

Taking Kylie to Korea

In August this year, NTEU member David Prater travelled to South Korea as an Asialink resident to teach at Sogang University in Seoul. While he has some teaching experience in Australia and oodles of time notched up as a performance poet, this was to be David's first stint as a lecturer in any country. It would also be his first experience of a long-term stay overseas. As David reveals, he could not have asked for a more diverse and energetic city to teach in.

The population of Seoul's greater metropolitan area is approximately the same as the whole of Australia and it is rightly known as one of the most dynamic cities in the world. Indeed, 'dynamic' is a word that you hear often in Korea. Since the devastation of the Korean War (in which most of the Korean peninsula was rendered uninhabitable), Seoul has transformed itself into a world city. Its subway system makes Barry Jones' spaghetti diagram look like a straight line. The government has also invested hugely in information technology, with the result that the country is one of the most wired in the world. PC Bangs (internet gaming rooms) are ubiquitous, as is broadband internet. Mobile telephony is several generations ahead of Australia's: you can even watch television on some handsets.

For all the hype however, South Korea is also an ancient place, in which battles have been fought for millennia, against invaders from Japan, China and Manchuria, as well as Christian missionaries. The division of the Korean peninsula remains a sore point, despite the existence of a Ministry of Unification and the so-called progress of the Six Party Talks aimed at ending the unofficial war between north and south. Few Koreans I have spoken to will be drawn on the subject, and most react with astonishment that I am at all interested in South Korean politics, let alone history. Clearly, there is much that I will never know or understand about this place.

This semester I am teaching two courses

for a total of six hours per week: not a large teaching load by anyone's standards. Sogang University, one of the top four in a city that contains approximately seventy universities, has a well-deserved reputation as an institution that works its students hard. Students from other universities know it as 'Sogang High'. I have tried not to be too fazed by this, nor by the students' constant reference to me as 'Professor Prater', a title I could quite easily get used to.

In my first course, Creative Writing, the total number of students is nine, a dream number for such an intensive and hands-on course. It's an ideal opportunity to fulfill all of my *Dead Poet's Society* fantasies, including conducting classes outside, convincing my students to write poems using search engines and generally acting like a nutty professor. So far it seems to be paying off.

My second course, in Australian Culture, has proven to be more of a challenge, though no less an enjoyable one. With forty students, each class is more of a performance than a seminar or lecture. The strangeness of the subject matter for the students is a constant source of inspiration for me – it wasn't until I arrived here that I realised how bizarre Australian culture and history must appear to people living overseas. We have covered so much during this semester – the history of Indigenous dispossession, Captain Cook's seemingly-insane voyage up the east coast naming everything he saw, Australians at war (yes, even Simpson

and his donkey), our unique native animals (the students were indeed shocked to hear that we eat kangaroos), Don Bradman's hat and a million other things.

I have sung the national anthem ('a capella?' one incredulous fellow-traveller asked me) and *Waltzing Matilda*, tried to explain bizarre Australian terms like 'beach bum' and 'laconic' and even spent a few moments discussing Shane Warne's penchant for cigarettes and text messaging. I now have sitting in front of me a stack of essays on famous Australians, including Ned Kelly, Kylie Minogue and Oogeroo Nonnucal. Strangely enough, only one student chose to write about John Howard.

As the semester draws to a close, I realise more and more the privileged space I occupy here, as a visiting lecturer/'professor'. It has given me a great insight into the variety of positions that teachers occupy both in Australia and overseas. It has also done wonders for my confidence as a teacher and public speaker. I now also know how to say where I come from in Korean. So the next time you meet a Korean person, wherever you are, put your hand over your heart and say: *Hoju Saram* – I am Australian! 🇦🇺

David Prater travelled to Seoul as an Asialink resident, with the assistance of the Australia-Korea Foundation and the Australia Council for the Arts.



'Professor' Prater explains the finer points of Australian culture at a Korean karaoke bar

Read more at David's blog

www.davidprater.blogspot.com