

Back-to-Back School

This past school year in North Carolina was unusual in that we had several days off for snow. We are used to the occasional hurricane-related school cancellation, but this year we had extra days off. To make up all the missed days, students had to go to school on Saturday. The complaints could be heard across the entire county. Imagine the horror of it, the end of the world.

As they were grumbling, I remembered back to the kids in Korea. The competitive spirit is developed very early over there. The Korean school system was very different from what I knew growing up.

The Korean school year begins at the beginning of the year. "Why does the American school year begin around September?" my Korean students asked me. All of a sudden, it did not make sense to me either.

One of the first things I noticed was the lack of yellow school busses. School children seemed to be finding their own ways to school using the city busses and walking. Unlike my school when I grew up, we went to the school nearest to us. Every Korean school had a ranking—the best, second best and so on. A student would go to a school according to how they performed on a placement test. If you tested well and attended the best school, your job was to hold your position because everyone else at a lower ranked school wanted your spot. If you were at any school besides the best, your job was to study hard and try to move up next year.

At the beginning of the school day, you could see the children outside their school in nice straight lines, performing Tae Kwon Do in unison for the morning warm exercise. The hours of the school day seemed to be about the same as ours. But the big difference was after school let out.

The afternoons and evenings were for attending schools of specialized study. This extra schooling was geared toward increasing performance on the yearly placement tests. The amount and the level of your extra training highly depended upon how much money your parents had. All the students I knew attended several of these hog-wons or schools five days a week. Most children spent time at an English school, a math school, a few hours at a Tae Kwon Do school and a music school. Then off to the library to study and do homework. I would see the kids on their way home late in the evening when I was coming home from work. I would teach ESL class until 10 p.m. Monday through Friday, so these kids must have been getting home between 10 and 10:30. Korean kids loved going to school on Saturday, it was considered an easy day, they only had to attend the day of regular school, as most hog-wons were not open on the weekend.

Now remember the goal was to constantly move up through the ranking of schools. In order to do this, some of the students were attending schools far away from their homes. I knew of several pre-teen students that lived near their schools during the school week and would only travel home Saturday afternoon to help out their families. Students would rent a room from a dormitory or from a

family near their school. The rooms were rented out from 10 p.m. at night until 8 a.m. During the other hours, the rental space was part of the host family's home.

This competition for ranking began early and became fiercer through middle school and high school—the better the high school, the better chance of getting into a better university.

While in Korea, I was able to witness the audition process for admission into the Hapkido program at a martial arts university. Over a 110 applicants were applying for entry into the university's Hapkido program (the TKD and Judo programs were much larger). The panel of judges looked very serious and intimidating. I recognized one judge from the Kukkiwon, and the others were professors. The audition was being televised. For several hours, the applicants were ordered through kicks, break falls, flips, sweeps, takedowns and demo-style self-defense techniques. Every single one of these applicants was incredibly skilled. In the end, only nine were accepted into the program. Devastation swept across those who did not make it. As one of the students explained to me, he had trained his entire life to get into the number one school, which would ensure his success in his field. Now that he had failed, there were only two choices—his parents could hire a better coach so he could spend the next year training to try auditions again the following year, or he could give up and settle for whatever job he could find. This man was disappointed, and felt he was a disappointment to his family. They had sacrificed so much to be able to afford him good instructors and schools, but it just wasn't good enough.

From very early on, their lives seem to be mapped out for them. Their career opportunities dependent upon the level of education they received. I was impressed by my students who constantly continued their competitive studies, knowing they were destined to achieve only the level they could afford.

"Lucky American," I was called more than once. "The land of opportunity...where one truly can exceed the life they were born into."



East Meets West By Master Rondy

Master Rondy is a sixth-degree black belt in WTF Taekwondo, a fourth-degree in Hapkido and a second-degree in Kickboxing. She was the only non-Asian member of the Korean Tigers Professional Martial Arts Team, spending two years in Korea, living in Seoul and YongIn. Master Rondy successfully blends the cultures of a Korean teaching staff and an American management staff for her 24,000 square foot superschool located in Cary, North Carolina. For more information visit whitetigertkd.com.