she was working in a company. Her marriage was based on love. However, she says she never experienced happiness in her marriage. She regretted that she married early and also married the wrong person. According to Lee, divorce is the best solution to troubled relationships. She says divorce was culturally condemned in the past days in the Korean society but it is acceptable today.

Conclusion

The *Panos Oral Testimony Programme* states that:

One key value of oral testimony in development is that it can amplify the voices of those whose economic, social and/or educational position has excluded them from the circles of influence and power. Many so-called ‘ordinary people’ rarely have the opportunity to speak out and contribute to development decisions and change, yet often have much to offer based on first-hand experience of living and working in marginal environments. (1999:2).

Through the oral testimonies of the people of South Korea, we are able to understand that this Asian country, which prides itself as the ‘soul of Asia’ has a life that is characterized by innumerable challenges but is also filled with immense hope. Rapid urbanization has led to many people becoming homeless as land rates and rents rise sharply. With thousands of people finding shelter in the tunnels of a train station, one notes the side effects of urbanization and

industrialization. The history of war and colonialism also cuts across the memories of the people of Korea. The Korean society, which was initially dominated by Buddhism, is gradually embracing Christianity.

Marriage and family is a very central aspect of the Korean community. While arranged marriages were the norm in the early days, this has changed and Koreans choose their marriage partners today. The prevalence of broken families has steadily increased and the citizens are quick to blame it on the Western influence, especially American pop culture.

In the early days most women did not go to school and therefore the current generation of older women is illiterate. Consequently, these women are largely housewives who depend on their husbands for financial support. Some are taking advantage of the government policy of education for the elderly to learn how to read and write. Thus there are today many Korean women who have attained high academic qualifications and are serving the country in various capacities. This has meant that dependency has reduced and families have better quality of life.

Focusing on testimonies collected from the people of Korea, this paper has tried to show that personal testimonies are a rich source of information on a place or a culture. The oral testimonies of the people of Seoul and surrounding areas offer great insights into the people, history and culture of South Korea. In addition, the people's narratives offer an alternative to the recorded or official history of these people.

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