

The Changing Seasons: Reflections of a Graduate Student in Korea

Kim Harold T. PEJI

*Master's Student, Graduate School of International Studies
Seoul National University
kimharoldpeji@gmail.com*

How to live in a first world country always made me wonder. The internet somehow gives us a glimpse, but experiencing it firsthand is entirely different. I have traveled to a handful of countries for quick trips, however, when I got to experience living away from home for a long time, I realized that those sojourns, as respite, only contribute to raising one's cultural awareness. Having weekend trips overseas might be entertaining, sometimes enlightening, but insufficient to fully understand the culture of a particular society. In my experience, one has to spend a significant amount of time immersed in a culture to have a profound understanding of it—at least six months to a year. Living in South Korea as a graduate student for more than a year now has allowed me to truly understand their rich history, culture, and people. They continuously impart lessons and evoke reflections applicable in my academic, personal, and professional life. My memories with South Korea can best be summarized and represented by its changing seasons—from autumn, winter, spring, to summer.



Figure 1: Changing Seasons (Autumn, Winter, Spring, and Summer in Korea)

Autumn: The Modern and Vibrant South Korea

Autumn, starting in September until November, is absolutely my favorite season. Every scenery appears to be magical and picture-perfect. Whenever people ask me when the best season is to explore South Korea, autumn is always my answer. There is something about this season that brings feelings of openness, maybe because I started my studies at the Seoul National University during the fall semester, or maybe the autumn foliage simply excites me.

Autumn symbolizes abundance, prosperity, and wealth. South Korea is the fourth largest economy in Asia and 11th in the world (Yonhap 2021). Their transition from being a recipient of official development assistance (ODA) to becoming a significant donor to developing countries is a remarkable feat. The global community has recognized the country's growth as an exemplary model for economic and social development. This also paved the way for South Korea to become a key player in global

affairs, thus, cultivating middle power diplomacy in its foreign policies and implementing development cooperation, not to mention their continued use of *Hallyu* (한류) or the Korean wave (K-pop, K-drama, etc.) as soft power.

As a huge fan of K-drama and K-pop, living in Korea helped me realize that Filipinos can easily adapt or blend in with other cultures. Unlike my colleagues who are not of Asian descent, I did not have to make any major adjustments to acclimate to the Korean culture. Perhaps Korea's modern and vibrant culture has already influenced the Filipinos' way of life—in music, fashion, cosmetics, food, and even language. Filipinos have become interested in learning *Hangeul* (한글), the Korean alphabet system. Who in the Philippines is not familiar with *annyeonghaseyo* (안녕하세요; meaning “hello”) and *oppa* (오빠; meaning “older brother”)? In 2022, the country landed fourth among countries that tweet most about K-content according to Twitter Philippines' report (Ferreras 2022). Korean culture is, in a way, embedded in Philippine society—as we embrace their trends and culture.

Experiencing autumn is like living in a fairytale. Everything seems to be progressing, colorful, and dreamy. The experience has elated me to look forward to what's in store for me in the next seasons.

Winter: The Cold and Conservative South Korea

Coming from a country which only has the dry and wet seasons, my first snow experience was memorable. I will never forget seeing snowflakes greeting my windowpane while attending my online classes. During South Korea's winter season from December to February, I documented every moment of braving the cold and playing in the snow. How I wish the Philippines also experienced a snowy Christmas!

Winter symbolizes sadness and introspection. My first Christmas in South Korea, away from home, was lonely. Christmas is my favorite holiday and I have always looked forward to celebrating it with my family. Unlike Filipinos, South Koreans are not big on the holiday. Although they are the only East Asian country where Christmas Day is a national holiday, Koreans

celebrate it quite differently. They do not travel back to their hometowns and spend time with their families. Instead, they spend it with their significant others—a holiday for couples like Valentine’s day. The atmosphere on the streets is not as festive as in the Philippines.

The cold season also reminds me of the unexpected sides of Korea. In comparison to what I have seen in most K-drama series that Koreans were very warm, I have noticed that they are generally reserved. Although I have not experienced any form of discrimination, some of my African friends experienced otherwise. In 2019, the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, an independent advocacy institution that promotes the protection of human rights, conducted a survey as a response to the concerns of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination about the rise of racial discrimination and xenophobia in the country. Results showed that about 45 percent of the respondents said that discrimination based on race exists, and more than 24 percent said that discrimination based on skin color still occurs (NHRCK 2020). Like in many other countries, the issue is prevalent within South Korean society.

Furthermore, the country remains to be conservative. Homosexuality is still a taboo; transgender people and sexual minorities are unrecognized. Advancing gender equality in South Korea is still a gargantuan task as traditional and patriarchal ideologies persist within the society.

Spring: The Ppalli-ppalli Culture

Spring lasts from March until May. This season sparks joy and brings ephemeral beauty as the *maehwa* (매화) or the plum blossoms signal the beginning of spring. The cherry blossom trees, one of the spectacular and captivating sights in South Korean springtime, are always teeming with crowds.

The season is also perfect for traveling to the countryside. I got the chance to visit different provinces in the southern region, and found that the unexplored and underrated wonders in South Korea were the most delightful. The country is bestowed with tranquil scenery and impressive

natural beauty that can be conveniently explored, especially by foreigners, because of available and accessible tours. Tourism services are subsidized by the government, hence, tour agencies require little to no fees. During the tours, our guides would always say “*ppalli ppalli*” (빨리 빨리), which means “quickly” or “hurry up” whenever we need to walk fast!

Like their “*ppalli ppalli*” culture, what I also like about this country is that almost everything is quick, efficient, and convenient—from fast internet connection to the reliable public transportation. Of the many countries that I visited, I can say that Seoul’s Metropolitan Subway is one of the most efficient public transportation systems. It is widely known as one of the best in the world. One can easily go from one place to another because every place seems to be well-connected. Through a mobile application, one can check the bus and subway routes complete with directions and schedules of arrivals and departures. A part of me remains hopeful that one day, the Philippines can also have this system of public transportation. Definitely, I will miss the convenience of their public transportation as well as the safety and security of travel.

Spring symbolizes transformation, perseverance, and resilience. In my course of stay in South Korea, I also had the chance to hike Mount Gwanak and Baegundae, the highest peaks of Mount Bukhan, the tallest mountain in Seoul. I was surprised to see that Koreans, especially *ajumma* (아줌마) or middle-aged women and *ahjussi* (아저씨) or middle-aged men, enjoy hiking with their full gears on. Geographically, about 70 percent of Korea’s territory is mountainous. For this reason, it is a popular past time with about one-in-three South Koreans going hiking more than once a month (Harlan 2014). I am still astonished how the older generation, despite their age, still enjoy it. As for me, I see it as a symbol of their strength and resilience. Whenever I see them hiking or even just exercising using the outdoor fitness facilities installed in most parks, I am encouraged to stay fit and have an active lifestyle.

Summer: The Burning Issues

Summer, unlike the other seasons, is hot and humid and starts from June until August. If one happens to visit the country during this sultry, at times, rainy weather, indoor activities are highly recommended. The country offers a wide array of indoor tourist attractions and activities such as visiting museums, attending art exhibitions, shopping in the popular Gangnam district, trying gastronomic tours, or even immersing oneself with unique and trendy coffee shops. For instance, a visit to South Korea's National Museum serves as a great escape from the hot weather and provides a great cultural experience, allowing its visitors into its digital galleries for free.

Hot as the summer season, South Korea has a lot burning or pressing issues that need to be addressed. In 2021, the country held the world record for lowest fertility rate. It even reached the population death cross, where the country recorded more deaths than births, for the first time in 2020. South Korea has the fastest ageing population among the member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (Bae and Yeung 2022). This demographic decline is indeed worrisome and if not addressed, it can eventually impact the country's sustainable development.

Gender stratification, specifically in terms of wages between women and men, is another pressing concern. Statistics from Korea's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family showed that women earned 31.4 percent less than men on the average in 2021 (Im 2022). In the 2022 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap report which measures a country's efforts in closing gender disparities in politics, economy, health, and education, Korea ranked 99th out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum 2022). This shows that the country needs to create a more empowering environment especially for women to facilitate the promotion of gender equality.

Summer is my least favorite season but somehow, this represents joy and optimism. My whole experience of living in the country was remarkable and full of positivity. Learning from the best university that offers truly world-class education, meeting people from diverse backgrounds, and being able to know myself better make this a life-enriching and life-changing experience.

The changing seasons from autumn, winter, spring to summer propelled me to understand deeply their culture and to reflect on different social, economic, and political issues that we should address as part of the global community. Staying in Korea—for more than a year now—has widened my worldview and has deepened my sense of cultural awareness and cultural competence. Moreover, it made me ponder on the culture we have, promote, and nurture as Filipinos. My fruitful stay has provided me not just a glimpse but a complete picture of South Korea—the picturesque and even those that are not usually portrayed in mainstream media or in any of the most sought-after K-drama series. For sure, I will bring all these memories back home especially the best seasons of my worthwhile journey.

About the Author

Kim Harold T. Peji is a graduate student at the Seoul National University - Graduate School of International Studies (SNU-GSIS) under its Development Cooperation Policy Program. He is a graduate scholar of the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). The views and opinions presented in this paper do not represent the views and opinions of SNU-GSIS and KOICA.

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