

10 Korean habits we should all adopt

Ondol

Living in an older Korean apartment with poor insulation might seem like you're destined to live like a human popsicle during the winter. Then I discovered *ondol* heating, which means heat radiates from the floor. Trust me, there is nothing more welcoming after walking outside than parking your butt onto a cushion and a warm floor as you enjoy your *samgyeopsal* (grilled pork belly) with friends.

"Membership training" (M.T.)

My Korean co-teachers and colleagues were naturally curious about this *waygukin* (foreigner). First thing on the work agenda? A 1-2 day outing where work is not discussed so much as the answers to these questions: 1) Are you married? 2) What is your blood type? 3) How old are you? 4) Do you like *kimchi*? 5) How much can you drink? It's not as if Koreans are so much nosy as they are curious about how to "address" you in daily interactions. This "M.T." also works for Koreans when in a new environment. Take freshmen new to a university – there's M.T. scheduled before any classwork. Simply put, it's much easier to interact with new colleagues and friends after drinking copious amounts of *soju* and telling funny stories about a shared experience.

Baseball b.y.o....everything

My husband was quick to list this reason. He loved going to the local Korean baseball games, especially when the tickets are much more affordable than a pilgrimage to Fenway Park. Not only is going to a Korean baseball game an experience by itself, but think about it: when was the last time you were able to bring your own cooler to stash your own food and drinks? Yeah, thought so. Not only are games a cultural experience with entertainment beyond the actual game (free noisemakers to cheer on the local team), but bringing your own food and drinks are *allowed*. Whatever you can fit, stash, or carry, no one will inspect your cooler...unless s/he wants a sample.

Yo-chul a.k.a. the “bing-bong” (call) button

Have you ever felt bad for that busy waitress and hated to bother her? Ever felt like your server was ignoring you? Korea has found the ultimate solution: the *yo-chul* or “bing-bong” button, a term based on the sound you hear when you press it. Think of this as the restaurant equivalent of calling over a flight attendant, but with nicer customer service. Just press the button found at the end of your table. The server will come to your beck and call and ask how s/he can help you. It’s also more polite than yelling the Korean equivalent of *Yo-gi-oh!* (“Come here!”) or the French version of *Garçon!* (“Boy!”), and it’s an efficient way to get in, eat your food, ask for the bill, and leave. We truly missed these buttons once we came back to America after feeling like we had to “flag down” servers.

”Deli-style” pick a number

Similar to Sweden’s *nummerlapp* (numbering system), Koreans take a number for government offices, banking, hospitals, and even at the movies. It makes the mundane task of local errands a lot more efficient – particularly if you’re going to the immigration office for your Alien Registration Card (ARC), which acts as your foreigner identification card. As soon as you arrive, pick a number. It may even tell how many people are in front of you. When your number shows up on the attendant’s screen, you’re up. Quick, simple, and genius. Just make sure you’re ready when your number’s called or risk getting evil stares from the locals.

“1 + 1”

Toothpaste and tampons? Milk and a toilet brush? Welcome to Korea’s wonderful way of saving at their many supermarket chains and big box stores, where the strangest combination of items are packaged together in hopes that you’ll think of them the next time you go shopping. This is similar to the concept of “buy one get one free,” except that the two items are completely unrelated. Either way, it’s a brilliant marketing scheme for making sure you’re always fully stocked.

“Service”

To a Korean, “service” is not like fixing your car’s transmission or getting your oil changed. This is a friendly way of saying “it’s on the house” for no apparent reason than the Korean sense of goodwill – especially as a *waygukin* (“foreigner”). Let’s say you’re a regular at the neighborhood *Kimbap Sarang* and you look a little overwhelmed from digesting cultural shock. Here’s an extra *kimbap* for the road. Going to the pharmacy? Here’s some yogurt – just because. Speaking (survival) Korean? *Woah!!!* The locals will be so impressed that you might just get handed a little freebie in return for your “fluent” Korean.

Boxed gift sets for special occasions

You won’t ever think about Spam the same way again once you’ve lived in Korea. Discovered during the Korean War, this canned meat served as an affordable food option and as a key ingredient in *Budae-jjigae* (“Army Stew”). So, when it’s time for *Chuseok* (known as Korea’s version of Thanksgiving), don’t forget to pick up your boxed gift sets to make a good impression on any Korean. Just don’t be surprised or offended if your boxed set is a 12-pack of toothpaste – complete with mouthwash.

Pepero day

If there ever was a genius way to market chocolate as its own national holiday, Korea’s *Pepero* Day is it. *Lotte*, a Korean conglomerate, manufactured the November 11th holiday to promote their chocolate-covered pretzel sticks. Why November 11th? The pretzel sticks can be lined up to look like the number 11. For chocolate lovers, it’s a dream come true. *Pepero* packages are thoughtfully decorated and worthy of a Pinterest page.

Bank transfers

This type of transaction is the simplest way of doing business in Korea. Instead of mailing monthly utility payments or trying to go online in Korean websites to shop, simply find out the bank the vendor’s going by and their wire transfer number. Yes, you may be skeptical of doing this transaction in banks and ATMs in America, but transfers are an extremely common practice in Korea. Say you’re a runner and want to

register for a race. Once you feel comfortable (and confident enough) to conduct a transaction via a Korean ATM, you can pay for this easily – and different banks don't rob you on fees.

Meal deliveries by scooter

Remember Domino's pledge of "30 minutes or less" to deliver your pizza? Well, food delivery gets a lot classier in Korea – complete with silverware, actual plates and bowls. Once you've finished your *Gamja-tang* ("spicy pork bone soup") is done, leave your grill, metal soup pot, soup ingredients, serving dishes, spoons and metal chopsticks at the door with the accompanying food tray. The delivery man somehow manages to remember the route and will come back to return your tray, dishes, and silverware to the restaurant.