

Bowing to Tradition

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One thing I didn't realize about myself until I came to Korea: I'm a waver. When somebody says hello to me, my first instinct is to hold up my palm and wave in response. I blame my Midwestern upbringing. When I first met my students, I felt like the Queen, constantly waving back to them as I walked down the hallway.

During my first week at Yeongwol Elementary School in rural Gangwon-do, my co-teacher gently pulled me aside.

"Lauren teacher," she said carefully. "Please, do not wave at the students. I think it confuses them."

Now *I* was confused. What was wrong with waving?

My co-teacher explained that things were changing in Korea. The traditional way of greeting an elder is to bow respectfully. But the world is growing smaller; cultural boundaries are not always easily defined. Now, instead of bowing, students often wave - especially to the native teachers.

"I worry that we are losing our traditions," my co-teacher said. "I see my daughter waving to her friends, and many students call the EPIK teachers by their first names. That is not Korean culture. They should always call you Lauren Teacher and bow. If you bow to them, they will remember to do it to you."

To be honest, it felt kind of...weird. I still wasn't used to bowing to anyone, let alone to children. It felt awkward, as if I was doing it wrong. My biggest fear was inadvertently insulting the principal by not bending enough at the waist or doing something inappropriate with my hands. Every time I bowed to a colleague, I felt like I was groveling.

I quickly saw what my co-teacher was talking about in terms of the students. Nearly every excited kid greeted me with a chirpy "Hello!" and an enthusiastic wave. I had to make a concerted effort to keep my hands down and dip my head, always making sure to give them a big smile in return.

With 1200 students in the school, there were plenty of opportunities to practice my bowing. Of course, I let a few waves slip every now and again - old habits die hard. But the students appreciated my efforts, and always bowed back.

Eventually, something happened. Bowing didn't feel so strange anymore. It became natural and instinctive. There are so many nuances to the simple act of bowing, from where to put your hands to a basic head nod. Over time, you gradually learn how it's done. After nearly two years in Korea, I now understand the importance of the bow in Korean culture. It's a lovely gesture, and often conveys more meaning than spoken words can. I don't feel like it's the act of an inferior, but rather a way of expressing a mutual respect to others.

Last winter, I visited my family in the United States and I brought my new habit of bowing with me. I couldn't stop doing it, whether it was to kids waiting at the bus stop or to the clerk at the grocery store. My conflicted loyalties even resulted in a sort of hybrid - the waving bow, where I tried to do both gestures simultaneously.

"You know you don't have to do that here," my sister said.

“I can’t help it,” I answered. “It just happens.”

There are many things that I’ve picked up in Korea, but I think bowing is going to be with me for a long time. One day, I’m sure my Midwestern roots will break through and I’ll start waving again. But until then, I’m happy to say that Korea has made me a ‘bower’.



A girl bows.



Students wave from the Danjong Festival



Yeongwol in Autumn