

Subject: Letter from Seoul

Date: Saturday 23 October 1999 01:31

Rather than write lots of letters saying the same, I thought I'd copy and circulate selected extracts from e-mails to Ali. Obviously I'll remove any unpleasantly romantic or offensive bits, but some things will probably make less sense to some than others, is that OK? Let me know



if you want striking from my list, because I'm filling your hard disk.....

Both days here have been cloudy, but quite warm, with the sun nearly breaking through at times. The colour is different somehow, with a general greyness, but bright colours seem more vivid. It almost feels like a stage designer has planned the colour scheme - you know how they chose one palette, and all the colours come from it. It's a kind of charcoal grey/dark but pastel blue palette, with dusty colours. I'm glad you're coming, because I don't think I can do it justice really....

[You see that's what I meant, because none of you are coming, are you?!].

Each day the twilight has been the really striking time, and yesterday, I was coming home in it, and as I went the lights showed brighter. There is a fifteen minute walk from the University to the Subway, and at the beginning it was like a late evening Mediterranean scene, with little ramshackle roads and shops, but then as I got to the station, under huge concrete flyovers, there was a fantastic market, with spotlights on the stalls, bright fruit, and all kinds of weird very oriental food. The trees, of which there are loads round the university, aren't as far gone as in Birmingham, but just turning. Today is Saturday, and among other things I'm going to find some parks.

So, only just beginning but already a roller-coaster. At the airport, there is a form to fill in before the passport check, and another form before customs. With the passport form you have to wait in a queue, and there is a mark on the floor, and a nice Korean man with a gun tells people off if they move before being asked! I was very excited about arriving, in a knackered sort of way, but it wasn't unbridled joy at this point!

All the systems actually seem to work very well - there was no horrendous delay, and the luggage all came out very quickly. There are a lot of people on a Jumbo. You realise that at Heathrow, as the lounge next to the plane fills up. That's why it's good to have a babe in arms.

So I came through customs without trouble; 'sonsaengnim' - Teacher - they called me. Then there was a vast line of people meeting people, lots of them with signs. I walked up and down it twice, panicked a little at the thought of not finding my 'short-haired male' amongst an estimated 12 million inhabitants of the airport, and was very glad when one of the throng emerged, bowing insanely at me - 'Wilson sonsaengnim'? Immediately lost all memory of which hand to shake with to avoid terminal shame, and just instinctively behaved all hugh grantly, with kind of mumbles and shrugs. 'JeongHwan Oh?' Nod nod, grab at my trolley to do everything for me. 'Oppicer' he said, and took me to a very smartly dressed twenty something, with mobile, who bowed a little less, and was clearly going to take us. I just followed [this happens a lot]. We seemed to agree on a compromise where we both pulled/pushed my trolley, not always in the same direction but seemed satisfactory. I couldn't quite work out the status, but the 'Officer' is in fact JeongHwan's superior. They are both on the administrative side at the University. It was his car.

Apart from the light as mentioned, the drive into Seoul was a little anonymous. Big wide road full of terrifying driving, lots of concrete to the side, and a very nasty industrial smell, which I immediately assumed would be ever-present throughout Korea, but was probably rather local. The signs, including lit up ones, were all in Korean, of course. Perhaps unsurprising, but they make everything look very foreign. I was tired, and the two in the front talked to each other, but I thought, I can't go to sleep now, this is it...the first sight of Korea... I managed a couple of very stuttering conversations with JeongHwan, ascertained that yes we were going far, no, not near university [2 hours from, he said - a fact I kept from you, and fortunately turns out to be a little pessimistic] Was hungry? Did like Korean food? Yes, yes.

The cars, even the suits, trendy glasses and mobile phones are very like western ones, and things only really got Korean in the side streets, though even there at that point I struggle to say why it looked so different. The garage mechanics in the dodgy workshops looked exactly the same as the ones in Handsworth, but they were different.

The arrival at the apartment was inauspicious. It is down a dark [by then] narrow drive, and at the end there were a menacing [not really, but to me at the time] group of staring men in the half-light. These were the builders, just finishing their day's work on constructing....guess what...my apartment. It isn't actually a new building, but either they're adding more on top, or mending the roof. Either way, there is a certain amount of builder-stuff around.

On the first floor, with a very ornate wooden door, is apartment 201, Changsong Art Villa, Sochwu-Gu. Inside is a little place to leave your shoes. Observantly, on my first arrival, I spotted two pairs already there. Aha! Someone else is here. The detective work was made easier by the volume of the singing from the closed bedroom. 'Ah, music teacher. She gone soon.' Right. A few dodgy moments here. The apartment is fine, plenty of room. A couple of problems - washing machine not plumbed in, no hot water, no phone, [all soon] and loud Korean/Italian noises with plonky piano in bedroom. Well, I can live with that, or with her....it wasn't quite what I expected, but they didn't specifically say that there would be no-one else in my apartment, and it is a crowded country, I should have realised.... It wasn't until late that night, after our meal, that Jeong explained that she just gave lessons there, and it wasn't until the next day that Young-ai explained that she would not be back, moved out for eminent visiting professor. Who? Oh me. When her room was vacated, there was the phone.

I can't really maintain this level of detail, and still get out at some point to have more experiences, so I'll have to gloss over a few things.....a quick meal, cross-legged and shoeless at a low table. Pulgogi [beef ribs] and kimchi [cabbage pickled in garlic and chilli], washed down with an interesting drink, I asked Jeong about, strange taste - 'water'.

Slept well, despite not having any sheets.....Jeong insisted I get up exactly at 7.00, set my alarm for me, so he will collect me at 8.00 to set off for the university. He arrived at 8.30..... trip to University took 70 minutes in the end..not really any worse than London for crowding, no people with poles squeezing you in, and very clean and punctual tube.

The Theatre School of the Korean National University of the Arts is set in woodland, with sculptures and exercise areas, and a lovely pond for contemplation. One thing to contemplate is that it used to be the headquarters of the feared secret police force, and was the scene of torture for many suspected North Korean spies...some taxi drivers will still not go there! They seem to have taken the irons off the walls, anyway, and it is actually very nice. Beautiful

studio theatre, good size classrooms and rehearsal rooms, and my office is brilliant. Brand new computer and printer, also table with five smart chairs for tutorials, walls lined with bookshelves, which look a little sad with the six books I've brought!



Young-ai Choi [the professor] is very nice, as are the students, whom I have now met. I also have an interpreter Yumi, who will be at all my classes. She studied at the Shakespeare Institute in Birmingham, and although early attempts to talk about the Blues proved unsuccessful, this does give her more in common with me than anyone else within 5000 miles or so! My contract turns out to be a little more substantial than envisaged, as you thought, magically extended to 22 hours a week, but no extra days, it's just they want me to do a concentrated playwriting workshop, in the evenings of two weeks. I will make sure I do that before Ali and the boys come out, and it shouldn't be too much of a problem.

Lunch in the canteen with Young-ai [rib soup and kimchi] followed by glass of hot water and tissue to wipe mouth. Session with students went very well, I thought. Strange to have interpreter, but I managed to persuade all to involve her in the class, which I think is the way to go. More about the students in some later dispatch, I expect. The afternoon was taken up by getting internet connections. A computer engineer came over and set up the e-mail address in the office [30 seconds], and on my notebook, [2 hours] Well worth it though. I can now send e-mails from anywhere in Korea, even alter my website, and pick up messages on my usual address. On Monday I have to open a bank account for them to pay my salary into, so I'll practically be a citizen.

Tonight, the students have kindly invited me to a movement piece, based on responses to the character of Hamlet, whoopee. I think I will have to watch a certain amount of stuff in Korean as I go, but I did notice Mickey Blue Eyes was on somewhere, so if I can work out where I might get some light relief.

Supper last night was tuna with mayonnaise and coffee Haagen-Dazs. Obviously I did my best to find dog-meat in the supermarket, but had to settle for that. Finding food that Eddie will eat doesn't look as if it will be a problem.

I think I'd better get up now, and go be a tourist. The hot water works, and Jeong came this morning [he lives 2 hour away!] and found the sheets. Only the washing machine to go now, and everything will be fine. I'm getting on OK with the language. I've asked the students to teach me one thing at the end of each session. Yesterday they taught me their names, and how to say 'you're welcome' . Now I can count to ten, after a slight hiccup when I paused for indignation on finding that the word for zero is the same as the word for England - I ask you. It also means flower though, so that's OK.

Even after all this, there seems loads I haven't said. Plenty of time though, isn't there.

With love

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@nuri.net>

Subject: Letter from the Seoul 2

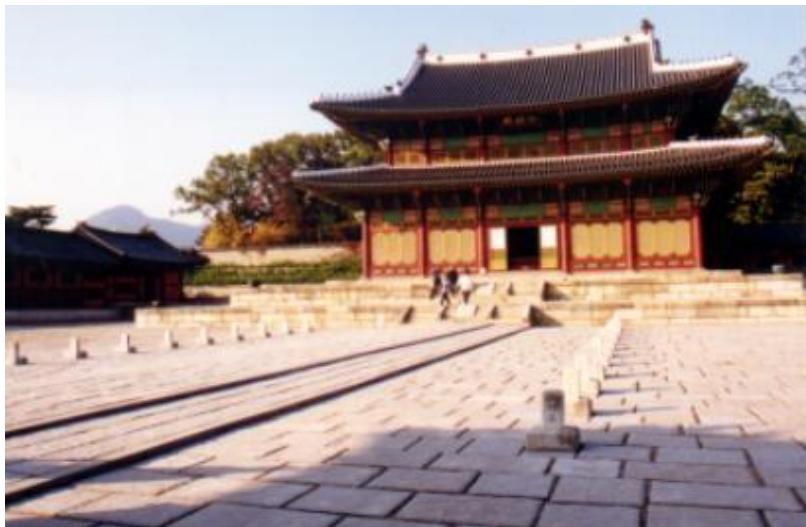
Date: Monday 25 October 1999 01:58

Hello out there

I think when I wrote before, I put down a lot of stuff summing up Seoul, the colours, and all that. At the time I had been here barely a day, and so I think it may have been premature to have arrived at a judgement on the city of 12 million Seoul souls. I got a bit over-excited, sorry. Now, however, I have been here for three days, and so now I really know what Korea is like in detail.

A few key facts. Firstly, I am the fattest person in Korea. It isn't that I have gone into a decline because of loneliness, I know I'm not that fat, it's just that everyone here is skinny. I put this down to two things. Firstly there are not many escalators in the underground, and all Koreans do taekwando, so they keep fit. Secondly, the food is fairly revolting, and so there is no incentive to overeat. I had a very strange experience on Saturday of being hungry in an incredibly packed food market, and really not being able to face anything that was on offer. This was partly because the big dead fish were all looking at me. Particularly horrible were all the lovely live little turtles, bound for soup.... Mostly though, it was because there were very sickly smells, which I just couldn't quite face.

This is my next big observation. There are very strong smells in Seoul. The big food smells are the pickled cabbage in chilli/garlic [Kimchi], the red pepper sauce, and the brown silk-worm lava soup[see what I mean?] Then there are the drains smells, which are pretty rank in places, and seem to echo and expand on the Kimchi cabbage smell [I



suppose because the population eats so much of it) and then there are the industrial smells. Quite a few people here wear face-masks, and you can see why. The eleventh most polluted city in the world says Greg [Gregory T Wilson, one of the two Americans at the university, now known as the other Professor Wilson!]

I have been a tourist for the weekend, and packed a lot in. On Saturday morning I braved the subway alone, and went in search of a tourist map. None of the streets have names here, and the buildings do not really have numbers either. People find their way around by saying something is near something else, so if you don't know where anything is you're in trouble. The best maps, it says in the guide, are at the tourist offices. Ah yes, but where are the tourist offices? The not very detailed map in the Lonely Planet was all I had to go on. On my way in what I thought was the direction of this office, I was distracted by what sounded like children singing, and decided to look. It turned out to be a student rally of some kind, protesting outside a big wooden palace. I skirted round into the palace grounds. These turned out to be very peaceful and nice, with a whole succession of palaces, all roughly alike, of the kind in The Last Emperor - huge great cloistered courtyard with raised platform at one end, and that platform has a painted and carved wooden palace. A little like a shed really, but an ornate one. Actually the whole arrangement is like some sad obsessive's approach to the concept of a garden shed. Huge garden, paved over entirely to avoid any difficult plants growing, and a

minutely manicured saddleback-roofed shed completely empty, no clutter, no tools, just one very comfy chair, or throne. That's it really. The Korean Palace. They are very beautiful and peaceful places actually, incredibly simple in some ways, and the gardens around were a sight, with trees here just beginning to lose their leaves, and lovely clear sun in watery-blue skies.

In fact, now that the sun has come out, I can see that all that stuff I said about greyness is not so true, except in the subway, where granite is the dominant material, and fluorescent light makes everyone look a little ill....still, back to the palaces. I keep putting them in plural, because after the one, I moved over the bridge to another, which on the map looked close to a place called The Secret Garden, which sounded like a nice place to go for a rest. On the way I was stopped, for the second time in fact, by an older man, just wanting to pass the time of day, 'sit my friend, where from?' 'Tourist?' I've already acquired a special, slightly humble way of saying 'No, visiting professor', safe in the knowledge of a highly satisfactory response. The 'can they really mean me, oh, come on, don't you know who I am, who are they trying to fool' has all gone. Now I'm all 'Bow deeper, you. Respect, I demand greater respect,' I think I'm turning into Yul Brynner.

The man gave me his card, which they all do. I have today commissioned JeongHwan to print some for me, because they are a kind of currency. Young-ai said meaningfully, 'Yes the men like to give their cards...' Now you see, the kings of Korea had these big courtyards for all their underlings, with markers running in a line down from the throne, to mark the ranks, so they could stand exactly where their status befits. The king, in his shed, could see exactly how many people were less important than him, and exactly how much less important. It isn't much of a leap from that is it? Where were the women, I hear you ask? In their own little wooden fold, off at the side, through a smaller door than the men's, doubtless exchanging wry looks about the men's obsession with ranking-posts, as our guide rather riskily called them. 'How big's your husbands ranking-post then? Ooh er'

So in this other palace, on what was now a sunny Saturday afternoon, the paths were thick with brides. I counted sixteen, all but one in proper big puffy white numbers - the other mercifully in deep red silken Korean. They go to this palace for the photos, and so the race is on to get a good angle with palace, or pool or tree behind, without any other proud couple in the background. The geometry of this game is fascinating, and I get a bit involved, trying to snap as many brides as possible in one frame, to get the jolly, 'look at all those brides in one picture' shot, while trying not to get caught myself in the background of anyone else's big day. If you needed convincing of just how crowded a place this is, it was here. It also serves as a symbol of how they've grabbed onto western things, good and bad alike, and won't let go. From outside it looks like discarding a much more appealing culture in exchange for tawdry copies of an idealised version of the west. Apparently, the theatre too is dominated by versions of western realistic drama - the artistic equivalent of the mass white weddings - I'm already an expert on that as well, you see.

Next I resumed the hunt for the tourist office, but again the scale of everything is so vast that to find a single office seems impossible. On this occasion the dice were loaded against me. I went up and down past the doe-eyed fish and doomed little turtles, asked as best I could a few times, and eventually ascertained that the Tourist Office had made way last year for a building site. Half of Seoul is a building site. Big big buildings too.

Next possible Tourist Office was a few subway stops away, so back down among the ants, as it feels. It's much cheaper than the London Tube, the carriages are slightly bigger and a lot less shabby, and it does have station names in English writing, so I've really appreciated it, but I am not alone. There are a good few people appreciating most carriages most of the time. A great assortment of people come along selling things - one man had two packets of chewing gum to sell today, or begging [the standard method is to have a small cassette recorder round your neck playing what I imagine are patriotic songs] or else leafleting for some campaign or church, or church campaign.

This tourist office didn't exist either, but eventually one did, and armed with better maps I marched on. Took in the changing of the guard - as earth-shatteringly fascinating as its London counterpart - , the biggest bookshop one could ever imagine, and a bizarre Anglican Cathedral - all the time chickening out of picking up unknown food from a side stall [or should that be dogging out] By now it was 3.00, and I saw a Burger King. Yes! No. No, I can't go in to a Burger King for Christ's sake, I thought, and went straight into the nearest other place, a tiny sweaty joint with small smiley women in it. Erm, that, please. Omelette. [Well omelette-y sort of thing] Substantial question in Korean. I nodded a lot. Ne ne. [This is 'yes'] What the hell have I said yes to? Actually it was fine. Seafood assortment of some kind, shrimps, squid I think and other stuff, in eggy mixture, with cucumber pickle in chilli water and of course Kimchi. I think I will get my students to explain some food stuff to me.

On Sunday I went to a big Festival for the international communities of Seoul, which gave me a chance to talk to people, and was good. The most familiar food was on the Bangladeshi stall, but there was a British stall, staffed by embassy people. Wilma, a stalwart of the ex-pat community, was selling scones with 'devonshire cream' - curious, it's like they are expats of a mythical country. 'Oh three days, practically a virgin. Jenny, this chap's been here three days. My husband, Jim, is here with BP, who are you with? You will love it here, so much nicer than Japan'. I got several cards, of course, and an invitation to proper English beer at the embassy on Wednesday and Friday nights. Might be worth it for fun when I'm really lonely.

The highlight of the festival was the parade. Every country in wonderful national costume, the twenty-strong Brits [there are 40 British children in Seoul apparently] were in school uniform. Shame. They were doing a display of Scottish Country dancing. Most revealing of all was the US section. At the back, 24 big big men [at last someone fatter than me!] in leather, on gleaming Harley Davidsons, revving them up. No Scottish country dancing for these guys, hell no! A majestic symbol of internationalism, American-style. Clear the pathways, folks, we're here.

After the festival I finally found the secret garden, but couldn't sit there, because the only way in was as part of a tour. On the English language tour I chatted to a very sweet couple from New Zealand, who were deeply impressed by everything. The secret garden was really another palace, and the most beautiful of the lot so far. A really wonderful giggling guide, who had a fly bothering her. She stopped her commentary after a bit, not battering it or anything, and just said. 'Hey fly. I am not a flower' Fantastic. Pity they don't think that way about turtles.

This is getting ridiculous. I've got to stop.

I haven't even got to today! I'll have to do that tomorrow. Short version is...didn't sleep very well [probably just hit me in a way], planned courses. Worked hard today, met Dina Emerson, kind of voice movement type American person. Got paper for printer and JeongHwan says next paper I have to buy! Greg says they are very funny about trying to get away with cheapskate ways. Maybe that's just his arrogant cultural imperialism speaking. Maybe he's right.

I'll be back

With love to entire western world

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@nuri.net>

Subject: Splendid but small

Date: Monday 1 November 1999 12:57

More extracts from life in the Orient

[NB These are just extracts - spare a thought for poor Ali!]

Wednesday - I think.....

Everything here is so so big. I was wondering whether it just looks it, because the people are a bit on the small side, but no. Things are big. I went into a book shop today which was like the wholesale Sunday Boot sale on each of eight floors of a building. Yesterday I went to an electronics centre with more than 20 floors! All sprung from the emperor-with- inadequacies-big- shed complex if you ask me.

I thought you'd like to know what have been the successes and failures so far in terms of the luggage I carefully assembled.

Firstly, on the success side, this little computer, which I am using now, is the cleverest thing on the planet. I can't quite believe how much it does for me. It may have been a bit of a weight to get here, but my God I'm glad for it. Main failures have been the digital camera which I haven't managed to bring to life, and my prematurely dead specially comfortable Clarks shoes, which lasted one expedition out into Seoul, during which they pinched me for three hours, before splitting completely down the middle at the back, bah, Clarks sensible shoes indeed! Runners up prizes go to the little Korean phrase book, and the nearly finished now chocolate society drinking chocolate [present from Ali] But the outright winner, and the winner of the 1999 most successful travel purchase award, is my bag, my gorgeous, beautiful, a-snip-at-whatever-outrageous-price-it-was bag. It is fantastic, effortlessly combining an awesome practical ability to carry anything, with the kind of battered academic chic that is exactly the image I feel becomes a visiting eccentric, which is obviously my aim. So it was worth it, and will be for years, or until I lose it, whichever is the sooner. [This is in here because Ali thought it was a slight extravagance! - Ed.].....

Anyway, back to the PWW analysis of the Korean character. If I have one reform that I would introduce here, it would be to lengthen all the brooms. They are all flat versions of witches' brooms, but sawn off at about two feet. This is so that those designated to sweep have to bend to exactly 50 degrees throughout. I think this is a deliberate policy perpetrated originally by those same kings that built the palaces, who wished their underlings to be visibly less significant at all times. Frankly, though, it has infected the national psyche. Yumi, my interpreter, has three degrees [the qualifications, not the LP] and yet seems to be sweeping with a short broom at all times, metaphorically speaking. She is quite small, but enough is enough. 'I think Yumi should have a break now' I said, after she had continued interpreting me right through my break. 'Oh, you are so considerate, Professor'. She would say this if I were suggesting I was thinking of stopping beating her. No, the time has come for those handles to grow.



Friday....

I'm getting to know my graduate students really quite well now. There are three of them, all in their thirties. Yong, who lived in Illinois for a while, and speaks good english [insofar as anyone who learnt it in the states can]. He is quite serious, and has the extra duty of class assistant - a kind of jumped-up board

monitor role which means I am supposed to send him to photocopy things, and ask him in advance to prepare any materials for my class. This is slightly intimidating, since it makes me feel like I should be using some materials!

Then there is Cheong-Myong, who is the most diffident of the three, and the tallest. She is still slightly anxious I think - always wants to make sure she is doing the right thing. She is what they call an acting major - the others really have intentions to be teachers. There was one moment today when she felt very strongly about something and really shouted. It was brilliant, totally unexpected. So I think once she relaxes she will be good value.

The third is Chi-Yung. She is probably the most impressive student. She has a five year old daughter, and is very clear most of the time about what she thinks. Seems to have a natural understanding of the whole TIE approach, and will be good at actually carrying it, I think. She and Young-ai are both clearly part of a new kind of long-handled, if any broom at all, type of Korean women.

Although they do bow when I come in, I am really pleased with the way the atmosphere in the sessions is working. Young-ai comes to most of the sessions, because she wants to know more about TIE, and there is a good sense of fun. I gave them a huge speech about how high my expectations are, 'It will not be enough for our visits to schools in December to be educational, I want them to inspire, to change lives, to boldly go....' I think having an interpreter gives me just long enough to work out the next piece of stirring rhetoric. Sometimes Yumi gets confused and talks Korean to me, and sometimes I get carried away and go on for ten minutes before she politely interrupts. 'Please can I tell them what you are saying?'

Big excitement looked like it was going to come this evening. I noticed that Ally McBeal is on on the US Forces TV station, the only one in English. Most of it is unbelievably bad, although has some curiosity value. I now know the number to ring if I have any questions about my anti-anthrax vaccination, and that I might get a 'dishonorable discharge' if I ring home on a government phone 'even if it's my Mom'..... Then after all the excitement Ally McBeal never came on yesterday. There was a tribute to Payne Stewart instead. Still, heigh-ho and la-di-da.



Sunday

My plan was to have a lazy day in the flat, but that was thwarted by the builders' Sunday working. They are here seven days a week, putting a few more stories on the top of the Chungsong Art Villa, as we call our humble home. I decided to go to an event I had seen advertised in the paper. The British Education Fair, at a big hotel in Seoul. This is a kind of

travelling roadshow with representatives from lots of British Universities, looking for overseas students, and it was in Seoul for the weekend. The reason I had thought I would go was that several students had already asked me about possible further degrees in England, and I don't really know anything, so I thought I could get information. In particular, Yumi, of three degrees fame, not content with studying a three year MA at the Shakespeare Institute, wants to do another one, and was wondering about Exeter! This is presumably because her current letters only qualify her to be my interpreter, whereas if she becomes the world's leading expert on Shakespeare she might feel able to carry my lovely leather bag.

Anyway, the hotel is not very near a tube station, so I thought I would take the chance to go away from the flat in a different direction. Up to now, I've only really walked the different routes to the nearest tube station. Going the other way I found quite a good little playground about 10 minutes away, and a very nice looking, though closed for Sunday, ancient tomb with wooded garden, about 20 minutes walk. Also some better shops, a McDonalds and Pizza place, all of which may come into their own when the family arrives. Obviously I myself am now king of Korean food, and wolfing down octopus tentacles, silkworm larvae and the odd bear claw with the best of them, McDonalds, pah! Although it is quite nice, sometimes.

My route to the hotel took me through the trendy shopping bit of Seoul, Myong Dong [silly joke deleted] This was fun, and quite promising for Christmas shopping. I've checked out over the time quite a lot of the centre of Seoul, which is really completely bewildering. The scale of things is too much to absorb. The electronics centre I mentioned before, had the floor space of the rag-market, on each of its 20 floors. Within this, stalls are crammed in and piled high, and in all parts of it customers are squeezed almost constantly at the level of New Street on a Saturday [I put in these home-spun references to help you to get the picture!].

My favourite part of Seoul for shopping so far is called Insa-Dong [No, stop it] This is a small road, with rows of gloriously low buildings - the only ones in the city centre really. It is the crafts and antiques section, with a few galleries, and bars and street stalls. On Sunday it is closed to traffic. I was there on Saturday night with my students, who continuing their permanent mission to keep me happy, were trying to take me to an exhibition. Unfortunately, my class had run over by an hour and a half, because I got a bit over-excited, and so the gallery was closed. Undeterred, we went to another gallery, then up some stairs which no non-Korean would even have thought of going up - round the back of a building, with only a hand-written note indicating anything was up there. What was there was a single room, about the size of our front room, with four tables and little low sofas. In the corner was crammed a gas cooker and fridge and a small person. The walls were lined with rough paper-coloured paper, scribbled on by arty visitors, and the two ceiling lamps were shaded by similar parchment rolled into a fat cylinder, glued to the ceiling at one end, and tied with a string at the other, looking like my attempts at present-wrapping. It occurred to me that this cheap but fantastically effective lamp-shade, if in Habitat, could be £17 or so. Almost interesting, that. The room was very warm, heated by two old cylindrical paraffin heaters.

This place was a 'tea-room'. You buy a drink, or some food, at a little more cost than you might expect, and can then stay there for ever, as long as you are engaged in sufficiently earnest discussion. Yong and Cheung Myong introduced me to Korean rice wine, dried little fish and a spring onion pancake/omelette thing, and I did my best to be arty/political cafe-societyish with them. Again they refused to let me pay.

By the way, good news. I am no longer the fattest man in Korea. This is in part because I am pining away, walking an estimated 47 miles a day, and unable to get access to any Nutella, but also because I saw him. He was wearing Baden-Powell shorts, despite temperature in forties, had bright red hair and was pushing a sit-up-and-beg bike through an ant-nest tube station. Clearly British. We were swept in opposite directions, so I will never know for sure.....

Anyway, back to today. The British Education Fair was in a vast hotel, with huge rotating doors, and shiny bowing doormen. It was set out like the exhibitions at those events that Women and Theatre perform at, with behind each desk a beautiful Korean interpreter in

traditional dress, and a generally not so beautiful representative of a fine British University. Not actually any elbow patches, because these were the people from the Universities' 'International Offices' which I suppose they all have. I went to the stalls for Warwick [quite chatty, thought Seoul was lovely, the toilets are so clean compared to Taiwan which is a dump, apparently] Birmingham [hadn't got a copy of the prospectus for 2000, only old ones from last year, couldn't wait to get home, and was a bit scared in Taiwan because of the aftershocks] Manchester [rather sniffy, wanting to make it clear that it was unlikely they would readily accept students for PhD, unless they stated very clearly what their area of study would be - there's a revolutionary thought, thank you for that!] and Exeter [extremely helpful. I now have the number of someone in Seoul who has just completed an MA there, related to Shakespeare, and an e-mail address for Peter Thompson - some other Professor! - so I actually can give Yumi some useful information] Another mission accomplished, back on the subway and ready for the next challenge. Just another day in the high-achieving life of your man in the Far East.

Coming back here another way, I checked out the route to the small but attractive-looking mountain which rises up from the end of the road where the flat is. There are a number of picturesque mountains within Seoul itself, covered in trees and very steep-looking, and just at the moment a wonderful mixture of colours. I have this one ear-marked for an assault tomorrow. It did rain today though, so I will see how it dawns, and then decide. Any rain that falls, which has so far been very light, seems to clear the streets in a way that nothing else can. I have no idea where people go, since every corner of this place is full, but most of the Koreans do seem to disappear. They must be lying in very big piles inside the buildings. Whatever, when the rain comes the streets are left clear for Mad Dogs and Englishmen. Only me in fact, because Korea being Korea, the dogs, even the mad ones are not mad enough to brave the streets, and risk being caught by the cook. I expect mad dog is a particular delicacy. 'See special foam on mouth'. Anyway, long may it rain, I say.

I've spoken to Eddie a few times on the phone, and managed to send him a story, which Ali successfully printed off and read. He is very funny indeed on the phone, but it's a slightly mixed blessing being able to speak to them so clearly. The other night I woke up and heard a noise in the flat upstairs, and was halfway out of bed, to go and see which of the boys had woken up before I caught myself. Sad. I'm glad I did, though, because I think the Russian professor of music above may have been a little unreceptive!

Monday Afternoon The first of November - the very same month during which the family is coming to Korea, hurray!

This is the nearest thing to being Kate Adie yet. I am writing this, huddled in one room of my apartment, the rest of which has been occupied by five men in uniforms brandishing a range of weapons. They are the actual builders, the ones previously only seen in the half-light of the entrance alley, or heard banging on the roof through the long days. Early in the morning a second Han River came down the stairwell which is common to all the flats, none of it appeared to come into mine, but the electricity went off, and since I alerted the authorities it has been the source of a great deal of frenzied speculation and experimentation.

Jeong Hwan [my administrative assistant - I hope you're keeping up] was due this morning anyway, to help install the washing machine, which had been sitting in the kitchen. It is too big to fit through the door of the utility room, so together we had to lift it through a window. That was surprisingly easy, and so it is now in the right place. We plumbed it in as well, now all we needed was some 'Jongiga' - electricity. By fiddling with the fuse box we got everything but lighting, and it seems likely to me that some water has got into the circuitry, and bugged it up [to use a technical international builder type term]. JeongHwan fetched the building chief - a suitably edentulous and wise man, with a good line in inscrutability. He fiddled for a while and got a younger builder, who dismantled most of the light fittings. We seemed to agree that I would not use the lights, and he would bring someone to check tomorrow. I've already got candles, because the lights are all a bit bright, so that's not the end of the world. Anyway, clearly the plan has changed while I was out, and he is now back with reinforcements. I've just

realised it's easier to work with them chatting in my flat, than when they're at loose, hammering on the roof!

I've been up my mountain, which was a great success. It's only five minutes from the flat, closer than I had realised, and one of several within the city limits. It's called Umyon San, which means 'Sleeping-Cow Mountain', it is 300 metres high, and like all of the hills I've seen here is covered with trees. The paths were less artificial than I expected, no concrete or anything, just made into steps at times using logs, with the occasional rope bannister at the steep parts. Some of it was very steep - the norm for the hills seems to be for them to rise quite suddenly, with rather perfect looking rounded shapes. Very quickly you get past enough trees for the city to disappear from sight, and gradually the roar of the traffic subsides too. It is actually very like the Lickeys, but steeper, and with summits, instead of ridges. Nor does it have the level of blissful solitude that the Lickeys achieves!

Most of the people walking there today were on their own, like me, but there were quite a few of us. They don't acknowledge each other as they pass. I did to begin with throw a cheery 'annyong' at people, but I sensed it was an intrusion. Didn't stop me doing it of course.

As you go up, there are various little extra creations. Plenty of benches, and sitting places, a few watering stops, quite a few exercise areas, with little bits of assault course equipment, and a couple of badminton courts - the highest of these at about 290 metres! There seemed to be two types of people there. Those involved in contemplation, and those involved in exercise. In both cases it seems a very deliberate course of action. They are there for a reason, and they are maximising the value of the exercise by supplementing it with 20 press-ups and a quick knock-up with the shuttlecock, or whatever. I noticed this when I said to my students I was going up a mountain. 'Ah, you want to exercise, to get fit?' well in a way... 'You like to hike' Really I just want to climb a mountain. I don't think the 'because it's there' argument would have carried much weight with Confucius.

One wonderfully surreal moment was going round a corner and hearing a Baritone Italian Aria echoing down a valley. Seemed quite well sung to me too. The singer was visible through the trees, and I'm not sure whether his purpose was to get an appropriate effect and spirit, or to build his lung capacity by singing while climbing steep hills, or if he just had too many complaints when he practised at home. Either way, when I caught up with him I said good singing, good singing, and he grunted, looking rather appalled. I suspect that this was my first major faux-pas. Somewhere in my Korean etiquette book there must be a bit I didn't read - 'when on mountains, do not commend a Korean on his opera singing. This can result in serious loss of face'. I puffed on up.

At the top, I had expected the trees to stop, in a sort of monk's tonsure, but there was still a thin surround, even there. You could see large chunks of the city below through gaps, but it is a cloudy day, and so I expect the view is often more impressive. Even today it was quite something.

The summit seemed to say a lot about Korea. There was a huge, perfectly formed cairn, about the size and shape of a decent wigwam, but slightly fatter. It reminded me of a ten foot version of one of those cones of incense. Also there were some nicely placed benches, a couple more pieces of exercise equipment for real enthusiasts, a single granite gravestone [one exercise too many, I expect], a noticeboard with pictures of the Pope and Mother Theresa, a sawn off lamppost, with a plastic clock at the top, and a bright blue telephone box, complete with broom - short handle of course.

I did a little bit of contemplating, and a token wiggly bit of exercise, in a spirit of cross-cultural willing, worked out that it was about 5.00 AM in your world and not a good time to risk a phone call, looked at the view and turned back. On the way down I saw a fenced off area with a sign saying 'Danger, Mines', and a nice little picture of a man stepping on one. It seemed implausible somehow, but I did stick to the path anyway.

The builders have now rigged up some makeshift lights for me to put in the power sockets, which still work, and gone back to bang the roof. I think they are bringing the electrician tomorrow, but not 100% sure. We reached the kind of impasse in the discussion where all you can do is shrug at each other and agree to leave it unexplained. This is fine if you are making small talk about your family, but a little disconcerting when the discussion in question is what not to do to avoid electrocution. I'm certainly going to stick with my candles in the meantime.

I spoke this morning to the head of drama at the American high school here, where I might be doing a demonstration lesson later in the week. I expect that will warrant an e-mail if it happens! Certainly Mimi Kim sounds promising material.....

Apologies for the quantity of this again, but you've all got little recycle bins if you want to use them

With love to you all, and please pass on my regards to those netless technophobes who are in line for a single postcard, if they're lucky.

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@nuri.net>

Subject: The week in Seoul

Date: Monday 8 November 1999 01:09

This week I got onto a train, elbowed my way rapidly across the compartment, and squeezed myself between two men who were spreading themselves nonchalantly as if to make out there wasn't room for someone in between. Ha. I wasn't having that. I sat, switched on my walkman and closed my eyes. I have become a commuter.

Up to now, I think I had held myself slightly above the crowd, attempting an attitude of easy amusement, and trying to be sustained by interest in the details of the people and happenings, but I have been swallowed up. I expect it's the same as in London in most ways, although there is a particular cultural thing about ignoring strangers. Until you have been introduced to someone, and exchanged business cards, a Korean person has no way of knowing how to relate to you, since relative status is the deciding factor, even in the form of the language you will use, which has three levels of politeness. In other words, you can't say 'hello' to someone. It might be completely inappropriate, because they might be on a 'good morning' level. So you ignore their existence, even as a physical presence, to be moved round, and instead you push straight through them. It is strange, because obviously to me, knocking someone out of your way seems a bit ruder than getting your verb-ending wrong, but this is an area of genuine cultural difference, it really isn't intended as rude. Once you have been introduced, practically everybody I've met has been incredibly friendly. I suppose we have the same class stuff, it's just that we are happy to judge on appearances, which doesn't sound any better when you think about it.

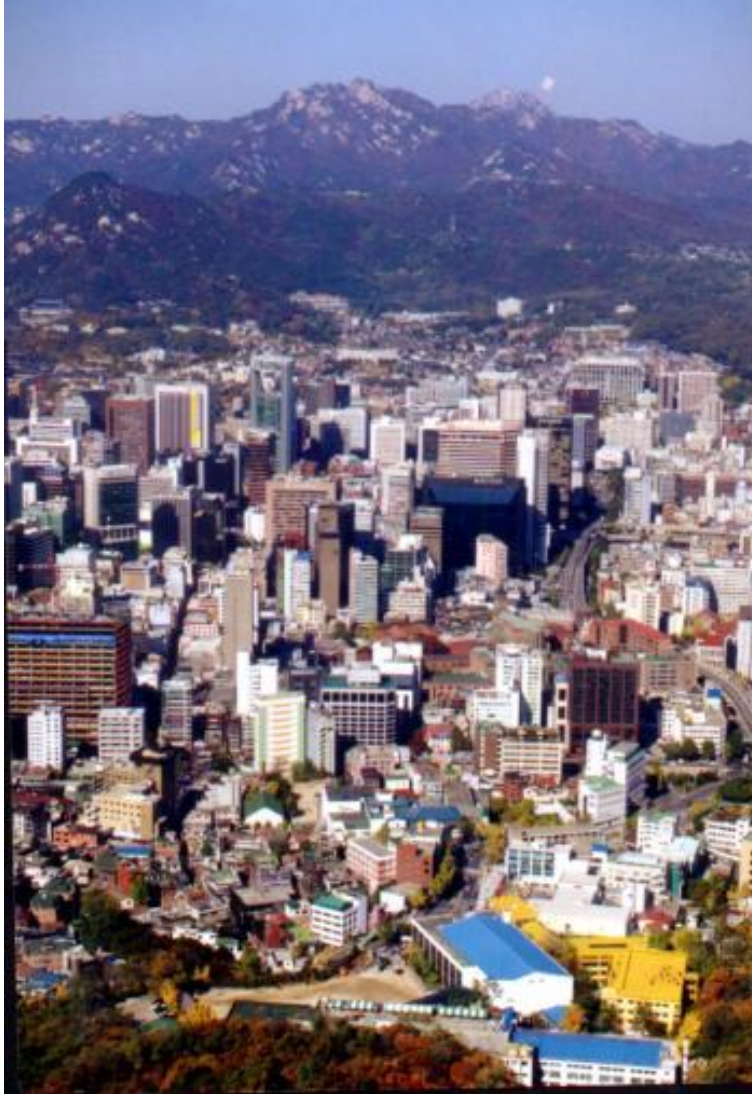
This system though makes for a very strange division in my week, because the status of 'professor' makes a radical difference to the way people are with me. On my days off I feel quite often a little invisible. Personally I would like to dispense with the business card bit, and carry a big sign around my neck saying 'Visiting Professor' Then they'd clear the way on the tube!

Anyway, there I was, squeezed so close to everyone else that you can feel which bits of their bodies are warmest, and ignoring away...

I've had a good week. The work is all going very well, and I'm getting more used to working through Yumi. This week I did a demonstration lesson at the Seoul Foreign School, to a group of assorted 13 year-old English speakers. This was alarming at first, because my students and Professor Choi [Young-ai] were watching, and without knowing the group at all I had effectively set it up as a kind of see-how-it's-done session.

The school is very American. There was a big wide corridor full of lockers, just like in all the films, and a loudspeaker in the classroom which the 'Principal' came through on at the start of the lesson [excuse me, class] to say a few improving words for the day. I wasn't sure whether to clasp my hand to my heart or something. In fact the actual session was really pretty much the same as it would have been in Dudley, and so I was pleased that I had set it up. Once

again the scale of appreciation is what is so appealing about being here. It went OK, but



afterwards each student found their individual moment to tell me what a glorious privilege it had been for them...I'm beginning to regret the fact that Ali is coming out, because she is just going to go round saying 'Please, do you know what you're saying?' to them all. She might blow the whole thing!

On my last invisible day this week I went up Namsan Tower, which is a big modern tower on the top of the biggest hill in Seoul, Namsan ['san' means mountain]. It was something I thought I ought to do, rather than looked forward to, because I knew I would get a bit scared, but I do have this Kate Adie complex, along with the various other delusions of my life here, so, what would she do?

There is a cable car which goes to the top of the mountain, so my first decision was an easy one. Walk. So much for Kate, who would at very least have stood on the roof of the cable car, if not hung from the bottom. The

path up was cut into steps the whole way, very steep indeed, and actually I was completely terrified. There was more or less no-one walking up, though a couple of elderly women skipped past me kneeling on the floor at one point. The views from the top of the hill were extraordinary, though, with a very strange effect again of being behind a row of trees, but with skyscrapers just beyond, almost in touching distance.

After the hairy climb, the lift to the top of the tower was fine, and I found looking out from the enclosed observation floor surprisingly unalarming. It did give a pretty good idea of why the city is so bewildering at ground level. I had a meal in the revolving restaurant at the top.

On the walk down, there was a point for the very first time since I came, that I could see or hear no-one else, I could believe I was the sole soul in Seoul. Obviously I've been waiting for that moment, but it's taken a while coming!

Other moments/highlights from the week:

I got taken again to the exhibition, which was open this time, and was fun. Lots of tiny insect-size sculptures, in a kind of basement. I was glad it was something I could understand, because there are these moments sometimes where I am supposed to say intelligent things about art, which I find a little disturbing. They all refer so readily to things. It's very much like

that bit in Gullivers travels' , JiYong said yesterday - I would generally be reasonably unembarassed about saying I haven't read things, but it seems so pathetic when they all have, and in a foreign language.....

I also went to a performance at Sodaemun Prison, where the much-hated Japanese held, tortured and executed political prisoners during their occupation of Korea. Actually, the Korean post-war dictators used it for the same purpose, although that part of the history is a little less acknowledged.. It was a fantastic,



wonderfully atmospheric thing, with lots of people, weird dancing and happenings, smoke, fire, lights, music....there are some kinds of traditional music here that I think are sensational - a very mournful 3 string bowed thing [haegum] which has about the pitch of a viola, and a kind of wailing reeded flute [saegum]. I went on my own but was spotted by a student, and whisked into VIP land with lots of people introduced variously as famous actors, poets and survivors from the prison - a lot of bowing in all directions. Anyway, I got asked to write a review of the piece for the Korea Herald, which is the national english-language paper here. I explained I hadn't understood it, because it was all in Korean, but this excuse fell through. They are setting me up with an interpreter who will explain what it all meant. Right.

We had a session at Ewha Women's University, which is the famous traditional university here. Because the Foreign school was the other side of Seoul, we decided to have our afternoon class somewhere else, and this was nearby. it is where Yumi lectures when she isn't busy sweeping leaves from my path! It was very english looking, with stone buildings and lots of trees, ivy covered professors..., and with statues of the missionary women who founded it. It all made me think about Emily Davies, and TC. I suppose it is in fact based on American universities, but they in turn perhaps owe a bit. The nature of the american presence here is a really fascinating mixture. I think I'll save my thesis on that to the next message.



Anyway Ewha is a much more formal place than KNUA, which makes me feel glad that I am not teaching there instead.

The pavements are interesting. I see a lot of them, and they are nearly all either dug up, or being dug, or with small paving stones placed back willy-nilly on previous digging. The sort of landscape that Liverpool solicitors dream of. They put blankets on partly dug sections, which looks rather sweet I think. The whole of Seoul is a building site. In some ways the overall feeling I have about it, is it will be great when it's finished. You suspect though that nothing will ever be enough. A lot of what's happening now is to prepare for the World Cup here in 2002. I am subtly making suggestions that probably I'll need to re-visit to see how the course is coming along about then....I wonder if I can get tickets, as a Korean journalist.....practically.

I'll write again next week. Thank you for all your messages.

With lots of love

Peter Wynne-Willson [Visiting Professor and Performance art Critic of the Korea Herald]

Do you think it's going to my head?

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@nuri.net>

Subject: Excellent Korea move.

Date: Sunday 14 November 1999 09:53

Dear public

I know I've said this before, and it's turned out not to happen, but this might be a shorter dispatch than some, because this weekend I am heading out of Seoul, out of range of my precious notebook. Actually, though I'd love to get away with a picture of myself venturing beyond the edge of the explored world, I think they do have phones elsewhere in Korea, but I'm travelling light.. .so I'm planning an early night, and will catch up with things next week.

In the meantime the highlights of the last week:

I have moved, and instead of 3-4 hours of travel each day, I now have about fifteen minutes brisk walk. It's also a much lighter, quieter and friendlier place, with far more families in evidence. The area where I was before is in fact ironically quite sought-after, with modern blocks and plenty of branches of 'Dunkin Donuts' - too sophisticated for me, obviously. This is actually more run-down, I suppose, but much nicer feeling. There is also much more curiosity value in being western, and even less English spoken.

I'm getting on very slowly indeed with my Korean. It just has no familiar elements in it at all, it is unlike any other language I've ever tried to learn. It is simply a code. I can spell out words letter by letter OK, but then they are meaningless. Most of the ex-pats here don't learn it. One British woman I met said, 'Well it's a pointless language really isn't it? They don't speak it anywhere except Korea, you see'. Right. I think this is about 80 million more speakers than Latin and Greek put together, for a start! I don't think I've ever felt quite so helpless as I have at some points here, trying to communicate. I've found myself coming out with other foreign languages, elaborate miming, writing things down...the way they learn english leans heavily on written english [or has until fairly recently] so many older Koreans understand written english pretty well. When it comes to speaking it though, the teaching has been done by Americans, and by Korean-Americans, and so it is itself another language. So quite often in the course of trying to communicate, I find myself doing bad imitations from films, to try and summon up the right American pronunciation for a word which many many times the person I'm talking to does turn out to know.

The other half of this problem is that where I do know a Korean word, my pronunciation seems to have to be absolutely spot on to be understood. I think this is because the number of sounds is relatively limited, and so a mispronounced word may well be a well pronounced something completely different. Even where a word they use is an english one, I wouldn't be understood if I just said it. So for example 'Handphone' which is what they call mobile phones has to be said something like 'Hunty-phun', which you feel silly doing, but does the trick.

Where I pick up most is in the classes, because every time I say something Yumi then says it in Korean, obviously.

The way the work is going is really fascinating. Both courses that I am taking - the one I have said less about is called 'Young People's Theatre' and has 15 undergraduate students on it - are heading towards performing work they have created in the final week of the semester. So this means the process involves a great deal of discussion of issues, and I am finding out so much from these. As with everything else, it is the mixture of similarities and differences that is so gripping. You are just feeling that everything is exactly as it would be with a group in England when something totally alien crops up. And vice versa. The subjects that obsess them are computers, Japanese fashion and sex. Bullying and exam pressure come up a lot as the problems of the young. They have a special system of ritual exclusion here, called 'wang-dda', which is the main form of bullying, and it is a good example of what I mean, at the

same time entirely different from and exactly the same as a school issue in Birmingham. Issues like racism are interesting because there are essentially no ethnic minorities in Korea, which of course doesn't mean it isn't a problem, just that it isn't an issue. The role of women, the behaviour of older men getting drunk all the time, corruption, American influences - we have had fascinating discussions around all these. They are some of them very quick to make judgements about the young people they will be working with. We had quite a tricky session last week when Chi-Yong wanted the TIE piece to focus on how young people didn't give up their places on the tube for older people like they should! In the end they are focusing on what is called the 'N Generation'. The N stands for Network. We have been researching the impact on youth culture of new technology...very very interesting all of it. Getting into schools to do it is proving a real struggle. There is no precedent. Anything like this is for outside school time. Even outside school, the pressure for activities to be of value is awesome. There are seven year olds who have private english lessons until after 10.00 at night here. Makes what Eddie calls 'lectricity' hour seem postively gentle.

I wrote my piece for the Korea Herald, after going for a meal with Dina Emerson, who is the other American I think I mentioned - very earnestly helpful person, completely doesn't get any of my attempts to be funny. She had been the vocal specialist for the performance, and so arranged for her interpreter to talk me through the deeper meanings of the text - well all the meanings, in fact. I tried to steer a balance between simply writing that I knew nothing and gross pretentiousness, and e-mailed it off. I think it will be in the culture section early next week, so I expect you all to get copies.

I went to pub night at the British Embassy, which was uninspiring. Felt a new kind of culture-shock. No-one really very nice. Full of business people impressing Korean clients with english beer, and some rather jaded long-term ex-pats. There was one couple with children, but they were just visiting from Taiwan. The funniest man was a completely ridiculously chinless embassy employee who organises the Cricket team. I am so sad that it is the wrong season, because I could definitely have played, and that I think would have been some kind of experience. They play 'test matches' against other countries. Apparently they lost very heavily to the West Indies this season - so just like the real thing..... 'Trouble is, damned ground adjoins some sort of desperate detention place. Terrible noises off at times....if the ball goes over we just have to leave it' I seem to be being followed round by places that are or were scenes of torture...

I met a big American who turned out to be one of the men on the Harley-Davidsons I saw the first week I was here. Oh you are a Biker? 'Rider', he corrected me. 'Sure. Hell, we have a blast. Only goddamned country in the world where if you're on a Harley you can jump a red light and the cops will salute you' I expect this is true. Motorbikes are allowed on the pavements, which is very alarming. Jay-walking is very sternly punished though. Another of those strange anomalies.

Another trip this week was to a place on the edge of the city with a zoo, a contemporary art gallery and a theme park - fun for all the family. Very nice place actually. I guiltily watched and enjoyed the performing dolphins, and took a tiny tape recorder on the trip, so as to send a little documentary of Seoul to Eddie. 'This is what the tube train sounds like. This is the people trying to sell me things.....'

Just a quick addition to my cultural analysis. **The last of the summer rice wine.....**

I'm sure there are a lot of creation myths in Korea, but if I were making one up for them it would involve a man with the already described shed complex. Mine is bigger than yours, and I'm going to sit here all day in it. He painted his shed, all day long, and admired the row on row of vegetables for which he was responsible. The Eve to his Adam, meanwhile, was obviously equally obsessed, but the main target was dog mess. She would send her man to round up any dogs she could find, and as a precaution against the spread of dog mess, she would kill them, cook them and eat them. Then because of the risk of stray individuals evading capture, she would insist that all shoes be removed at the door. And if her man ever came in onto her frequently scrubbed ondol, he would get short shrift. The whole of the future

development of Korean culture has been set in motion by these two obsessives. Do you think this is evidence of some kind of link with Yorkshire?

Weird little sights. Rows and rows of bright yellow pooh bears. A girl with a Wallace and Gromit hunty-phun. Jeans for sale in a shop, on mannequins which were sawn off just above the waist, and moulded bending over - fantastic, you decide to buy the ones which look best on this row of bottoms. Policeman and older man sitting holding hands. Absolutely no dog mess anywhere.

I tracked down some fresh basil, and bought some of the tomatoes they have here, big, slightly pale ones. Set about making salad, only to find out these particular tomatoes are in fact persimmons.....

England Scotland match was not broadcast here. BBC Radio Five had to go dead because Sky had done a deal which gave them the 'web-cast' rights. Then sky's web-cast turned out to be only available in the UK. I stayed up specially, and so was very angry with Rupert Murdoch - that should do the trick. In the end I found a site which reported in writing every two minutes. Good game.

Guess what. It was quite long after all. The next episode should include 'Peter goes to the countryside and therefore becomes an expert on Rural Korea'. Watch this space.

Lots of love

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@nuri.net>

Subject: Out of Seoul Experience

Date: Sunday 21 November 1999 02:51

Dear all

Notes from my brave baby elephant trip out of the big city.

Train. Excellent. On the way down I travelled super-express. They keep you at the barrier until it is ready for boarding, like a plane. There is a gate number and everything. Then the best moment is after you get your ticket clipped, you go past this guard of honour of railway men in pristine uniforms with white gloves and Miss World-style sashes, who line the sides



and bow in unison at each passenger. Wonderful. I just can't see it happening at New Street. There are regular announcements and everything runs to the minute. 'We will be stopping at Chechon for one minute'..... Seats are allocated, and people sit in their one. The train doesn't go especially fast, and the woman next to me makes me close the curtain, to keep the sun out of her eyes, so I have to peep round it to watch the countryside rolling by.

And roll by it did. Four hours worth. The day was cloudy, and there was something a bit disappointing about the Korean countryside. I shouldn't say that. It was very interesting. There were paddy fields, of course, lots and lots, but it is the end of autumn, and they were nearly dry, and yellow looking. We went through several fairly substantial ranges of mountains, and some lovely scenery. But every inch that can safely be stood upon is used, there were no empty spaces at all visible all day. Even the mountains themselves are crowded with trees. It's hard to

explain, because I had achieved the principal aim of getting away from the city, and really should have felt more impressed.

I got off at Andong, which is an unremarkable town of 200,000. I looked for places to stay. Nothing bore any relation to the maps in the guide book, which I have got a little used to, but this far out of season, and on a weekday, there were clearly plenty of choices. In Korea you have five options, Hotels, Yogwans, Yoinsuks, Youth Hostels and Minbak, in reverse order of poshness. The hotels cover the usual range 5 star to one star, Yogwans and Yoinsuks are 'Inns', Youth Hostels are Youth Hostels, and Minbak are rooms in people's houses. Kind of Bed and Breakfast without the breakfast. And in fact without the bed, because Koreans sleep on the floor, which as I've mentioned before is heated by the underfloor heating system the 'ondol'. I decided to do my main sight-see straight away, and deal with accomodation when I got back.

The guide book said that a taxi to the Hahoe Village would cost 9,000 won and take 20 minutes. An hour, and 20,000 won later I got there. It was really worth it, though. This is a preserved but living traditional village which you have to pay to get into, but which in other respects is reasonably normal. Full of tourists in season, and at weekends, but on a cloudy cool Monday in November there were almost no other visitors. It was quiet. An actual, traffic free, music, babble and crowd free haven. The inhabitants were all rather antique, and rural life was going steadily on, skinning, podding, drying, soaking, grinding sort of things. I spent about four hours there, just hanging out, going into houses a bit, doing what would be chatting, if there were any mutual comprehension involved. I had a point-and-hope meal in one house, which was excellent. I just chickened out of staying in a Minbak there. A man showed me the room, with an open fire burning merrily underneath it, but I failed at this hurdle. I really should have done, but some combination of fear of spending the evening trying to make conversation in Korean, then trying to sleep on a hard but warm wooden floor in the knowledge of a raging fire underneath, and the facilities, which suffice to say did not involve flushing in any way..... I opted to return to the town. Pathetic soft western wimp.

Outside the village there is a brand new special museum, built to mark 'the most significant moment in our 4,000 year history - the visit in April 1999 of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth 2nd of England' This is the chair she sat in. This is the pen she used to sign this, the piece of paper saying she came here. This is the spade she used to plant this tree. This poem, written by famous poet, expressed to Her Majesty our great honour and humility on this occasion... At one point it said 'On her visit to Korea,



Her Majesty felt she should visit some of the great old relics of our culture.....[yes well, it takes one.....] It was the strangest feeling being there. Why on earth, you felt, should they give a damn that the Queen comes here? It is bizarre. No connection historically with Britain, very few British people, not even much British business. Still, I had the irrational desire to tell other people that I too was English. A kind of possessiveness. 'These pictures are of my Queen you know'..... I found myself standing around, ostensibly waiting for the bus, smiling at the exhibition, secretly hoping somebody would say, but My God, are you from England? Perhaps so I could just nod smugly 'yes I am actually', as if I were a close personal friend of hers.... What the Hell is that about then?

Back in town, drink in an 'Italian restaurant' - full of young women [high school girls] every single one of whom had a miniscule huntyphun. It is already a way of life, and clearly not just in Seoul. Conversations invariably include at least one long-distance participant. Yumi tells me this may well be the boys, who are perhaps sitting all together in another bar. Strange.

I find a Yogwan which is cheap, 25000 [about £13] but fine. There is a bath, which I enjoy. Korean TV, which I do not. I finish my book. Then in the middle of the night I wake up... noises. Outside I can hear people out on the little town. Noraebang - the Karaoke which you hear everywhere is still going strong, as is the PC room, which is a place that young men gather to sit at an individual internet terminal and play Starcraft - a global but especially Korean phenomenon of networked world domination, and also the DDR machines - these are another craze, consisting of a platform with squares marked on it, and a person dancing to music, the aim being to keep to the pattern dictated by the flashing squares under your feet. All this is drowned out however, by the noises from the next room, through the paper-thin wall. A highly energetic passionate encounter which didn't leave very much to the imagination, although my imagination did pretty well at filling out details, and I learned a few new handy Korean words. It went on at quite a pitch for an impressive length of time, which made me feel there was either ancient oriental tantric ability involved, or else some faking. Either way it was hard to get back to sleep, which is why I should have opted for the fiery Minbak.

In the morning, again misled by the Lonely Planet, I went on a very very long lakeside walk [not as nice as it sounds, because also beside the lake was a motorway!] to another traditional village, but only had time to watch a little bit of thatching, before getting back to get my train.

I had decided to go some of the way back to Seoul, and then spend the afternoon in the quiet mountain resort town of 'Tanyang'. This again was a seasonally crowded place, which today had no visible visitors except me. I went on another lakeside walk, which this time was genuinely very nice and peaceful. I was aiming for Korea's biggest complex of caves. This I was warned is terribly crowded in season, and you have to queue to go through. I was congratulating myself on being there late in the November afternoon, when visitors were dwindling, until once I had gone in it dawned on me that actually down a cave it is quite nice to have someone else around! It was completely terrifying. Not only dark and wet, and a very tight squeeze for someone of western proportions at times, but also up very high ladders, and across huge drops. I have no idea in retrospect what possessed me to go in. I think they were probably very beautiful caves, but when I eventually heard footsteps [the cave track was 2km long] I was so relieved. The people I caught up were a young couple. The woman was very pregnant, and we got into a kind of battle of her wanting to let me past, and me trying to make clear that 42 week pace would do me just fine as long as I could stay within six inches of them! When I came out I was sodden, and it hadn't been warm, or that wet. This was a cold sweat.

Very very nice chinese meal in Tanyang, and then a litre of beer, owing to a language problem! I only managed half of it, but that was enough for me to sleep for quite a bit of the 3 remaining train hours home. Ordinary express train, slightly slower and no bowing line, but half the price. Funny how safe and familiar it seems here now. I've only lived here a week, but after my little travels it feels like home!

Friday

I had the post-graduate students and Yumi and Young-ai round for a meal last night which went very well. Literally the first chance I had had to pay for anything when with them. I had sought out western food supplies, which was a frustrating process, because the places suggested turned out to be full of almost equally unfamiliar American food, of course. I found eventually from different places fresh basil, imported pasta, olive oil, wonderful looking mushrooms, earl grey tea and strawberries. Enough to make at least a kind of european meal. Gifts from all of them, and lots of appreciation, of course.

Also early this morning we went into a High School [16-18] for Girls, to do research. This was hysterical [literally at points - notably when I spoke!] The students set up the hall for what they had planned, and Young-ai and I had to see the Principal. Tea with her. Quite internationally recognisable girls school tweedy Head, very sweet actually, but first time I had been in a

strong status-reversal situation. School Principal at Young-ai's own school, requires colossal amount of bowing. Yong, my student, came into her room practically backwards, and bobbed down to the carpet every stride. She was very positive about drama, and genuinely interested, but the conversation took along pause....short period of holding forth....much bowing and agreeing, then long pause again.... form. No-one except her had the ability to end the session, which mean't we started very late! In a way it is a very extremely english thing at



work here, going to ridiculous lengths to avoid embarrassment.

There were 55 in the class. Very young-looking eighteen year olds, in uniform. They have an absolutely brutal system for university entrance here. The whole nation of 18 year-olds takes a single exam on a single day, and then the answers are published in the evening paper on the same day, so you can immediately check through and see whether you seem to have done well enough or not. The result

is seen by parents as practically a judgement on whether or not you succeeded in life, and makes a vast difference on all sides. The final results then take a month to be sorted out. These girls are in that limbo.

Anyway, when I was introduced they clapped loudly, and when I did my practised 'annyeong hasseyo' with coy bow, they went wild...cheering clapping giggling. I couldn't resist a little speech of thanks at the end. When I spoke English it was as if a movie idol of major proportions had come to visit. This is the school we will be doing the final programme at, and I am hoping Ali and the boys will come to that. I cannot begin to imagine the reaction then. If Eddie can practise his bowing and annyonging, I don't think we will be able to avoid a few fainting casualties.

This wasn't even my session. The students were doing some drama and discussion activities to find out about attitudes to technology. They were nervous but all very good, so it bodes well, I think. They have decided that the main programme on the TIE course will be set in the future, exploring the effects of technology.

The cold snap predicted for so long seems to have arrived. No snow yet, but I today began to get a sense of what it will feel like when it turns cold. Cold, in fact. But really beautiful, if today is anything to go by, and certainly no colder than a decent Patterdale Christmas.

Tonight I went to another play at the University, which was very good I think. Totally incomprehensible for me of course, but they certainly put a lot into it all. 'Very committed performance' I was able to say afterwards - as I wiped the spit from my face. I have seen enough now to begin to see some traits in Korean acting, and relaxation and subtlety are not amongst them.... A great deal of physically impressive acting, quite a bit of declaiming, a lot of sticks and swords, and masks and dry ice and men with bare chests and white silk everywhere.

Less than a week before Ali Eddie and Jim arrive, and so preparation for that is dominating a bit. My current apartment is about two hours drive from the airport on a Saturday night, so Yong is going to drive us. I think they will have quite a time here.

Marvellous news about Cherie, you must all be very happy over there...

With love

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@nuri.net>Subject: Another change of address!

Date: Wednesday 24th November 1999 08:53

Owing to sad loss of notebook computer, I can no longer be reached on pwynne@nuri.net. Please send e-mail to this address [pwynne@knua.ac.kr] until 20th December, after which I'll be back at home.

All the best

Peter Wynne-Willson

Thursday 25th November

So, as you will have gathered from my short message to the world, my precious little notebook has been stolen. The big policeman with a gun who came round says that someone used a ladder to climb through the window. Personally I don't go with the theft theory at all - I think it was suicide. It just couldn't bear the thought of being pounded with any more long messages home, saw that the window was unlocked, and jumped. The tragic thing is that it took my camera with it - perhaps the strap was tangled with the mains lead. Also if it had just waited for two days, then Ali would have been here, and it's life was due to become much easier. Still, no point in regrets, it had a short but blistering life, packed with travel and adventure. I am very glad to lose it now, rather than four or five weeks ago, when it was crucial - now I am close to my office and can do e-mails from here. Yes, normal service is being resumed.... so if it was theft after all, and one of you had put out a contract in the hope of stemming the tide and saving space on your hard disk, you should have realised, it will take more than a little break-in to stop me.

I am sad about one thing. There was a film poised infuriatingly on the 35 mark in the lost camera, much of which was taken on a fantastic day on Tuesday, when I climbed up Pukansan, the biggest mountain in the Seoul Area. The cold snap that I think I mentioned in my last letter, snapped back to warm, and I had walked in the morning to Dream Land - a slightly faded theme park with impressively big roller-coaster, to check it out for Eddie. It was about 2.00, and the weather had become quite spring-like, so I thought I really ought to take my last chance to go on a little walk, hailed a taxi, and asked him to take me near to Pukansan. On my map, it looked as if I could pop up to a kind of hill-fort comfortably, as a gentle way to spend such a nice day. The 'pop' turned out to be two hours of very steep climbing indeed, much of it on rock-carved steps, through very similar tree-covered terrain to the other hills, but really quite craggy at the top. There were just enough people around for it not to feel foolhardy, but it was still relatively empty. The fort on the map was really on the summit ridge of one of the three summits of the mountain, and by the time I got there, at about half past four, it was quite breathtaking. Trees for once left behind, fairly sheer drops on both sides, and a gaudily painted wooden gate house, with dramatic stone ramparts, and

stunning views of Seoul below, and the other peaks to each side. You will have to take my word for it, because some Seoul sneak-thief has the pictures! The trip back down was very steep indeed, racing against the falling sun, but I was so glad I went.

This version of the climb actually misses out a little salutary episode near the top. I was following signs all the way up, which after quite a long way suddenly announced 2km to go. I was getting pretty tired by the time I saw the wall on the ridge, and I was really pleased to get there. I had asked someone to take a photo of me, and after he had done this he gestured me to come on along further. I tried to insist on going back down, but he wouldn't let go, and so with pictures of a night on the summit in my head, smiling but thinking 'silly man' to myself, I went on. In fact, the wall where he had taken the photo was ten minutes below the actual top, which I've described above, and I would have stopped short, satisfied with a perfectly nice little building, not realising I was so close to a quite staggering sight. Not for the first time, silly little foreign person turned out to be right after all.

Other highlights of this the last week before the invasion have included a trip to the extraordinary Namdaemun Market [which I will have to return to with Ali's camera, and maybe with her too] finally getting paid some money [I am a millionaire, having received 3,000,000 Won - not counting the 2.5 million loss of possessions!] and the moment when Yumi, after I said something vaguely funny as she was leaving, stopped the car to get out and say, 'Peter Sonsaengnim, I very much love your joke'. Now you see some people would just have laughed, and many, sadly, not even that.

The scenes around the burglary were quite funny. 'Halmoni', the landlady at the flats, was extremely upset, when I went to tell her about it. She shuffled frantically round my flat, showing me the window locks, and talking very fast indeed. I really didn't want her to be upset, but it was difficult to know what to do or say. I was trying to ascertain what the procedure was, about the police. At one point she paused, but only long enough to belch very loudly, then she looked at me, and I had some difficulty deciding how I should respond. Fortunately she resumed rushing round, and beating her chest. I managed to get JeongHwan on the phone, to talk to her, and try and calm her down, but she came back four times later in the evening, each time doing the same rounds of window locks. I have to admit to saying things in English just to make myself feel better, while maintaining the concerned sympathetic look. 'Yes, I know, but do you think you could just be quiet now, please. Leave me alone, perhaps? After all, it was my computer wasn't it?'

Everyone at the university was absolutely mortified, too. I was congratulating myself on not letting it get to me, which I think I'd done OK, but as news spread this morning, wave on wave of apology and sympathy arrived. I just kept repeating to different prostrate people that it could have been a lot worse, that it wasn't their fault, that things like this happen. Yumi of course offered me her camera. By the end of the morning this had had the effect of making me want to scream in the canteen that I didn't care about the bloody computer, and would everyone please stop apologising. I will not hold it against the Korean nation in perpetuity, and didn't they have insurance companies here. Somehow I felt nobody could understand why I hadn't spent the morning keening. I'm afraid part of this is to do with being used to a bit of theft, isn't it?

I am nearly ready for Ali, Eddie and Jim now, and am getting more and more excited. It has seemed like a long time apart. I expect for the next three weeks there will be no long e-mails, and perhaps the traditional, telling you about it over the photo album when we get back will prevail [obviously their pictures, because I won't have any - well except for the five or six hundred already assembled!]

It has been a strange five weeks, alone in this contradictory and elusive place. Every time I seem to understand something, I am confounded by its contradictions. The Koreans hate the Japanese, with anyone over 60 remembering their repressive rule here, but Japanese fashion dominates the shops. They resent the Americans, whose massive and patronising military presence here defaces the peninsula, and yet in some ways they cannot move fast enough down the American highway. This last issue fascinates me. For the states there is an appealing nostalgia in staying here. The Cold war is still present, in a nice simple Communist Threat that they can somehow understand. When I asked about American attitudes to Korea, one of my students mentioned M.A.S.H. What do you remember from that series as the picture of Koreans? North or South. Exactly. The vast majority of the population want the country to be re-united, but it is still a major crime to speak positively about the north [actually I think it is in London as well, isn't it?]

People I've met have been extraordinarily courteous, or inexplicably rude, excessively concerned or supremely uninterested. There are gestures, traditions, behaviours, stories which are exact equivalents of familiar ones, and others that are entirely alien. At times I have felt like the King of Siam, and at others I have felt like a lost child. I have got used to feeling like a bull in a china shop, in places with tiny crowded aisles stacked high, like china shops for example, where I suppose strictly speaking I've just felt like a bull. I have got used to some smells I thought would turn my stomach forever, and some weird tastes. Some I have failed to get used to. I have got used to a level of noise, of crowding and of visible activity which only a few weeks ago seemed likely to induce epilepsy. I expect the culture shock of getting home will be as great as that of arriving here, adjusting to altered colours and smells, being able to focus on things more than ten feet away, seeing pink, brown, black three-dimensional faces, and having a Patterdale-sized bath. But what am I talking about? I'm not coming back yet. I have marked off the days to the twenty-seventh on my calendar as though I am finishing then, but no. It is the beginning of the next big adventure.

Thank you to all of you for being a collective therapist for me, while I've been here on my own. If you start getting messages now from Ali, claiming to tell the truth, and in any way contradicting any of my previous accounts, please ignore them as ravings brought on by jet-lag. I have told the Seoul truth, and nothing but.

I have had to reconstruct my address list from information sent to me, because it was all on my notebook, so if there are any problems receiving this, let me know - except of course if there are any problems you won't have received it - still you know what I mean.

Off to bend down and sweep the flat for the family arrival.

Love to you all

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@nuri.net>

Subject: No longer the sole Seoul occupant

Monday 6th December

I have engineered a little time in the office to send this. As predicted, there is less time than there was. I'm also a little worried that something is wrong with this system. I haven't had any e-mail at all for the last week, and only one message since my computer was stolen. Could you send me something, just to show that it is working.

Ali and Eddie and Jim arrived ten minutes later than scheduled last week, after quite a long-feeling flight, which is in fact quite long. I will leave her to tell you all about that some time. From my point of view it was quite nerve-wracking enough just waiting for them. First their flight inexplicably disappeared from the arrivals board for ten minutes, just like happens in disaster films, and then a man arrived to be met by his wife standing next to me, and a baby who screamed and shied away from him. I was in a bit of a state by the time they appeared from customs. Jim did what we call in the trade a 'slow burn'. He had no idea of course that the reason he was being forced to stay in a seat for 11 hours was because he was going to meet that man again. Once he had realised who I was though, he stuck to me very firmly, and was gratifyingly distraught when Ali had to take him away a while later. One of my students, Yong, had offered to drive me to the airport, and bring them back. The drive back took nearly three hours - a good introduction to the city of 12 million cars, all stationary. Ali and Jim slept, Eddie talked quite a bit.

The boys took about three days to adjust to the time here, which took us ridiculously by surprise. Ali says it was a bit like concentrating so hard on the birth, you forget about the small matter of dealing with the baby when it's born. They were awake in neat shifts throughout the whole of both the first two nights, so those days are now something of a blur. I think we went into the city a couple of times, visited the university and did some shopping. I certainly remember it felt a little different. It is lovely to have them here though, and I am really appreciating the chance to share everything now [except the apartment, which I quite enjoyed not sharing!] One of the big differences is that travelling anywhere with either or both of the boys you attract a quite unbelievable level of attention. People are generally keen on children here, and western children are a rarity, so on several occasions there have been so many people trying to touch them that we have had to take evasive action. It isn't just smiling and saying hello, it is constant ruffling of hair, pinching of cheeks, poking of tummies, and just straightforward grabbing of whole child. Women of a certain age fight to get Jim on their knee in the tube. Suddenly getting seats is no longer a problem. They are managing very well - much better than we are - and when Eddie relaxes with it enough to do his bowing 'annyong hasseyo' there is the kind of collective response from everyone in the train that you think only happens in musicals. Actually that is slightly the sense of the whole experience. From the moment you get on a train, previously disparate passengers seem suddenly to turn into a chorus, an audible intake of breath in unison, sitting up and turning their heads like meerkats, all looking without blinking at us. This attention can get a little wearing, when for example Jim is not happy. It is embarrassing enough dealing with a tantrum in public, but with fifty or sixty people following avidly every aspect it is hard not to have a little tantrum yourself. I daresay before the time here is up....

Eddie has been in to work with me a couple of times, which has worked well, particular for him, since each of my twenty students felt they should give him a packet of sweets or cake or biscuits. He has been learning Korean traditional drumming, a bit of dancing, and there has been a great deal of appreciation of him generally. Jim and Ali also came in to meet the graduate group, and they are all coming to both of the groups performances which happen later this week. The graduates are performing on Wednesday in the Girls High School, and the other group is performing to groups of children coming to the University on Saturday.

It has been a week of politics here, because the University was due to be granted National University status, an important step, which was suddenly blocked after protests from the older universities, who feel it's level of resourcing is unfair, [the ability to hire foreign 'professors' is

actually one of the main bug-bears] and that they are losing their best students. KNUA was set up by the Ministry of Culture six years ago, and is funded by them, rather than the Ministry of Education, which tends to support the other universities case, in part because of course most of the people there attended them. The argument was due to be debated in parliament next week, but this has been postponed. It is a very interesting and complicated dispute. I wasn't sure at first whether I may be in fact on the wrong side of it [is it the equivalent of working in a grant-maintained school?] but really am now pretty convinced by KNUA's case. The place was established to provide something that the existing Universities were not doing - a high quality of vocational and academic arts education in combination, and for those establishments now to say they could do it better seems a little rich. One way or another I have supported the protests as far as I can. The students and staff here responded by mounting a big outdoor performance, which Eddie and I went to, the other side of town on Wednesday. It was a fantastically impressive event, with everyone wearing black, and a great range of performance. I had not really appreciated that the staff here are many of them very well-known and accomplished performers, and they were doing their stuff - a mixture of traditional music and dance, which as described previously is well-suited to mournful protest, an improvised dance with a stunning solo cello, specially written angry poetry and drama [probably equally powerful, but a little harder to follow] and some spectacular opera singing by a quartet of big-for-Korea professors. It was cold but stirring, and Eddie particularly enjoyed the drumming, which is why he has been doing it.

We have been to some playgrounds, markets, shops, palaces, parks. Today we are off to a 'folk village'. The much-vaunted below-zero weather has still really failed to arrive. Today is quite cold, but sky very blue and beautiful, and we have had no weather that would be unusual in Britain, except for the sustained sunshine!

I had another stereotype-busting experience that I must report. While rehearsing we got into a discussion about masks, and Yumi mentioned that in Korea people wear face-masks when they have colds. That isn't to do with pollution, then? No, it is in case of giving germs to others. I apologise for exacerbating a pitiful image of suffering people in their naive self-induced smog. Please replace this with one of a city with an advanced sense of community which rather makes one feel guilty for all that public sneezing and sniffing at home. I expect if I stayed here long enough I would end up having to modify every single impression I've given in these messages. Not that this is not the twelfth most polluted city in the world, though. At the moment I stand by that..... Anyway. Off to be one of Jim and Eddie's entourage on another sortie into their adoring public. More soon.

Love to all.

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@knua.net

Date 15 December 1999 06:53

Subject: Sokch'o strange time of year for a journey

Not long for this. We have been away for two nights on a holiday within a trip, to a fantastically positioned town called Sokch'o. We saw the sun rise over the Pacific, and set over Soraksan, the highest peak in the East of Korea. We climbed up one mountain, with the help of a cable car [well, Eddie and Ali climbed it - it was the best I could do to stagger from the top of the cable car, and use Jim being asleep as an excuse to stay there, trying not to look down, or even up, as they went on up a ridiculously steep path with precipices on all sides. We visited a Buddhist temple on the coast, with a vast statue overseeing the safety of the fishing boats, threw stones in the sea on an astonishingly mild and sunny December morning, and we braved a meal in a Korean fish restaurant, with unnamed creatures staring at us from a range of dishes.

Through all this, Eddie and Jim have continued to be magnets for the most intense attention imaginable. They have been grabbed, scooped up, pinched, slapped, squeezed, applauded across the nation. With Jim on your shoulders it is hard to make any forwards progress in most places. Surprising people like soldiers and business men follow them around grinning maniacally. Women pull up socks, pull down jumpers, force on mittens, whatever the reaction. If either of them seems unhappy, the deluge of satsumas, chewing gum, sweets, yoghurt, and persimmons simply grows. Jim for the most part seems to like it, and he now waves almost all the time, like the queen, keeping up a monologue either along the lines of 'hello, hello, hello', or 'Yum, yum, yum' or 'wow wow wow' - more or less depending on if it is people food or a view. Eddie finds the attention more wearing.

On the beach at a place called Naksan, a fisherwoman adjusted Jim's clothes for the wind, and then hit Ali twice, rather hard, for her negligence. I told Yumi about this, and she says it will not have been intended as criticism, and is an expression of her great spontaneous love for Jim. At the time of writing I have not put this theory to Ali, but I suspect she might be sceptical!

Fisticuffs notwithstanding, our trip to the East was genuinely fantastic. We went on a small plane, because the runway at Sokch'o is notoriously short. Eddie managed to stay awake for the take-off, and really loved the whole flight. He has watched a video of Free Willy an estimated 27 times in the last week, and has convinced himself that we will eventually meet Willy [a whale - in case you haven't seen it, or were wondering] every time we see the sea. He gazes out with heart-breaking longing from the plane window, and the hotel.

The hotel was a safe option, relatively expensive, with fantastic sea view. Slight drawbacks were karaoke above until 1AM and strong smell of drainage in room. Incense and earplugs helped. Mercifully none of the other sound-effects from my previous out of Seoul experience.

About forty minutes on a local bus up to Soraksan, which is a vast national park, usually very crowded, but manageable on a December Monday. Gorgeous weather, and spectacularly beautiful scenery.

In the week before the trip, the two courses came to a climax with performances in school and at the University. All pretty successful. Ali and Jim saw very little, partly because Jim was not in a good frame of mind for the university performances, but also because the school cancelled the one that Ali was coming to. We arrived for a whole day, and it was revealed that all the students had to go to a graduation ceremony in the afternoon. Typical bloody school - some things are the same across the world, evidently. It was a shame though, because I really wanted to see what Ali thought.

Very interesting performances and reactions, but no time to discuss them here, I'm afraid.

Evaluation, marking, planning for the future, and trying to make sure I get paid are the agenda for this week, with last minute sight-seeing, shopping and packing filling up the domestic side. I'm down to my last million, obviously due largely to Mrs Professor's notorious profligacy. I will try to sneak in another message before we come back.

Love to all

Pete

From: Peter Wynne-Willson <pwynne@knua.net

Subject: Just a dong at twilight

Seoul now, the end is near..., anyong merrily on high, this is my Sonsaengnim, you're the Won that I want, Korea to eternity and all the others from the same songbuk.....

I have just finished a gruelling round of goodbyes, with much incontinent thanking, presents [Cadbury's Chocolate Bears that Ali brought] and some very hurried planning for the future. They want me to

come back, and it may be that I will - the leading idea being to bring a

company here in 2001, and to do a collaborative project. I have thoroughly enjoyed the work here, but am keen that if I did come back it

would be to do something which is a development, rather than a repeat. At this particular moment it is nice to think about coming home, and perhaps doing a similar thing some time in the reasonably distant future, perhaps somewhere else, where I could start on a fresh list of puns. I've done Korea now. On the other hand, the thought of a refresher burst of bowing and boundless respect, every now and then, when a Year 12 workshop has been a little bruising, will I'm sure seem appealing.

I haven't got time or energy to sum up much but.... Korea's omnipresent

slogan is 'Land of the Morning Calm' - the translation of 'Chosun', a previous name for the peninsula. This for me ranks up there with 'Coventry - the city in Shakespeare Country' and 'Balham - Gateway to the South' for inappropriateness. I have been toying with variations, Land of the Warming Floor, Land of the Monoxide Cloud - I think 'Land of the Madding Crowd' is my favourite. It is an exhaustingly packed place, which I have been in like a lost sock in a washing machine, bundled through it's whole cycle. I think I will hold onto more vivid pictures than I would have thought possible in just ten weeks, and it is strange now that the last few have gone so fast, when early on it seemed that time had been caught in a great smog-bound gridlock, and reduced to walking pace. We are getting ready for one final push through the ignoble strife on Monday morning. I am preparing now for my

reverse culture-shock from coming home. The positive relaxation and solitude of pre-christmas New Street. Sudden total lack of interest in Jim and Eddie. No bowing, no 'yes, Peter Sonsaengnim', no Yumi to turn to to explain what it all means.

I am looking forward to seeing you all. We are relatively unchanged by the experience, and you will still recognise me by my mandarin moustache, little goatee beard, grey padded cotton pyjama suit, my cellphone and my walkman. Mrs Professor still walks at a decent distance behind me, carrying both children strapped to her back while sweeping the floor with a short-handled broom. Eddie and Jim are unchanged except for the heavy bruising of the pinch-marks on all soft areas. I have also acquired eastern wisdom, and if you show me appropriate respect, I will impart it to you.

Token news from this last week. Eddie's front tooth came out, just in time for him to learn, 'All I want for Cwithmath....' He recieved a pound and a thousand won. Ali has been out on some extremely intrepid sorties across the city with both boys. A fantastic children's museum, some palaces, theme parks, markets. The weather finally got to face-aching level. This last weekend will be just Christmas Shopping and packing, with a Traditional Dance evening thrown in tonight [Saturday].

Think of us if you will from 5.00am-4.30pm your time on Monday, back past Beijing, across the Gobi Desert, Mongolia Siberia St Petersburg. Hope that the car starts in Heathrow long-stay, and see you all very soon.

With much love from

Pete

17th March 2002 Seong-Buk-Gu, Seoul, Korea

So here we go...I'm back in Seoul, and your inboxes are due for a regular battering of unsolicited drivel, to help me get it out of my system and keep sane in the roller-coaster that is life in the Land of the Morning Calm - as Korea, without a hint of irony, is known.

I am sending this out to a long list of people in my contact file. Some of you have actually asked me to do this, and others have been caught in the cross-fire. Please let me know if you prefer to be struck from this list, or if the details I have are wrong, or if you don't know who on earth I am and have been included due to typing error.....

Because of the number of people included, I am aware that I am up to date with some of you and not with others, so some introduction may be needed/superfluous. Bear with me.

I am in Seoul for the next four months, teaching an MFA in Theatre in Education at the Korean National University of the Arts, a course that I came here in 1999 to set up. Many of you are veterans or former victims of the dispatches from here [sorry - the only english-language TV here is the American Forces Network - those darn guys have infected my mind already] so you know what I was doing then: well this is different.

This time, like any good sequel, there are new issues, new developments. I'm here for a 'semester'. Not content with my god-like Visiting Professor status, I am also making links between schools here, five in Birmingham and six in Dudley [as natural an alliance as you could possibly imagine!] running a course for teachers and researching. I shall also be directing a schools tour in Korean of Heads or Tails, a play that I wrote for Big Brum - set in Ladywood, Birmingham in the 1940s - telling the story of [Steward Street School](#). The family is out here for a month starting in May, and then of course there is the World Cup.... and the International Congress of Toilet Manufacturers - the two major international events here, for both of which I shall be acting as your unofficial correspondent. Hold on for an eat-what-you-can barbecue of bizarre events and images, and please send me word from your allegedly civilised world every now and then, as I fearlessly perch here on the very edge of reality.

If it's like last time, I guess I will write a lot, for therapeutic reasons, so this time I'm going to put it on my website, with pictures as well. If you have the stamina, read on....

Three days in, and my pitiful dream of a grand and dignified re-entrance, between bowing lines of students, and blossom floating down from the trees, lies in sad ruins. After two hours of flight it was all going fine, but then my feeble western constitution let me down [helped I think by a suspect chicken baguette at Heathrow], and the next nine were spent between my window seat and the toilets at the back of the turquoise Korean Air jumbo - doing my own close up research for the big lavatory convention. I was too sick to appreciate fully the brand new international airport in Seoul too, except to notice that it is like a big concrete armadillo...



Well I say 'airport in Seoul'.... a couple of very tricky hours drive later, still clutching my airline vomit bag, I got to the university. This was great, except that strictly speaking I should have been at my flat, it being nine at night, and my life ebbing rapidly away [well OK I was just feeling sick, but that's what it felt like]. The problem was that Yeong-Hoon, the student-turned-administrator who had fetched me, had lost it. I don't mean he'd lost his temper, or his mind...I mean he had lost the flat. It had been there in the afternoon, but now it was dark, and it was gone. There was no shortage of flats, in the area around the university. A wonderful ramshackle maze of them, with random numbers and no two looking

alike, but none seemed quite right. We even went into a couple to look, but in each case there were in fact people living there.



It was 10.30 and I was actually not feeling ill any more when we went back with further advice, and found it. Young-Hoon left, and I have to admit that this trip did not seem like a good idea any more. All the planning, two weeks of delay in a visa mess - which I won't stop to explain, because it involves a system that Kafka rejected because he thought it was overstated. In the name of God, why? The phone wouldn't call the UK. No Ali, no boys. I had picked up the information that I was to take my first three hour class at 9.00am, and I was on my own. The underfloor heating was on, it was cosy, I dumped all my stuff and went to sleep. Things could only get better.

What was that? Better? It was then that the jet-lag did its bit. I woke up at 2.00 am, eventually went off to sleep properly, and then....

'Peter Sonaengnim, Peter Sonaengnim. Wake up, wake up!'



'Oh God, what's the time?'

'It's nine o'clock Professor Peter. Don't worry. I have called your class and told them you will be fifteen minutes late'

'Right...'

And so, my entrance, without blossom [due in April, apparently] and without a great deal of dignity, happened at 9.15 on Friday morning. Seriously dirty, without any food for a day, [and with the previous day's worth somewhere in the Gobi Desert] dishevelled, unshaven, and lacking the level of meticulous planning for my session that I have always held so dear..... There was plenty of bowing, I'm pleased to relate, but other details of the next few hours remain hazy. I do remember revealing in desperation that I was wearing my superman T-shirt under my shirt, which was extremely well received. I think in a desperate kind of way, it was quite a good session. I was so close to tears that what I'm hoping is that they saw this as an unusual level of passionate belief in my work. But I'd settle for them just feeling sorry for me, really. The students seemed lovely, and Insoo, my translator, is wonderful.



I had a big lunch, without being able to eat much of it, with Young-Ai, the head of the department and my reason for being here. It was fantastic to see her. In the afternoon I did another class [my improvisation class, which was frankly, well.....improvised], and then there was a big welcoming ceremony [not just for me, for the whole new semester] which involved each of the staff in making a short speech. My fellow professors, grouped together, are an impressive mixture, and the reception each got was extraordinarily wild - not neat formal rows politely clapping, more whooping and cheering. Many of the staff are famous performers, and that is the way they are related to. One relatively big esteemed colleague looked familiar to me, and I found out later it was because he has been in Bond films. Eddie is going to be ecstatic. After the speeches [I said my three words of Korean to wild jubilation] there was a raw fish and seaweed reception followed at seven o'clock by a short [just 2 hours] performance of extracts of mostly rather verbal korean drama. All in all, a bit of a day, but it was over, I stayed heroically conscious, and the sanctuary of the weekend beckoned.

I'm going to start rehearsing on Monday, and will rehearse most evenings, and in the day on Saturdays, and some Sundays. My teaching is only on Wednesdays and Fridays, and the rest of the work will fill the rest of the time quite full. This weekend I have pottered round, getting reacclimatised to this extraordinary place. I came with the happy memory of the end of my previous time here loud in my head, but suddenly what has rushed back is the memory of how I felt when I first got here. A level of disorientation I've only felt in the orient. The scale, the smells, the colours, the noise, the language, the tastes, the traffic, are relentless and battering and the effect has already swung frequently between smothering and exhilarating.

I must stop. I don't want to put you off reading at this early stage, and once again I run the risk of only experiencing one day in three, while the others are spent writing it all up! There is loads I haven't mentioned. Remind me to tell you some time about Calvin and Tommie, about the search for a rubbish bag, about Insadong and Dongdaemun, about the mistake with the apartment number, my much-travelled box, the washing-up dryer and the singing alarm-clock.....

By the way, I'm feeling fine now. The weather is bright but cool - very nice in fact.

With love to you all

Pete

Sunday 24th March Seongbuk-Gu, Seoul

A week and a bit, and I'm surprised by how settled in I feel.

My apartment is only ten minutes walk from the University, which is in the former headquarters of the



secret police, up on a hill. In front of it is a small park, alongside it a small historic site, [an ornamental garden and some royal or noble tombs - Korean dignitaries of old were buried in kind of Tellytubby grass mounds] which costs about 40 pence to get into, but is very peaceful and beautiful. Behind the campus is a tree covered small mountain, which is fenced off, and at the other side are the university's own gardens which have a large pond and wooden gazebo for contemplation and a wooded area with a kind of trim trail. All the park areas are used very fully by

people of all ages but mostly older people exercising in impressive earnest. All in all it is a really nice area, immediately bordered by the shambling residential district of my flat, which is built around a maze of narrow streets and alleys, and is full of very mixed, mostly low-rise housing. From what I have seen of other parts of Seoul, I think I'm very lucky to be where I am. It is much more obviously run down than some parts, but it is on a more manageable scale than most. In fact the flat itself is incredibly quiet, considering the density of population of the whole place.



I am on the first floor [or second in Korean] and although there is only one bedroom, there is a separate living room, with two sofas in it, so we should be OK when the family arrives. I've now got most of the technical domestic issues more or less sorted out - I can switch the wonderful heated floor on and off, I know when to put the rubbish out [any night I want is the impressive answer to this one - it's collected every day!] and I can even operate the interestingly different washing machine. To achieve this last one, I took a picture with my digital camera and printed it off, so that Insoo my translator could scribble down what the buttons mean for me. There is a television in the bedroom which shows



fourteen Korean Channels, one from Hong Kong and the American Forces Network, which has the odd thing worth watching, if can cope with the bits in between - [Operation Enduring Garbage] But now, outstripping all this, I have a cable connection to the internet -I'm wired up 24/7, for twenty pounds a month all in. I can surf the hours away, video-conference with home, and listen to Radio 4 round the clock if I feel really homesick.

The neighbourhood wiring is all up in the air, with a spaghetti of cable on every street on every level. It's a good metaphor for the way the place has grabbed technology with both hands, fantastically impressive, but also terrifying. You want somehow to slow down the stampede and pause for thought, but why the hell should they have to wait.... Another wonderful symbol is the dark pink plastic machine on the draining board. I thought it was a dishwasher, but it is actually just an electric dish-dryer - a drainer, where you can stack the dishes, and then press some buttons so that hot air dries them. 'At last, an end to all that tedious waiting while the dishes drain dry!'

So all in all, I like my flat. There is no wash-basin, and there are large cracks in all the walls, but perhaps it is an indication of the deranged optimism which is my inoculation for this trip that I found myself being pleased about them. I figured that Ali will not worry so much about the hairline cracks in our kitchen. As I write this, I see a small flaw in my argument.....



This week has been very full of work. Rehearsals are probably going well, but it's difficult to be entirely sure. I spent five happy hours on a trip to the Immigration Office to be registered as an alien, I visited one palace and several markets, I got more used to the constant bowing of students, and I slotted into a kind of rhythm

My traumas over the Gobi Desert seemed a fair way away by Tuesday, but they've followed me, or at least the desert itself has - in the form of a yellow mist which descended that morning. Everyone put face masks on, and the nurseries and elementary schools were closed, so that children could be kept inside. This is the Chinese Dust, a nasty smog which floats across from China every now and then. Mostly desert sand, but picking up sulphur and stuff en route. I made my way into college, and asked a student about it. 'How long will it stay?', I asked. She shrugged and said 'I don't know...Spring, maybe' So for a while this was a cause of some gloom. In the end it was thinner the next day, and has gone altogether now. Again, though, perhaps it's just me, but there seemed to be something more significant held within the idea of this country being helpless in the slipstream of China, vast and mysterious....

Time for bed. I hope you are all well. It would be good to hear if you've received this, because a good deal of my e-mail seems not to be arriving, and it's impossible to know who is getting what. I'm copying these messages onto my website, in case I go on having problems, so you can always keep up with me there.

Love to you all

Pete

Dear Britain

I am very sad to hear your tragic news. You must all be devastated, and the makers of ludicrous powder-blue outfits must be distraught. I considered suspending this week's news out of respect, and then remembered I haven't got any [respect, I mean - I've got plenty of news]. Perhaps some thoughts of far away will help distract you from your national mourning. I do hope that none of the tributes forget to mention that marvellous time she went to the East End in the blitz, and showed that she really understood ordinary people.



It's Sunday, which at the moment is my only day off, with rehearsals for Heads or Tails filling my non-teaching days. These are increasingly fascinating. I have to cut the play down from 90 to fifty minutes, which has been a little traumatic, but probably quite good for me. This is deemed to be the longest that any school here is likely to spare their pupils from proper work, even on a Saturday, when almost all the performances will take place. Really the attitude to school and college is staggering. I know I've gone on about it before but..... one of the students in my cast finishes rehearsals with me at 10.00 every evening, goes home [90 minutes on the tube] and at midnight she takes a lesson for a high-school girl for an hour. She is giving her special coaching for the national university entrance. [Special except that almost all of them have it] This exam is crucial. It takes place on one day in the autumn, the exam paper answers are in the papers in the evening, and the corpses of teenagers are picked up from beneath apartment blocks all over Korea the next day. Do you think the NUT would

be considering industrial action?

I have to say that the University of the Arts, where I am working, is clearly unusual, and the atmosphere here is not oppressively formal, although they still work too hard. I am now completely used to the attitude to me, which is really so fantastic... random students in the corridor, who aren't even in my classes, stop me and give me chocolate biscuits. It is this, and the facts that if I ask them to do something, they just whole-heartedly do it, and that they laugh spontaneously and apparently genuinely every time I even try to be funny, I think explains at a stroke why I have come back. I mean, what more could one possibly ask for? I had a hole in my sock on the first day [shoes are taken off outside the room before every session] and the next lesson Chi Ok gave me two new pairs of socks. If I accidentally lick my lips, two glasses of water appear within seconds. I could go on.

Yesterday, Young-Hoon, who was a student when I was last here, and who now is an administrator, and who also acts as my interpreter for rehearsals, asked me to visit his english-learning group. They are an internet community which meets face to face once a month, and who provide another example of the self-improvement obsession. The leading light of the group is an impressive young man called Teong Heun, who works night shifts as a labourer for the Korean railways, and learns english in the daylight hours. His lesson included introducing a list of words [opera, ribbon, nylon and raindrop] with which Koreans traditionally have difficulty, and explaining that with an 'R' your tongue doesn't touch anything, and with an 'L', it touches the roof of your mouth - go on, try it. His top tips were to repeat this list for one hour a day for a month, and to learn the words of 'raindrops keep falling on my head', and sing it one hundred times during difficult moments at work. This was part of his seven stage programme. [I guess the singing thing works better for working on the railway than it would in some jobs] I do not mean to mock this. He sang 'raindrops' extremely well, and he made me feel, not for the first time, utterly ashamed of my pitiful efforts with Korean, which in other contexts I feel I've worked at pretty hard. I put it down to not having enough bad times at work.



The rest of the group was largely younger women, who were mortified by my presence, and who spoke english well, but very shyly, with hands over their mouths. I found myself talking like a text-book for some reason, and saying things like 'how do you do?'. Some kind of instinct to collude with the idea of England that prevails took over. But they wouldn't have understood if I'd talked in a Birmingham accent, would they?

The group meet on the fourteenth floor of a block in Yeouido, which is Seoul's Manhattan. It has this tag because it is an island in the Han [big river to you] is full of skyscrapers, and is the business district. Probably comparisons end about there. There is a large cherry park which next week will be sensational, when the blossom hits town. Yesterday it was raining, so I didn't look round.

Oh yes, the rain. Saturday, when Peter found out that his part of town is not quite so quaint when it rains, and the drains overflow.....

I have been paid for my first month [two weeks of which was spent at the Korean Embassy in London] but I cannot get the money out of my account until my Alien Registration completes, and my passport is returned. Still, I now have 3 Million in my Korean account. Pretty good, eh? I managed to spend some money yesterday, which is tough when everyone gives you things. I took all of my cast and crew for a meal, explaining beforehand that it would be my treat. This is what you have to do apparently. Offering to contribute when someone else has suggested the meal is not on. We had a vast banquet for two hours with eight people - barbecued on the tables in front of us. It cost about £26!



Earlier in the week the same group had taken me to the theatre and a meal, which was a really good trip. Three former students were involved in the play, which was a wonderful performance with a range of puppets, and was visual enough for me to be less out of my depth than sometimes. It was good to meet the performers, who wanted to know all about what Eddie was like now. Actually it was nice to be thought of as mainly Eddie's dad - being a guru-figure can be so draining! It also reminded me of quite how excited things may get when Mrs Professor and her small entourage arrive. The chocolate biscuit sales of the area will go sky-high.

We have successfully video-conferenced a few times now. It is very strange to see and hear Ali and the boys, clearly, even if slightly out of sync. Jim just thinks it is completely normal, of course. What was wonderful was that it didn't work at first, and Eddie got it working, with me talking him through it over the phone, as if landing a jumbo from the ground. Precious little father-son moment.

This afternoon Professor Calvin McClinton, visiting professor of Musicals, has arranged tickets for The Last Empress, Korea's big big musical, which came to London earlier in the year. He and Tommie St Cyr are two of the three Americans on the staff, the other being Sun Tek Oh [right], the Korean-American whom I had wrongly identified as Odd-Job. In fact he was in Man with the Golden Gun, as Hip, the agent that helps Bond and kicks people, plus about a million other films. [Oddjob was in fact played by a Japanese Hawaiian wrestler called George Sakaro, now sadly gone the way of the QM]. That is the ex-pat community here, such as it is, with me representing the non American world, which lets face it needs a voice here.... But that is another issue, perhaps next time.



Love to you all in your hour of darkness

Peter

Seogkwan Dong, Seongbuk-Gu, Seoul - 7th April 2002

Dear All

As you would know, if you were doing the level of background reading expected in Korea, Friday was 'tree-planting day' here, and we had a holiday. This festival is not traditional or symbolic, but wonderfully functional, having been instituted in an attempt to repair the huge deforestation that was left by the Japanese Colonisation in the first half of the twentieth century and then the Korean War. Every citizen, once a year, was to take a day off work to plant a tree. But here's the thing: that is exactly what happened. At a stroke, or gradually I suppose, over the years [very similar in size to England and with the population now at 48 million - figures just out] the problem was solved. Every scrap of open land is full of trees, and the mountains tend to have trees even over their summits. Is it just me, or is it hard to think of models of national efforts of that kind that aren't about war?



I have to say that I didn't see much tree-planting myself, because the cast of the play took me on a tremendous day-trip to a little lake district, near a town called Chuncheon [at last a first line for that amusing limerick about a truncheon!] It involved waking at five o'clock, to get to the early train, for which we had just managed to get standing tickets.



I had been very impressed by my previous contact with Korean Railways in 1999, [it is still in national ownership, although with privatisation depressingly being regularly debated], which involved an express train, with a bowing guard of honour welcoming you on board, which ran to the minute. The expresses are called Saemaeul, but this one was the Mugungwhana, the cheap and cheerful second class train. I cannot say exactly how cheap, because we had paid a one-off fee for the whole day of about ten pounds to Chi-Ok, who plays

Jeannie, and was our organiser. Cheerful I can confirm, though. There were people standing in every possible space, many of which would not have been possible for anyone bigger- on luggage racks, behind seats... We played noisy games all the way, with a good deal of giggling, and it seemed as if everyone else on the train was also in a group of ten, also giggling, but singing as well. Some seats were empty some of the way, and of course the students scouted the train every stop for any possibility of somewhere for me to sit, and then gathered round wherever that was for the next round of 'Ming,Mang,Mung' or the 007 game. Two hours later, on time to the second, we arrived, and had the first of three picnics by a pond - a kind of early Chuncheon luncheon, well OK it was still breakfast, but I had to put that there, because by lunch time we had gone out of town!



Forty minutes on a local bus, then a fifteen minute ferry on a big artificial lake, and a long walk up a river valley to a spectacular buddhist temple. The weather was the best it's been, the landscape really very familiar except for a few crucial differences. Nowhere I have been is completely wild, and all the mountains have box-offices at the entrances, and ticket barriers higher up, with set trails to cover. The paths often have cut steps, or banisters even, and there are lamp-posts. Apart from that, you can imagine walking up a popular stream in our dear lake district, looking for a picnic spot. Same pools, shady steep twisting paths, stepping stones and waterfalls. Now turn up the brightness, and turn down the colour control, taking away most of the green. Then every now and then, build a ramshackle restaurant, where people eat on little platforms above the water, under plastic or tarpaulin shelters. Oh and at the very top of the mountain, build a cluster of brightly-coloured temples filled with carved dragons and paper lanterns, and play a tape of chanting and bells. You have the picture.



Our second picnic was by the stream, the third was by a pond, and then back to the town for another impressive banquet of marinated chicken cooked on the table in front of us. We got back to Seoul at ten o'clock, and after getting on the wrong bus in my tiredness, I was back home only an hour or so later. The best 'tree-planting day' trip I've ever had, I would say.



On Saturday as if to emphasise how lucky we had been with the weather for the holiday, it rained very long and hard, and the streets ran again with dubious streams. I bought an umbrella, because I had almost come to blows with a man in the street who was trying to insist I take his.

Technology update. There is a new subway line, where the escalators see you coming and start moving just for you. This is a common tendency with machines here. The urinals do it as well - they don't move, though, they just start flushing. I think perhaps they may have developed this technology because it is not something that occurs naturally in people here, as a rule. I have tried to stop myself from behaving like John Cleese, and constantly muttering 'right I'll just walk round you then shall I?', and nearly adjusted to random intimate contact with strangers.

No time this week for political commentary, at a moment when we have a South Korean envoy in the North and some of George Bush's damage seems to be being undone. Nor for details of my contact with the chap at the embassy, who turns out to be Mike from Walsall, and who is getting us all tickets for the England warm-up game on Jeju Island in May. Meeting him delayed because the embassy bar wasn't open due to death in the Royal family. Thank you very much for your messages. I don't feel anything like as isolated as last time. The rehearsals are getting better, my korean is coming along slowly, and I've really had a very good week indeed. Enjoy the rest of the holiday.

lots of love

Pete

Seokkwan-Dong, Seoul Sunday 14th April 2002

Dear West

The nation here has been on the edge of its seat this week, the newspapers buzzing with re-unification talk. Is it going to happen, just how long will it take, for the north and south sections of David Beckham's second metatarsal to re-join?

Back on the front pages, similar issues have preoccupied us. With apologies to those of you who are well aware of all this, here is a Ladybird guide to Korean reunification. The assumption here is that Korea will be reunified, the questions when and how. Of course the model assumed is really reclaiming the North into the capitalist world rather than some kind of fusion of systems. The Korean war never officially finished; the current state is ceasefire rather than peace, and the ultimate aim of the south [or rather of the US] is victory, rather than anything which really resembles negotiation.



The current President of the South, Kim Dae-Jung [in hospital this week with a foot injury, along with Beckham and Jim] staked his political success on progress with re-unification [the 'sunshine policy'] and things were going well until September, with tourist cruises begun from south to north, and with staged reunions between divided families. Then security was upgraded, North Korea took offence and talks were called off. After that George Bush included NK in the top three of his league of evil, and the future looked gloomy. This matters a lot to everyone here. Not only is almost everyone in the south said to be separated from someone close, but the divide seems to be a cause of pain within the national psyche, and of very practical suffering as a result of the level of military activity - from the massive American presence, to the fact that all South Korean men serve three years in the army, with serious effects on families and relationships.



Americans here will tell you that Bush's advisers knew what he was doing, and that it was all part of a plan to up the ante, and encourage North Korean progress. Whether or not that is being a bit charitable, talks are now back on, and the Minister of Reunification sent someone to Pyeongyang for talks about talks this week. Reunions will start again at the end of the month, and the final railway station on the broken Seoul to Pyeongyang line was symbolically reopened. I will go there and investigate when I get the chance...

Back in my little bizarre world. The news. Well, I am now proudly registered as an alien. Another visit to the great bureaucracy resulted in the return of my passport, and a crucial little card. It has a fuzzy picture, and the words Registered Alien in English and Korean. I am not sure quite what it qualifies me for, but I show it to people whenever I can. I have started watching out for Sigourney Weaver, who I think is stalking me.

I received a bundle of sticky labels in the post from my English-learning friends. I had casually admired their set, with words in English to stick all over the house, and so they sent me a Korean set. There are 130, of which I understood three, which are now proudly stuck to the toilet, the soap and a pair of shoes. Today, I shall go through the dictionary with the rest.



Yesterday the cast of Heads or Tails [or 'Tong Jon Teon Jigi' as we now call it] went to do a session in a school, which was very encouraging. The school was huge, but reassuringly familiar in its feel. The children were fantastic, and very forthcoming in the discussions we did, which were about what they understood from the four scenes we showed them. They had no real problems with the things my actors were anxious about [coping with the distance in time and place, quick character changes etc] and they drew masses of meaning from everything, so it served to make us all feel that this eccentric enterprise has some chance of being quite successful.

I had an hysterical visit to the British Embassy's club night, to try to secure my tickets for England [what's left of them] v South Korea. I did that, and also secured my place in the British Cricket team, which starts its season next Sunday [against Pakistan and South Africa teams and the like!] and should



provide some material for my messages. British not English, you note; all part of the concerted thrust towards reunification I imagine. The assessment of my cricketing skills that resulted in my selection was not too strenuous. Along the lines of, 'just breathe on this mirror, would you?' There are one thousand British people among the 48 Million in Korea, and a remarkably dysfunctional cross-section they are too, if the ones I've met are anything to go by. I'm sure they speak equally highly of me.

Tragically, I seem to have missed the toilet convention, that I promised I would tell you about. This was down to the back-to-front date system - the same reason that my theories on how the world changed after 11/9 have not gone down well - everyone is wondering what happened in November.

The video linking is continuing to provide me with great therapy and entertainment. Jim just sits and chats away on his own in the room, without feeling it's odd. He now types messages, [like Eddie, except that Jim's are random letters] and then tells me what they mean. One of them apparently meant ..'I can't kiss you because you are on the other side of the world....'

Which sounds like a good sign-off

Love to you all

Your resident alien

[available, two fully functional feet and practically on the scene if Sven needs me]

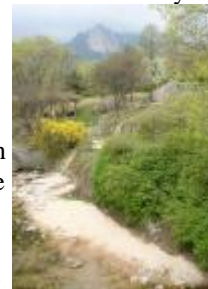
Seokgwan-Dong Seongbuk-Gu, Seoul 21st April 2002

Hello

We've had a pretty hot week, though a frustrating proportion of it has been in sweaty classrooms and rehearsal rooms.

On Monday, I had no commitments until 5.00, and although that morning it was cloudy and threatened rain, I felt the time had come to head for the hills. So I set off early, to conquer somewhere before my evening rehearsal.

There are various fairly substantial mountains close to Seoul, and some pretty big ones actually in the city. The biggest and most famous is a whole mini range known collectively as Bukhansan, which figures looming impressively in the background in many views of Seoul. It is only a twenty minute tube ride to get to the bottom of one of the parts of Bukhansan called Dobongsan ['san' is mountain] and so this was Monday's peak of choice. I have my mountain boots with me, and generally felt pretty pleased with myself for getting up in time, and avoiding the weekend crowds.



Actually there were plenty of people on the carved footpaths, mostly older people, with regulation flowerpot men hats, and sleeveless fishing-type jackets with pockets, many of them with impressive ski-sticks and ice axes. The crowds thinned, the weather cleared and the gradient increased gradually all the way up. There are no proper maps, Wainwright never made it to Dobongsan, and navigating is done by following the signs, with no concessions made for foreigners. I tried to follow signs for the ridge which looked most promising in the tourist brochure, but the signs for all I know might have been saying 'under no circumstances attempt this route' My rich fantasies of the path never before trodden were blown away a number of times, as I passed a coca cola machine at an estimated 25,000 feet, and higher still a whole complex of Buddhist temples, with a very full congregation, and painted lanterns. But just as I was feeling it was more of a park than a proper mountain, I noticed that it had imperceptibly become much more scrubby, and I was having to use my hands as well as feet. The trees were fewer, the people too, the ground



underfoot had become rock, and I started having not to look down. Thinking about it now, I can't really say why I didn't realise this would happen. The peaks of the mountain are perfectly visible, and even from a distance you can tell they are pointy. I suppose I thought that the paths with all these people on wouldn't lead to that sort of top. As I got nearer, the one in front became more and more like the Matterhorn, and the visions of my little adventure ending with a thud like a Whymper began to take a grip. But I seemed quite close to the top, and I had come this far.....



I had scaled a longish section of fairly steep 'path' completely on all fours and very slowly, when the only other visible man went round a corner out of sight, and I just froze. Something about the angles. I could see down to nasty drops in three directions, and although the piece I was on was quite broad, nothing would convince my legs that any other movement was possible. I tried to concentrate on what I had in my bag, and even tried to take some pictures to prove



how far I'd got, but that made me think about the view, and then the thought of tumbling down. In the end, I started very slowly down, while still looking up. It was at this point that a woman of about 85, with a uniform tabard and a broom, came skipping up past me. She was cleaning the mountain. My humiliation was complete. I'm glad to say, it didn't stop me saying 'annyong hasseyo', and attempting to bow without leaning forwards at all.

Today I went to the park instead. Very nice, no precipices, but one or two other people had had the same idea. My peace is punctuated rather often in public places by children who either say 'hi' or just point and laugh. More intrepid ones come up and say 'Good morning Sir, my name is Jeong-Hwan, how are you today, Sir?'. On Sundays, fathers appear, and so there is quite a stream of smaller children pushed by a Dad, to come up and show off their english. They bring me iced coffee and greengage juice. It sounds nice, and I am always very smiley about it, but that slightly upsets me now, because I've been finding out more about the drive to learn english. There is a growing practice of children having the little thing under their tongues removed surgically, because of a rumour [nothing more than that, it is complete rubbish] that the reason Koreans have difficulty distinguishing 'r' and 'l' is because the movement of the tongue is restricted... Qualified, intelligent surgeons actually take their money and do this operation.

The World Cup is getting closer, and preparations are more in evidence. A 'silver army' of elderly volunteers has been recruited to help, and a team of students is also lined up for each team, to do the cheering. Soccer has in some ways been slow to take off here, and the feeling is that the atmosphere in games will need a little artificial assistance. I now have a ticket for a match [Brazil against Costa Rica] which was hard to get hold of and expensive, but I think I have to get to at least one match since I'm actually here.



In the news, the Japanese Prime Minister has annoyed everyone here by a bizarrely-timed visit to a contentious war memorial, hot on the heels of a new publication of a Japanese history text book which is bitterly resented for its 'rewriting' of the occupation of Korea [both re-runs of very damaging disputes from last year] as the World-Cup co-hosts continue to be the least likely bed-fellows since Sven and

Ulrike.

Rehearsals are hotting up. Perhaps I'll tell you more about that next week. I'm off to teach some children 'Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head'...to try and save them from the knife.

Love

Pete

Seokgwan-Dong, Seoul - 28th April 2002

Dear all

This morning I went to the World Cup Stadium in Seoul, where the opening ceremony, opening match and several significant games will be held. Like all ten stadia being used it has been built specially. Quickly and on an awesome scale, not very like our own dear Wembley. The concept is impressive too - each stadium takes a different traditional theme as the core of its design. In the case of Seoul, it is designed to look like a traditional kite, the symbol of reunification, sitting on an octagonal fruit dish of seats, a symbol of hospitality. The site was until three years ago a wasteland resulting from fifteen years as Seoul's main landfill, but has been reclaimed. The methane from the rubbish is collected and used to power the stadium and the nearby apartments, while no fewer than five linked parks have been constructed across the mounds. They are not finished yet, I was told. They open on May 1st. In the Hangang, the river that divides the city, there is a fountain which symbolises the year 2002 by rising 202 metres [good to know that there are limits, even here!] and 21 smaller fountains standing for the 21st Century.



I know about all the symbolism because one of the 'silver army', the tens of thousands of retired volunteers who are helping on all things World Cup, was my individual personal guide around the stadium. He led me through an exhibition, detailing the development of the stadium, and the history of the World Cup, and then out into the place itself. I won't get there for a match, I think - all sold out long ago, but I might hang around outside for the Firework Festival, or the Global Festival of Drums, or the Cup Countdown Cultural events [depicting *gi* and *hon* - energy and spirit to you - and life and peace], or the intriguing World Cup Guinness contests, the Happy World Rock Festival, the Sangam Cheer Show, or the World Flag Festival.....I think you could say Seoul is making the most of its moment in the spotlight.



Yesterday I saw a wonderful show put on by the adjoining school in our university - the School of Traditional Performing Arts. It was a new version of a very well-known traditional story Chunyang - which is a kind of Romeo and Juliet-like, rich boy and poor girl in forbidden love type story. It was really extremely good - presented on the main stage at the National Theatre, with a cast of about three hundred, an all-singing all dancing extravaganza. To my shame I had thought it might be something of a trial. Korean traditional music is quite hard to listen to at times - lots of squeaks and bangs, different harmonics, very dominated as everything is by mournful, tragic laments, and often rather long. This was not like that, and in fact the squeaks bangs and lamenting were very good as well as the comic bits and the spectacle. Again the scale of support - the sheer amount of money committed to the production, which played to about 2,000 people, was staggering.

My own production is not quite being given that status, although it has much more money and time given to it than most things I have been involved in. The set is being welded at the moment - in the University's own workshops, which are massive. We are touring a full rubber floor with two layers to it, with sections that lift out during performance to reveal splashes of bright colour. The design team have been through two whole models, and innumerable wonderful sketches on the way to this creation. 1940s english wirelasses have been tracked down, and because an authentic pram could not be found it is being made. All the costumes are being made from scratch, so that the costume designer has full control of fabric as well as style. We have a poster. I am slightly scared about whether all this will seem justified, although any failing will not be for want of effort.



Last week I went to the dentist, because I lost a filling. This was a little scary, but I was told that the place to go was the Seoul Seventh Day Adventist Hospital, so off I went. The dental department took some finding, but actually it was pretty straightforward, except that I waited for some time opposite the x-ray chamber which looked exactly like the electric chair in a stupid film I had watched the night before. A very nice dentist with pretty good english put a temporary filling in, and we made an appointment for the real one at the same time next week, which gave me a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to say, 'so on the seventh day I shall

come again, then' This amused me a lot. Not sadly anyone else, which is really why I mention the whole thing here.....

Other highlights of the week include; my much admired Korean haircut, [admired by my students, ridiculed by Ali, I have to say], my night out with the Americans - one of the administrators has a boyfriend who is a US Captain on the main base [very interesting insight into that angle on things, one way or another] visits to three Middle Schools, and a jolly barbecue in the campus gardens with the cast of the Little Shop of Horrors, which is being done by the undergraduates the week we open with Heads or Tails.



The low point was a bad decision to demonstrate something in my much-admired improvisation class. Up to now, I had just fed them a long list of fun activities, which they are very good at, and enjoy a lot. A fool-proof and shameless route to popularity. This week I thought I should show them how it's done, so as to bask in even more glory, and attempted to do this by introducing the art of street-theatre with a short example. I thought it would be against the spirit of the class to plan anything, and I would rely on my vast experience and deep-seated instincts to carry me through. Unfortunately.... yes you're ahead of me..... it is quite a long time since I've done any of that, and when I did it relied rather heavily on verbal humour which works best with english-speakers in the audience, so after a rip-roaring start, I plummeted into a pathetic panic, and ignominious failure. I attempted to pass this off as an indication of just how important it is to have a structure in mind, even when improvising, but I could not avoid some decline in my standing. Any more of that, and they might start treating me as some kind of mere mortal....

Tomorrow I am at the British Council for lunch with Fred, whom I met at the Embassy, and wants to know all about everything. Then it's rehearse rehearse rehearse. Less than two weeks until the rest of the family come, now. I'm trying to get activities lined up, and a wash basin installed.

love to you all

Pete

May the Fourth be With You

332-198 Seokgwon-Dong, Seongbuk-Gu, Seoul

Dear All

Yesterday was our wedding anniversary, a potentially difficult time for us both, although obviously for Ali the lack of my romantic presence is more than made up for by the pleasure of looking after the boys on her own all the time. I had to make do with a special massive barbecue in the azalea-studded garden, shaded in the elegant wooden pagoda from the blistering sun, with a big cake, because I had casually mentioned the fact to my students. But spare me your sympathy, because it is less than a week now until the real big day. May 12th. I am getting excited, counting the days, beginning to wonder how it will feel, after such a long time away..... for Birmingham City to be finally in the Premier League. I am also worrying slightly that I won't be able to concentrate on the match, with Ali and the boys arriving in Korea on the same day.



I have been strengthening my links with the British authorities here this week, with meetings at the British Council and at the Embassy. Because of the relatively small British community here, there is a kind of status slippage, by which I can speak to people who in other circumstances would be far too lofty for the likes of us. The Ambassador seems quite likely to come to see my play, for example, and later today, I am invited over for a swim at his residence, which is an unbelievably quiet colonial stately home with lavish gardens, perched implausibly between Dokksugung, the main royal palace permanently full of tourists, and the huge streets and blocks of central Seoul, perhaps one of the busiest and most crowded few square miles in the world. This prime piece of land was retained through Korea's traumatic last century, apart from brief occupation by the Chinese - [Seoul changed hands four times during the Korean War] and the building itself is actually one of the oldest in Seoul. The city has a number of much older palaces, all of which are in fact reconstructed [rather well], having been destroyed at least once each, and one or two older academic buildings, as well as some tombs and archaeological sites with very ancient remains, but none of the main buildings or houses are any age at all. Almost the entire city was built in the last fifty years, having been thoroughly pillaged by the Japanese, and then razed to the ground several times during the Civil War [as it is most often called here]. The piece of Seoul that is forever England, which also includes a bizarre 1920s Italianate Anglican cathedral, was apparently kept safe during the bloody Japanese colonial period because the ambassador had been at Oxford with the Japanese head man here.... makes you proud doesn't it? Still, it will be nice to have a civilised dip. I expect we shall have tea on the lawn afterwards.



My invitation actually comes from Colin, a Counsellor at the Embassy, who has lived here for some time, speaks Korean, and has a child Eddie's age. We had a meeting about some ideas he has for a touring theatre group to come here, and it is good to have the possibility of meeting up with his family when the boys are here. I also met Young-Ai's daughter finally yesterday. She is called Sae Ryo, and is five. They will be in Exeter all next year for Young-ai's sabbatical. [Choi Young-Ai is my Professor, and the person who invited me out here]. There is no shortage in general of children for Eddie and Jim to play with, in the local park, and on the streets around the flat as well, which feel wonderfully safe. They are barely negotiable in cars, which never go above walking pace.



Seoul is a safe city generally. The traffic on the big roads would certainly be dangerous if it could ever go fast enough. There are a lot of 'minor' accidents. I am not sure of crime figures, but my GI friend, who has been here for three years, was aware of only two murders in Seoul in that time, for example. One of them was an all US army murder, and the other was thought to have been done by a soldier, but turned out to be a 'domestic'. George Bush probably remains the biggest threat to our safety here.

Heads or Tails opens on Saturday at Wonchun Middle School in the gymnasium at 11.30 [if you're passing]. We have had good and bad rehearsals this week. A friend from Birmingham, Kim Ju Yeoun, watched the run yesterday - she is doing a PHD at the University of Central England on using the British model of Drama in Education in a Korean context. She couldn't quite believe it - said that it was very different from anything that is ever shown to Korean children. It feels a very serious play, but with quite a few funny bits, which I have worked particularly hard on, to try and make sure they are funny for our audience. It has been hard to get it into schools. We seem likely to receive complaints about the nature of the play, from some teachers and school managements who may think it is 'too much' for their pupils, and my students are anxious that teachers will be insulted by the aspect of the play that is attacking 'traditional' teaching styles. The setting in 1940s Ladywood, is a distance away, and the specifics of it, which were very significant within the original production, are played down in favour of emphasis on the global truths in the story. It has been fascinating directing the play, trying to sense what is meant by the differences in speaking lines in a language of which I still have so

little grasp. The actors have been wonderful to work with. But for now it is all guessing - I can't wait to see what it all actually feels like in performance.



By next Sunday the play will have opened, and my flat will have filled up, so this concludes phase one of my adventure, and the stage when your presence has been most necessary to me. We may even have a series of shorter messages, for the month of my colonial occupation here, but then there is the family trip to see Beckham stride out again in Jeju Island, Eddie and me forming our links with schools, Jim tackles Korean food, Ali and the mosquitoes, and the World Cup itself - so much to come, so much to tell you about.....

Come on you blues.....

Pete

Korean Reunification

May 12th. 332-198 Seokgwang-Dong, Seongbuk-Gu, Seoul

You should be the first to know. Reunification has taken place in Korea. Five minutes early, at 11.00, Ali's plane landed at Incheon International Airport, and life in Seoul has changed beyond recognition. As predicted, it was not quite the equal coming together of two systems that the word reunification suggests, more like a straightforward noisy take-over by the forces of the West, but the boyz are in town. We have been on a short foray into the neighbourhood, played football and basket ball for a long time, eaten, and now they are asleep.

The week has been much my busiest, with preparing for them, and for the opening of the play.

Break in Transmission.It is now Monday morning. Did I say they were asleep? What I meant was dozing for two hours before waking up bright and cheerful from 11.00-3.00am. This might have been worse, had it not coincided neatly with the timing here of the live broadcast of Birmingham v Norwich, culminating in the blues glorious return to the premiership. My cup runneth over.. but I am a little tired. That is nothing - I have attached a picture of the current state of my children. Ali is in a similar condition in their bedroom!



E-mails may be shorter for the next three and a half weeks. Not that I expect there to be any let-up in the number of exciting happenings. First responses to Eddie and Jim have been enough to confirm that Ali and I will be roughly in the position of minders to teen idols for much of the time, and these are exciting weeks in Seoul's life even without them here. The World Cup is apparently not being sufficiently fervently anticipated by the Korean people. Soccer is increasingly but not overwhelmingly popular here, and there was a furore when baseball was given more press coverage than the competition one day this week. The determination for this competition to do good for the country borders on desperation, with posters everywhere, and campaigns, not so much advertising the Cup, but exhorting people to clean up, be polite, smile. It is like nervous parents who don't think their children are quite up to the standards of behaviour of their expected guests, without some pretty heavy coaching.

Teams of supporters have been recruited from amongst the locals, for countries that may not have many, so that by the time Senegal plays the first match, there will be thousands of suitably dressed well drilled Koreans chanting for them. [I wonder who was given this briefing job, and how deeply they researched the role of football fan. It's a wonderful picture...right everybody, after three "We hate villa and we hate villa...we are the villa ...haters". Not bad, not bad, now, can we have a go in Croatian, and don't forget those gestures we worked on last week...]

Actually another controversy is that the Korean team itself has the slogan 'Korea - FIGHTING!', which some have felt gives an inappropriate image. It is being modified to roughly 'Korea fighting-but-not-

that-type-of-fighting'. My favourite World Cup campaign is in the public toilets, where the 'Restroom Association' has put posters by every urinal saying 'Go all in Seoul', with the word goal highlighted. Very neat, I think you'll agree. Also worth watching will be the dog-meat traders campaign, a valiant rear-guard action which looks likely to bring out the riot police in some numbers, since they have vowed to set up a large number of stalls near to the stadium, to reclaim the rightful position of dog-meat as a cultural tradition which should be valued and supported.

The riot police are very evident actually. They do turn out in numbers for every kind of protest. I'm hoping no-one leaks news of Jim's slightly dissident attitude to eating Korean food, or several coach loads of alarmingly disaffected-looking teenagers with shields and batons may well surround him, as a precaution. This happened to some not terribly dangerous looking old people who were protesting outside the city hall about pensions last week.



The first performance of Heads or Tails went well, if slightly nervously. The audience was disappointingly quiet, but this was in part because their teacher had told them to be. They did seem to get what we wanted from the play, as far as I could tell. I had a lovely e-mail from one of the pupils waiting for me when I got back here, saying 'It's a very exciting, funny, and morality learn a lesson. And player is good performance. There will never be such a good chance as this again' Pretty high praise.



Last week at the embassy was very funny. No tea on the lawn, but a game of tennis with Colin, who invited me, and with Michael Breen, who used to be the Guardian Correspondent here, and wrote a really good book about Korea. Very nice interesting man, who has been here for twenty years, has had dinner with Kim Il Sung [N Korea's notorious last leader] and generally knows a lot.

Also this week I started running a short course for teachers one evening a week. 27 came, from 7-10 at night, out of an interest in theatre-in-education. It promises to be a significant thing, I hope, in developing the work that Young-Ai is establishing here. It is harder to get access to schools, and particularly to curriculum time, than it is in Britain [where it is hardly easy] but once again the striking things in talking to teachers were the similarities, not the differences.



There is still no sign of waking here, and it's past eleven, so I'm just going to check some pulses.

Next week we are off on our trip on Sunday to Jeju Island to see David Beckham's triumphant return to the international stage, so I'm not sure about the timing of the next message, but I'll do my best.

Lots of love

Pete

May 23rd Seoul

Jeju See The Match?

South Korea 1 England 1 [Seogwipo May 21st]

Just a quick late message this week after our mini-break....

What can I say....it was a game of two halves.



In the first, Eddie and Jim were incredibly excited, had more photos taken of them than Beckham himself, who was cowering in the dugout, and the small and frankly motley English contingent shouted occasional indulgent comments while the team themselves toyed with the Koreans like big uncles playing beach soccer with a toddler. Saint Michael scored and all was well with the world. In the second, the England second team came on and were predictably, well... predictable. The poshest ever England football crowd went quiet, except for about two who were drunk, Eddie was still incredibly excited, but Jim had



resorted to breastfeeding, which may have distracted the England B Team who let in a soft goal, and the 40,000 Koreans raised the roof.

Well the roof is actually already raised, along the lines of a traditional sailing vessel, used by the famed women divers of Jeju, and the crowd raising it further was unlike any I have ever experienced. There is no long history of football as a working class man's game, to be lived and breathed, but the Koreans have typically vigorously committed themselves to replicating the form. So a vast array of chanters, all dressed in red uniforms, has rehearsed Korean words to the greatest hits of the terraces, and a band of traditional drummers in full costume bizarrely banged out dum dum da da dum da da da da 'Hanguk!' [Korea].



The mood was fantastic, and the Koreans were clearly bemused by the behaviour of the England fans, who had either come all the way for the World Cup early, or were ex-pats over from Hong Kong, Singapore or Seoul. There had been great preparation for the threat of the 'hoodlums' as one man told us, and the collection of forty-plus business people and diplomats in unflattering white nylon may have been something of a disappointment.

The trip to Jeju overall was fantastic. It is a beautiful place, a great relief from Seoul. A cross between the Isle of Wight and Lanzarote, we thought. Part Sun City, part Dubai and part Sardinia, said the press photographer we met on the plane, slightly more exotically. Volcanic, with black dry stone walls, but very green, with tangerine trees, and wild jasmine everywhere.



We swam in the South Sea, saw [at a distance] the women divers, who dive without masks and hold their breath for two minutes while catching octopuses, we visited a dolphin show, a waterfall and a traditional village, and we saw lots of people on their honeymoons - they traditionally dress the same, and so are easy to spot.

Love to you all. More on Sunday.....

Pete

May 26th Seoul

Hotting Up

On Jeju, where there are apparently only 60 days a year without rain, we had three of them, so perhaps the holiday rain jinx that seems to have followed us around has lifted. Certainly this week has been beautiful, with Seoul unusually clear, and bright sunshine relieved by a nice breeze. No sign yet of the stifling humidity which is supposed to be the mark of summer.

Things are hotting up generally, with the city busier than usual in all respects. A slightly mind-boggling thought, in a place which let's face it is never short of action, but let me try and give you a sense.... Take the 7th most densely populated country in the world, rule out 70% of the land from habitation by putting forested mountains in it. Persuade the population of all the remaining rural areas

that life would be better if they moved to the capital. Inject a hysterical work ethic to ensure that the population is up and about for 18-20 hours a day. There you have the usual activity level of Seoul. Set the temperature to maximum. Now add one World Cup....

Several times this week we have just gone out somewhere, and on the way encountered dancing, singing, processions... happenings are everywhere. Every organisation and individual here is having its special event now - the Seoul Performing Arts Festival, for example, usually in September, has been shifted to now, for the Cup, and that is a kind of Edinburgh-scale event, which we had not even noticed.



On Saturday night we went to the first night of the World Firework festival, which was a long tube-ride. The subway stop nearest to the fireworks had been closed because of crowds, so we had to go past, and walk back, watching the fireworks but arriving at the event only as they finished. This left a crowd of probably several hundred thousand* on Yeouido, [Seoul's Manhattan, remember], all trying to get back at the same time. We looked at the options, and went for walking across the river bridge with two sleepy children [I think it was on a walk like this that they

came up with the name Han River - it means 'big' river, and is very apt] and catching a bus. Two and a half hours later we were triumphantly home. Ali ended up being given a seat on the bus, with E and J both asleep on her, and five Korean women holding on to them to stop them falling off. I was standing, but fully supported in all directions simply because the bus was full. The word 'full' here should not be confused with the English word meaning every seat occupied and a dozen people forced to stand in the aisle. This is the word 'full' as in a jar full of jelly beans. There would have been room for two or three lying up on the heads of those standing, and even this seemed likely to be taken at one point.



Yesterday we went for a meal and to a traditional outdoor performance with Young-Ai and her elusive husband [also called Han] and her daughter Sae Ryo, who with Young-ai will be in Exeter for a year from September. I have explained that it is very like Seoul. Sae Ryo and Jim got on very well. The boys have been playing in the street a lot, which is great.



My course for teachers has finished, but I am still busier than I would like to be with the tour of the play. The performances have got better and better, and there is wonderful response, which interestingly is mostly on the internet. There were more than seventy messages on the University website from kids who watched the last performance [Hangul-speakers among you can read them at www.knua.ac.kr/performance/board] This week we have four performances in the University Theatre.



Other highlights of the week ahead should be a trip to see a show called Nanta [billed as 'Stomp with Korean Food', swimming at the Embassy, the World Cup opening ceremony [no tickets I'm afraid, but we will soak up the atmosphere...] and I expect a few more unexpected encounters on the scorching streets of the city.

Brief football notes.....Based on first-hand knowledge of recent performances - Danny Murphy is no great loss, but where is McManaman??? Not even discussed when the first twenty seven midfielders are all injured? He features on the posters here, along with Owen and Beckham. Did you hear that in Sweden they were celebrating his omission. Where is that manager from again...conspiracy, I think.

Off to Dreamland this morning - a rather faded but nevertheless Seoul-scale theme park up the road, which Eddie and Jim have been agitating for.

love

Pete

*I know I have been known to exaggerate in these messages, but the Chosun Ilbo reported this crowd later as 450,000!

June 3rd Seoul

Dear jubilant crowds

I hope Sweden's equaliser or the threat of imminent nuclear war haven't spoiled your street parties.

Where do I start for this week?

I suppose that this is the week that Korea was most likely to slip into your consciousness without me, with the eyes of the world upon us for the opening ceremony. I hope that you were able to feel smugly knowledgeable as John Motson trotted out facts about Korean life and culture, or whatever, during the World Cup opening ceremony. Here the commentary is in Korean, because the internet Radio Five Live service tends to have a delay on it



Here we were pretty pleased. The front page of the Chosun Ilbo crowed that baseball still dominated the Japanese press, while Korea had won the hearts of the globe. I expect some of the massed riot police who have practised so hard were disappointed, but the over-riding atmosphere here is of friendly excitement. Everyone is on very best behaviour. It is as if the Korean Government is treating the World Cup like a big Ofsted inspection. Potentially embarrassing pupils have been excluded, I'm sure. Certainly, a special law has been passed to force car-owners to use their vehicles every other day, so that the traffic is only half as bad while everyone is watching.

For the England-Sweden match we were at the British Embassy watching on a big screen, with the same kind of genteel ex-pat crowd as in the friendly at Jeju. Two photographers from the Korean papers had turned up, to get pictures of hooligan behaviour. They sat at the front by the screen, and waited for ugly scenes. Perhaps they should have simply taken pictures of the second half of the match itself.

Any thoughts about being here full-time are certainly put into perspective by any contact we have had with the British community. There are some nice people here, of course, but... Sunday afternoon was our time to go over as a family to the ambassador's pool, and it clashed with the 50th Jubilee [not that one] Mash. This is the Mixed All-Seoul Hash, a jolly event in which families run or walk around the city in the midday sun, following a trial set by the 'hares'. This event was being hosted by the British contingent [most of the hashers are American] All the mash members have amusing nicknames - 'Ah yes well, I am Phidippides, for obvious reasons. That is 'Large Member', and she is 'Dances with Dogs'.



Winners are toasted with lager sprayed over their heads and a not particularly lusty rendition of the song [I don't think I'll even go into the song] I know watching any activity like this from outside tends to make it look more absurd, but it did put into perspective any bizarre Korean behaviour I have been reporting.

Elsewhere in the week, the performances of Tong Jeon Teon Jigi went extremely well. I could not be happier with the actors, who are fantastic, and the response of students, who certainly find it very different, but are almost all extremely excited by it. The staff [excuse me, the 'faculty'] are a different matter. Overall a resounding 'no comment', except from Young-ai and the one other women in the acting department. I am not sure at all what the reason for the silence is - my students say loyally that they are 'jealous', but I

think once again there are cultural factors here - I will let you know when I have some idea what they are!

Eddie has seen the play five times, which has been really sweet. He will perform sections for you in Korean when he gets back [which is now very soon - Thursday] He is a little in love with one of the actors, all of whom are in love with him of course. Even listing the different things we seem to have packed into the boys time here is an effort. This week they saw another four shows in addition to TJTJ - not including street performances and casual encounters with singing or drumming. A wonderful children's show which I missed was maybe the best, or Nanta, which I did go to. This is a now rather commercialised version of a sensational show devised by five traditional Samulnori drummers, around the basic idea of using kitchen stuff instead of drums. They cook a meal on stage, with much chopping, throwing beating and leaping. Again, I am sure Jim and Eddie could give you a flavour.



Yesterday's main drama was Jim locking the bathroom door and closing it, so that he and we were trapped outside it. A search of the neighbourhood for a ladder only yielded one which was too short for the second storey little window, but when I stood on the top rung, Eddie could just reach the window sill on top of me and he scrambled up, arriving triumphantly through the locked door, to Ali's surprise [I had decided it might be best not to draw her attention to the ladder business!] The neighbourhood certainly enjoyed the entertainment.

We also had a rare invitation into a Korean household. Everybody I have met here is incredibly generous and hospitable, but I have almost always been taken to places rather than invited round.. But yesterday my translator Insoo had invited us to her apartment for a meal, which was a very special event - a very modern and spacious apartment in a huge estate of tower-blocks, with several children - Insoo has one, and her cousin came over as well. Ali was able to find out all about breastfeeding and childbirth in Korea [good and bad respectively, is the short version] and Jim watched Toy Story with Korean subtitles, while Insoo's mother massaged him.

All I have time for. I expect that next week the long long lonely emails will resume, as I adjust to life back on my own for the last few weeks here.....

love

Pete

June 9th Seoul

Dear all



The Seoul 'sauna' was switched on on Thursday, just after Ali Eddie and Jim flew out, with impeccable timing. The temperature jumped from 25 to 36. I'm not sure what that is in old money, but I know there is an 'F' in it!

It is steaming hot here, in every way. To say that the people of Seoul are excited does it no justice. In England, I gather there was some satisfaction at the little football result on Friday. You may have heard that Korea won one too. Their first in 48 years of World Cup football. Tomorrow we play the US. A crowd of half a million [yes half a million] is expected in the city centre to watch the big screens. Riot police have ringed the American embassy, in case anything goes wrong. Since Koreans are still in a state of fury with the States about their speed skater being robbed of gold at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, even though the judge was Australian, there are those that feel all it needs is a wrong decision by a referee. Good job there's no chance of that then. Even sensible americans are hoping that Korea win. One less sensible spokesperson however was quoted as saying, 'we are not concerned. The World Cup has gone extremely well so far, american citizens here have been treated

very well.' I think he was missing the point... they haven't been the enemy until tomorrow, at least not openly.



As I said before, soccer is not the number one sport here. The people filling the streets at this moment singing and dancing, are not all particularly clued up about football. They do know about Korea though, and they are united by three aims. Winning the World Cup is one, but actually they don't in the main expect to do that, even though hopes are now soaring wildly. No the main aim is to do better than Japan as a team and as a host. But the third whispered desire, not said very often in english...they want to beat the americans.

This is not about football. I suspect that it is unlike in England of course, where we particularly appreciate beating Germany and Argentina purely because of the unique football challenge they present. In Korea, other issues enter into the equation.

I'm with the Koreans on this one. Get up at whatever time you have to tomorrow and cheer along will you? You need to know the following chants: 'oh pilsung Korea, oh pilsung Korea, oh ole ole' [Oh Korea you must win, ole ole] 'Dae... Han Min Guk clap clap clap clap clap' [Oh, Korea!] and the old favourite 'Clap clap, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap-clap-clap Han-guk!'



[Korea!] - they may be cheering the nation rather than celebrating the football, but at least they have several names for it.

Eddie and Jim and Ali are safely back in my computer now, after a wild four weeks, which I have only scraped the surface of in these messages, and which you can now hear first hand



from them. Jim was ready to leave, I think, but Eddie would happily have stayed. There was a typically understated goodbye at the airport, which lasted almost as long as the flight back. No formal chance had arisen to say goodbye to my students, so I am still picking up signs of grief and mourning from some of them. It was great to have them here, to be able actually to exchange looks with Ali about everything that happens, rather than have to try and remember to write it down. There are so many moments. So many opportunities to say 'quite'.



Also opportunities to say 'aaah', like when we saw these lads on their way home from extra lessons one evening!.....

It feels a bit like going back to work, although actually in the middle of the family time here I was busier than I wanted to be. The students are doing their final presentations in schools. These are TIE programmes that they have created, which is really the core of my work here, and once again, watching the process in a Korean context is fascinating. The three groups have devised programmes about the closure of a rural school, cyber-families and a children's view of the Korean War. Each for a different age group, each very different. Because of the level of commitment that you know about, they have carried these through into projects which compare well with many professional pieces I've been involved with, in terms of preparation and performance level, and the overall standard is higher by a distance than when I was here before. Some things come hard, and some come very naturally, and one or two elements that they have introduced are genuinely new to me. The routine use of the internet to continue discussion beyond the visit to school for example, which I still don't think we are ready for in Britain.

Again no time for everything in the week. I should mention in passing the Real Body show, an extraordinary exhibition of dead people, preserved and dissected, very challenging really. I went out of ghoulish desire to take in as much of what is here as I could, but found it much more fascinating than I expected, and am not quite sure what I think about it in the end. It was packed with families apparently in pursuit of knowledge, and I learned quite a bit. I was on the point of thinking that there was absolutely nothing questionable about it, when I got to the deformed still-born children section.... I have to say in the interest of journalistic accuracy that this is



not a Korean exhibition, but a German one which is touring here, and I think a version of it is in London too. Has there been controversy about it? Because I'm sure you're wondering, yes they had all given permission, and the process of preservation is called plastination [more at www.bodyworlds.com]

So now I am back in virtual contact with home, but nothing is quite the same. They know what I mean now, when I talk about things, which is good, but the house feels more empty than it was before it was full, if you see what I mean, which is bad.

Tomorrow we are evaluating the tour of the play, although there is still one performance to go, and then I am hosting a party in the university garden for everyone involved - if Korea have won it should be a good one, if not.....

love

Pete

June 16th Seoul

Dear all

Oh my God, what a week. Extreme, even by the extreme standards of this place. I'm torn between telling you all about it and getting out into the town again to have some more.

Trying to remember the beginning of the week is tough, but it all started on Monday, with the Korea /USA match. When we went to see the friendly match with England I mentioned the relative lack of interest and knowledge about football here, and outside the bulk of football followers I stand by that, but things have changed - drastically. Everybody here is now a 'red devil', and I mean everybody. The atmosphere on Monday afternoon was unbelievable, but that was only the beginning. By the end of the week Korea had beaten Portugal, qualified for the '16' as they call it here, and there is a round-the-clock party going on which involves the whole of Korea [well the South], and the representatives of the world passing through.

Monday's match was a draw, which was enough to prevent riot, but realistic voices were muttering that it was not sufficient to qualify. It was enough to enable the evaluation meeting about the play, and then my party for the cast to happen, although dramatic thunderstorms forced it inside. I spent most of the weekend cooking, because having the traditional self-catering single pan and a blunt knife, meant that food for thirty had to be prepared bit by bit. It was, I think you could say, well-received.



On Tuesday I went for a bath, which I had been steeling myself for. There are public baths everywhere, but it is a very Korean activity, and no allowances at all are made for explaining what you are supposed to do. I was a little scared of being intrusively foreign, taking off my clothes in the wrong place, or not taking them off, and all that. Also some of the public baths are fronts for more dodgy enterprises called 'turki-tangs'. Insoo had darkly said she didn't know what sort of things happened there, but I wouldn't like it. I made her talk me through exactly what might be expected of me, if I happened to chance on a non-dodgy one.

In the end it was wonderful, and I wished I had been more adventurous earlier on in my stay. It cost about £1.50 to go in, and consisted of three rooms - a changing room, with lots of big mirrors and a hairdressers chair and a TV showing the Korea US match again [One channel seems to be re-playing the Korean matches 24 hours a day], a sleeping room, with mats on the floor, and the baths themselves, with a large very hot stone sauna, and plunge pools of various temperatures, showers and massage tables. Everybody, including the staff of one [the 'demilo'] is naked, and men are just hanging around relaxing, discussing the football, and grooming. Also they are massaging or even washing each

other. The demilo, if you pay extra, will sit you in a plastic potty, and wash you all over, then place you on the table, rub you viciously with a towel, and walk on your back. I opted for dwelling in the warmest bath and having my Korean conversation with anyone who passed. When I put it all together it is quite long now, and structured a little like a political interview. I say what I want to say irrespective of the questions, in fact I say the only things I can say. Then I make Korean noises, at which I am extremely accomplished. I can do authentic grunts of surprise, agreement, emphasis and admiration, which make me feel and look as if a real conversation is taking place. If there is a lull, I sing 'Oh Pilsung Korea', which always goes down very well. In the bath, if I get stuck, I just go underwater. When I am a little more confident, I shall just call rather imperiously for the demilo to jump on my back.

Anyway - back to the football. England Nigeria was the first match I've watched on my own at home, and then ...Thursday. A public holiday, because as a candidate rather memorably told me in person last week, 'we are having an erection'. But for me it was a big day because I was off to the cup - to Suwon, with my ticket for Brazil against Costa Rica.

I decided on this as my single live match here because no tickets can be got for the Korea games, because World Cup equals Brazil, and because it was the only ticket for a day I wasn't working. It was a lucky choice. So was the decision to set off early and see Suwon. It is a town built at a stroke by a particular king, who wanted a retreat from Seoul. He built a fortress with a long wall around it, which has been preserved or rebuilt. But Suwon is also seeking to be famous for its beautiful toilets, and if you only have time for one tour on a visit to Suwon sometime, it is these I would go for. I don't think I can do better than quote directly from the literature....



'Suwon - a city leading the toilet culture with the world. The public toilet of Suwon City turn into the most clean and comfortable place of speculation and rest, display., rendezvous, recreation of energy in the world - bringing to advanced toilet culture where foreign visitors feel and learn'

There are 33 beautiful toilets in all, with very individual architecture, themes and features. Amongst those I visited were the Firefly toilet [*'the front of the urinals is made of glass, so as to enjoy a natural view and to listen to music'*] which featured a very powerful sound system with constant opera, and Daesulgi toilet [*'prepared as wide and just like a cafe atmosphere to feel another charms'*]. My impression is that they have got a case for being hailed as world toilet capital - notwithstanding the gorgeous Cesar Enrique toilets of Lanzarote. Now why didn't Birmingham think of that?

I am sorry if I've gone all Carry-On on you, but they made an impression - not least because my iron constitution chose this day to have its first wobble, and so I did feel particularly grateful for the toilet culture of Suwon. Oh I forgot to mention the professors' night out, the mountain of raw fish, including still wriggling squid, which may have been a factor in the state of my stomach....

A soldier in the silver army showed me round Suwon, and I did do the walls of the city too, including an interview for Brazilian TV - did you catch it? - and then it was time for the match. The atmosphere around the stadium was just sensational. I was taken by surprise at the range of people there. Brazilians and Costa Ricans of course, but people were there from everywhere, and the sun shone, and shirts were swapped, songs and dances performed. Call me an old softie if you will, but it was really very moving indeed.



The toilets at the stadium, by the way, although not officially 'beautiful' were excellent. I managed to make my several urgent visits without missing any goals, which was quite an achievement. Brazil scored the most they have in a world cup since 1958, and played like Brazil play in the myths. Costa Rica could have scored ten goals themselves. Maybe you saw it on telly. I was there.....

And what can I say about Friday? Two final presentations in schools, which were both very good as expected, and then Young-Ai had arranged to take me to a traditional mask drama in the evening in

Daehangno - the student area. She mentioned that quite a few people had arranged to watch the match there [Korea v Portugal - keep up will you] , so I should watch out for crowds. I went early, an hour before the play, and three hours before the match. I have described crowds several times in these messages, and I have run out of ways of saying, this was even more of a crowd, but it was. It was the biggest, reddest, most excited, most homogenous [I didn't see one other foreigner all night, literally] crowd I have ever been in. This was with three hours to go. They had closed a huge dual carriageway, and installed giant screens at intervals. People were crowding to get a view, and there were thousands



whose best chance was to get within sight of the back of one of the screens, and who watched the whole match back to front. This was not even the main public viewing area in Seoul, it was a spillover arrangement.

An understandably small audience watched the mask drama, which was fortunate for me, because the clown figure had me out of the seats dancing on the stage with him. Minds were elsewhere, but it was an extremely interesting performance. The plays were extracted from the folk-plays from Hahoe Maul, the little old village that the Queen and I visited in 1999 [separate occasions] - very vulgar, full of bulls bollocks and urine. [The play, not the queen, obviously] ...anyway, you don't want to hear about folk drama, what about the match?

The crowd had filled up during the performance, and try as I might, there wasn't really a hope of getting a view. But it was thrilling enough being on the edge of it. I ploughed my way back home, seeing bits in cafes and bars, and in the theatre at the university, and actually watched the second half at home, with wonderful shouts from everywhere whenever anything happened. Quite how everyone managed to be out on the street and in their houses at the same time is a mystery, but still, they did. Korea beat Portugal 1-0 and qualified for the next round. I honestly think it has been a week that will change Korea's concept of itself. The nationalistic passion which I am in the middle of would be terrifying in some contexts, but really does feel positive in the context of a nation with an often over-deferential attitude to the world, and with a history of being bullied by the big boys. Besides, I like everyone here. They have been so nice to me and my family. I want them to have this party.

On Monday they play Italy. I think they may well win, but even if they don't, I think that there will not be trouble [unless, perhaps they perceive any unfairness in the result] . The point is they have already won the cup.

I can't even tell you about my wild night with the Ireland fans, watching England march on. They are in Suwon today, playing Spain. I told them all to go early, and experience the culture. As I write this now, I can see the emerald green nylon shirts in my mind's eye, singing 'The Wild Rover' as they speculate rendez-vous and display in the Vivaldi toilet. Enough. I have a party to resume.

love

Pete

June 23rd - Seoul

Dear all

There may be some sad individuals out there who feel that this week the world cup lost its interest, as our brave boys went tamely home in a sweaty mess. I can reveal that this is not quite the majority feeling here. For your special correspondent, the only sadness is that suddenly much of what I have to tell you is being relayed to you already by other johnnie-come-lately journos who have swanned in here, sensing that news is being made. I dare say that there has been some passing mention in their media of the scale of Korea's celebrations after beating Spain. I spent most of last night wandering the streets just soaking it up. I had a Korean flag painted on my cheek, a fetching arm-band and of course my regulation 'be the reds' T-shirt. The result was that everywhere I went I was met by people wanting to take their photo with me, or just shaking my hand or simply laughing at me. Several older



people through the evening wanted to share their makkoli [rice wine] and antibodies with me, just as some kind of expression to the wider world of overflowing Korean happiness. Younger people did high-fives, danced around me, drummed or just screamed.

Earlier, some of my students headed back to the campus to watch a Korean adaptation of a compilation of Beckett pieces, transferred into a movement medium, and suggested I come along. I am ashamed to say I laughed out loud. I ask you. What do they think I am, some kind of theatre academic? I recovered enough composure to say that the world of Seoul had tonight a real feeling of the absurd, which I wanted to research on my own, and got on a random bus into town to see more celebrating. Many people just drove around, competing at how many they could pile on a car or motorbike, waving flags. Car horns are still now regularly banging out Dae Han Min Guk at 9.00 Sunday morning, even though a spoilsport rain storm arrived at about five in some kind of futile attempt to calm things down. As I went on my way, crowds of a decent size were still gathered around TVs everywhere, watching the endless replays. Everyone seems to be equally amazed each time the result comes out. On Tuesday, instantly declared a public holiday, Korea play against Germany, who else, at Seoul World Cup Stadium. The prize a World Cup Final against Brazil [perhaps Turkey] in Japan. On Wednesday I fly out of Seoul. If Korea have won [and who would dare bet against them] I will not need an aeroplane to fly back, I could be carried just by the wave of noise and feeling, or ride out on one of the slightly terrifying volleys of impromptu hand-held fireworks.



It all started happily enough. The crowd was all in red T shirts, many with Korean flags draped around their shoulders, noisy and excited. And that was only the crowd in school for the final performance of Tong Jeon Teon Jigi at 9.30 on Saturday morning. 'It was, you may say, satisfactory'. Not the best performance, perhaps minds were already slipping elsewhere, but the end nevertheless of a really terrific experience from my point of view. The play will now be re-worked for presentation at the World Congress of ASSITEJ [Association Internationale Theatre de Jeunesse] in Seoul in July. The fact that I am back here for that [17th-31st July] takes the edge off my goodbyes here. In a way I'm just having a three week visit home before the finale.

After the performance we had a barbecue meal in a restaurant near the University, and then hit the streets with the rest of the population. All our first options for places to watch the match were full - a woefully inadequate term. So in the end I watched it rather bizarrely in a big church, where one of my students is a worshipper. Clearly the power of prayer had its effect on the inspired players, not to mention the linesmen. There is an awesome quality to the way the Korean team is playing, but there is also the less-mentioned fact that they are very good individual footballers. Strangely the people here do not think they are a faceless team with no stars, as seems to be the way the western media put it.



It's strange to think back, but until yesterday this message seemed likely to be dominated by tales of the famous victory against Italy, which was in those days the pinnacle of Korean achievement, but is now a distant foothill. The grumpy Italian reaction to their defeat got a great deal of coverage here, and upset people quite deeply. Footage of the players barging surlily past autograph-hunters at the airport, and the absurd conspiracy theories of politicians and football people alike briefly cast a shadow on what seemed at the time to be the biggest party in history. Three and a half million people on the streets of Seoul, not a single arrest, and no litter. Goodness only knows what the figures will be for yesterday. Again it's easy to forget the other aspect of Tuesday that certainly helped the party here. All the team's success up to that point had been mirrored across the East Sea, but no more. As the Korea Herald rather unusually unequivocally put it, 'Korea make history - Japan are history!'.



On Tuesday, I decided to get out of town, and to find somewhere sleepy and quiet. I got on a train to a place called Cheonpyong, a lake resort which at weekends is full of young Seoulites waterskiing and bungee-jumping. Evidently on tuesdays it is empty. It was a very hot day, extremely quiet and certainly sleepy, as you can see. I was able to find such an empty area that I could strip off and swim in the lake.

The rest of the week involved final presentations from my classes, evaluation sessions and planning for the work in July, all of which continues and will with luck be finished by Tuesday.

And so the adventure draws to an end. These messages home have inadvertently taken on the structure of a well made novel, with everything neatly coming to a head, on Tuesday. At this point we do not know what the ending will be. I shall do my best to fit in a quick final chapter, win or lose, before I set off home. This time next week I shall be watching the World Cup final with you all. It can't end up being Brazil against Germany after all this, can it?



love

Pete

June 25th - Seoul

What can I say? It was a year of two halves, and one of them is over. My carrier of choice Air France beckons, and I have packed my substantial bags ready for the long haul back over the absurdly enormous Mongolia, which I am hoping to experience from the seat rather than the toilet in this direction. Three hours in Paris - just time to gloat briefly in my Be The Reds T-shirt - and then sunny Birmingham, culture shock, premier league football and 'normality'.

I will not miss the mosquitoes, who have bitten me in five places overnight. There is a fatal breach in my air defences, because the TV cable is flung out of the window directly into the high-voltage noodles on the pole outside, and the mosquito screen cannot close completely as a result. I will miss my walk to work, through the frying sesame-oil breakfast smell of downstairs, past what was an old building, then big hole in the ground, then building site and now new four-storey apartment block. Breathing in as deep as possible through the nose by the jasmine bushes, and trying to keep that breath to take me past the rubbish pile, with its fish and rotting kim-chi. Past the previously strawberry now plum lorry, the ever-playing children, the bent back on herself woman, the arguing men, the telly-tubby shrine and the lotus pond. Between the tinted glass black cars that come and go up the tree-lined drive to the silent secret police building, through the bowing welcome guard of students and to my office.

I still had meetings today to finish off evaluations, and plan for the conference in July, and the fact of my afterthought visit then has taken the edge off the goodbyes, although there has still been some fantastic effusiveness. My favourite note, from a student I have to quote verbatim, 'My Dear and admirable Peter... When I met you at first, I surprised at your huge stomach, and your articulation [it was my first time to be taught by english teacher] but as time goes by your teaching impressed me...etc etc.' You can see why I love them, can't you? Most of my messages are in Korean, and will take some time to get through with a dictionary and a handkerchief.



Even if you've only skimmed the odd paragraph [and there will be a short test when I get back] you will be aware that I have enjoyed my time here. It needed to be worth it - it is a long time to desert my family - and just now I imagine the value for me at least will be far-reaching. The World Cup has so dominated June, that I have to strain to put the whole time back into my mind, but it has been a rich mixture indeed. I am really pleased with how all the important aspects have gone, and it does feel as if I am leaving something of value. I mean, when I arrived, as I reported to you, most of the people here weren't interested in football, and now that I have been here for four months they are mad

about it. That can't be coincidence can it?

I hope you have enjoyed these messages, but I don't really care - as you know they are essentially for my benefit. In my fertile fantasy life I can see people the world over riding the roller-coaster of the east with me, feeling every sensation as if they were here. Every now and then more sobering pictures

interrupt, of people sighing at yet another bloody message. If you are feeling glad that your hard disks will no longer be topped up by my weekly garbage, then I have to tell you it's not over yet. I have more than 2000 photos on this computer, and there is so much I haven't had time to tell you. A few hours of talking and you will be wishing you could put me safely back in your inboxes.

See you soon.

love

Pete

PS You may have heard that the gods [or the bookmakers, if you choose to believe the bigots at the Daily Mirror] decreed the sad but glorious ending for the background story. Grandfathers clock-like, the Korean World Cup adventure has ended exactly as mine does. 1-0 to Germany may be a bit predictable, but I think it brings a touch of gritty realism. The alternative, plucky little Korea in a glorious World Cup final against Brazil is just too Roy of the Rovers. If I included something so obviously implausible it might cast doubts on the rest of my tale. There was a two minute pause, if that, at the end of the match, a kind of 40 million person collective shrug, and the party went on anyway. Fireworks, dancing, singing, exchanging shirts. Everyone is pretty exhausted anyway, I don't think when the celebrating started two weeks ago anyone had thought they may need to pace themselves. But it is another wonderful night. The final world cup game in Korea, the play-off for 3rd and 4th is on Saturday, and their own team will be playing. July 1st has been declared a public holiday in honour of them, and July 2nd is going to be a special festival day in honour of the success of the competition. Much more of this and the reputation for hard work will be in tatters.