South Korea modern, vibrant

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When you reveal you are going to Korea, you will be questioned. People will come out of the woodwork. Strangers will smirk. Friends will warn you about dirt and danger. Loved ones will cry. At least this is what happened to me when I was about to leave my hometown of Scranton about a month and half ago.

As I finished my time at the University of Scranton, I would often read about Korea in the local and national news, and it seemed to be on the mind of many Americans. These were not pleasant thoughts; they were bitter concerns about the threatening rhetoric of North Korea.

Well, North Korea's vehement rhetoric has cooled, and many people in the United States have forgotten about this peninsula in the Pacific.

What about North Korea's southern brother? Ask an American about South Korea. He or she might mention the Korean War, where we came to the aid of a needy people. At least this is what a history book might tell us. However, in the eyes of many Koreans, Americans were just fighting a war against the USSR on Korean soil, using Korean soldiers.

Though the Korean War was an important marker in Korean history, Americans need to remember what South Korea has become.

I live in Anyang, a city 40 minutes from Seoul. As I walk on the sidewalk, I can see a multilane highway filled with taxis and cars with brands of Kia and Hyundai. South Korean cars have become well known in the states, and the sales of Korean-made automobiles rival that of Japanese-made automobiles.

I work in a hakwon, a private school where schoolchildren can practice their English by night. In the Korean education system, students have to study, often for 12 hours a day. However, Korean children are just like American children; they love playing games and not always studying.

My hakwon is on a street where there are electric signs in Korean and English. There are fast-food burger joints as well as gimbap stands.

Though western culture has definitely left its mark on the country, something remains which is specifically Korean. With palaces of painted wood and mountains of green forest, there is a history here. The colonization by the Japanese could not destroy it, nor could the invasion of foreign enemies eliminate it. In the wake of Korea's so-called progress of skyscrapers and industry, the echo of history rings true.

I heard it in the countryside, when I was invited to eat with a farming couple and their church's congregation. They ate grilled pork, hot peppers and sesame leaves. There were wild blackberries and fresh potatoes. The rains came, and we sat and talked.

South Korea is a country full of businessmen and businesswomen, parents and children, rich and poor. So next time you see a headline about Korea, remember it represents not just a war or an industry, but a vibrant and diverse people.