

This Station is Sinchon Station. (이번역은 신촌역. 신축역입니다.)

A year before writing this capstone, I flew to South Korea as a curious, enthusiastic exchange student in February 2023. My objective was to study abroad during university and seeing that it would fulfill a requirement for a Certificate in International Learning, it was a one-of-a-kind opportunity. Before my exchange, I was familiar with Korean culture. I spent three semesters and my free time immersing myself in the language through study, absorbing different kinds of media to learn the ins and outs of their history and social structures. I had memorable moments with Korean visiting students, knowing that I could learn from them and that they could learn from me as our positions would switch within a few months. The unique perspectives of South Korean culture fascinated me. Discovering distinct viewpoints on life scratched an itch in my brain and propelled me to uncover more. Meanwhile, I felt a great sense of connection through similarities. Despite living on opposite sides of the globe, commonalities reflect human nature. I entered my exchange with little to no expectations, just a feeling of wanderlust. Little did I know then that one ordinary station would encompass the excitement, fears, and transformation my journey was waiting for me to experience.

I remember conversing with friends at Yonsei University about whether one preferred the bus or subway. Without hesitation, I chose the subway. Traversing every corner of Seoul was my goal, and the subway was the best way to sift through what the city had to offer. Some friends detested the hustle and bustle of subways, confusing pedways, and rush hours. However, those aspects define Korean culture to me. The subway was a hub for perceiving life in Seoul, and the associated etiquette reflected their social structure. I learned about Korean culture through the rides and people-watching, all with the comfort of music running through my headphones. My favourite was Line 2—the green line—because it circled Seoul. Every cart had a diverse range of

people, assisting the children, university students, office workers, and the elders who depended on the subway to reach their destination. It was interesting to see the smaller cultural groups fill up the carts as they made their way home from their stomping grounds. Hongdae (홍대) was the spot for the artsy, emerging youth. Jamsil (잠실) for the date goers. Gangnam (강남) for the suited-up workers and shopaholics. “This station is Sinchon station. Sinchon station. The doors are on your left.” The little jingle rings, and the automated voice cues me to stand up and scooch through the crowd before the subway stops—knowing how fast the door closes. Sinchon (신촌) station, in particular, was the final stop for many university students. It was also my final stop. Upon leaving the station, I walked through the stores and restaurants to the front gates of Yonsei University, then the unbearable hill that my friends and I would alter our entire route to avoid climbing on our way back to the dormitories.

Initially, Sinchon area felt like a maze. I tested positive for COVID-19 the minute I landed in the dorms. While a week was taken away for me to quarantine, other exchange students filled the streets, learning the fingerprints of the youth-filled area. I was antsy to leave my room and explore. Trapped in a dorm, it felt like I had never left Edmonton. However, I took only a short time to accept the area as my temporary home. Soon, I associated areas I encountered with memories: the claw machines in the arcade that my friends and I tirelessly played with to win a Toothless doll, the go-to karaoke rooms on the second floor after barbecue and drinks with club members, the spicy noodles that I would fill with too much meat, and, of course, the giant red tube with a mirror that witnessed every group photo. The high of being in a different country and immersed in a new culture felt endless. Constantly learning freshened me up and gave me the energy to wake up and tackle the day. Then, at the end of every adventure across Seoul and

throughout South Korea, the voice telling me that it was Sinchon station gave me a sense of comfort, telling me it was time to go home and rest.

The semester ended four months later, and some friends flew back home. My dorm housing expired, and I moved into an apartment within a residential area in Seoul for the last month of my trip. Transitioning from the bustling environment and student life to a quieter lifestyle pushed me into a period of introspection and reflection on my experiences. After the excitement dwindled and the rose-coloured glasses had fallen, I was forced to confront the practicalities and challenges of everyday life within this unfamiliar yet familiar environment. I remember writing in my little green diary: what am I searching for here, and why do I still feel empty? I have learned and explored so much, yet why does this feeling of incompleteness and fragmentation sit at the bottom of my core? The unfamiliarity of my surroundings seeped in, pulling out a sense of loneliness that had always lurked beneath the surface. My extroverted nature toned down and tucked itself away. I grappled with the complexities of cultural integration, realizing the disparity between my Filipino-Canadian identity and Korean culture. Despite knowing much and expecting little, I realized that bridging the gap between cultures is not always straightforward. I realized that the true challenge in intercultural experiences emerges when the sun sets and you are forced to navigate it alone. Beauty standards, social etiquette, discrimination, language barrier—I had little to no support system to tackle difficult interactions. I was nervous about visiting clinics due to worry they would not understand my issues. I avoided speaking for fear of coming off as disrespectful. I did my best to camouflage myself within the sea of people. I thrive in independence and enjoy solitude and the freedom to spend alone. Still, I once again felt unfamiliar with the streets I made memories in.

“This station is Sinchon station. Sinchon station. The doors are on your left.” I hop off the subway walking up to the lobby. The rush of people running to their next schedule, the smell of fresh rice cakes and kimbap, and the beeping of transportation cards tapping in and out. A setting I had become so accustomed to over the past few months suddenly pungent with estrangement and loneliness. The same song I had listened to while on the station only a short time ago simultaneously sounded new and nostalgic. Korean culture is known to be fast-paced. Although I enjoy moving quickly, I never realized how badly I needed to slow down my thoughts—allowing myself to absorb and simmer in my experiences. The culture shock that forgot me tackled me all at once at the leg of my trip—a juxtaposition of familiarity and alienation. As the hustle and bustle of the station continued, I stood there idle, people-watching as I did before. My loneliness transformed from isolation to an appreciation for my courage to tread unknown grounds and uncertainty. Most importantly, I basked in the solace stemming from the bonds I shared in Korea and with those waiting for me back home. I realized the power of cultural exploration and distance’s role in highlighting the connections that serve as anchors throughout difficult times. I broadened my horizons and ability to understand the world but also discovered the ethereal significance of the heartfelt relationships that shaped and filled my short journey in South Korea and my entire timeline. I also grew to experience the power of time—its ability to facilitate adaptation, understanding, and connection across cultural boundaries. Whether brief or prolonged, encounters catalyze self-transformation and a sense of attunement to the world around us. The impact of time unfolds and is not realized until the experience has ended, resulting in a toolbox of lessons learned and insights that influence future attitudes and interactions.

Upon returning to Edmonton, I sat patiently in a room for Intercultural Communication Training. Although attending the session before my trip seemed counterintuitive, it was a moment of reflection on my growth. It allowed me to connect with others who shared or were about to embark on similar experiences, affirming that I was not alone in my journey of self-discovery and cultural immersion. While feelings of loneliness crowded me at Sinchon station, I realized someone somewhere shared a piece of my heart. Despite its ebb and flow, I would never go back in time and redo my CIL experiences. The Certificate in International Learning planted the seeds of curiosity I needed to witness and immerse myself in a culture that would serve as my mentor. As I continue to navigate the complexities of cultural exchange, I draw strength from the experiences and connections I cultivated over a few months. Upon graduation, I raise the question: which stop should I get off next?