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Aspire and be inspired as a Korea foundation fellow: pay it forward in the long-term

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Aspire and be inspired as a Korea foundation fellow: pay it forward in the long-term

Abstract

This essay's title refers to the 2000 feature film *Pay it Forward* directed by Mimi Leder and starring the talented Kevin Spacey, Helen Hunt, and Haley Joel Osment. The film is not all that great in terms of making a contribution to the art of cinema, which is what I research and teach. However, its message carries a deep meaning. The phrase "pay it forward" captures the spirit of the potential impact Korea Foundation fellows have/can have in and on society. Everything we do and everyone we come in contact with in our lives is touched in some way. Everything we say about Korea, especially when it comes to our particular research topics, can be influential. People DO listen to what we have to say. In the film *Dead Poets Society*, the Robin Williams character, an English professor, says: "No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world." Given the power of this so-called ripple effect (and the general power of speech), we always need to remember to aspire and be inspired to make a difference in the world. Perhaps this might remind readers of that scene in *Jerry Maguire* (1996), when the Tom Cruise character (while writing a heartfelt manifesto) declares: "We must embrace what is still virginal about our own enthusiasm, we must crack open the tightly clenched fist and give back a little for the common good, we must simply be the best versions of ourselves...that goodness will be unbeatable and the money will appear."

Keywords

forward, pay, fellow, foundation, korea, inspired, term, be, long, aspire

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Fellow Essay

Aspire and Be Inspired as a Korea Foundation Fellow : Pay It Forward in the Long-term

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This essay's title refers to the 2000 feature film *Pay it Forward* directed by Mimi Leder and starring the talented Kevin Spacey, Helen Hunt, and Haley Joel Osment. The film is not all that great in terms of making a contribution to the art of cinema, which is what I research and teach. However, its message carries a deep meaning. The phrase "pay it forward" captures the spirit of the potential impact Korea Foundation fellows have/can have in and on society. Everything we do and everyone we come in contact with in our lives is touched in some way. Everything we say about Korea, especially when it comes to our particular research topics, can be influential. People DO listen to what we have to say. In the film *Dead Poets Society*, the Robin Williams character, an English professor, says: "No matter what anybody tells you, words and ideas can change the world." Given the power of this so-called ripple effect (and the general power of speech), we always need to remember to aspire and be inspired to make a difference in the world. Perhaps this might remind readers of that scene in *Jerry Maguire* (1996), when the Tom Cruise character (while writing a heartfelt manifesto) declares: "We must embrace what is still virginal about our own enthusiasm, we must crack open the tightly clenched fist and give back a little for the common good, we must simply be the best versions of ourselves...that goodness will be unbeatable and the money will appear."

Jerry Maguire is talking about money because this is seen as evidence of success in his line of business as a sports agent. In fact, Cuba Gooding Jr.'s character (Maguire's client) exhorts: "Show me the money!" It is true that money is important, but "pay it forward" is not ALL about the money. As we all know, Korean Studies and all other scholars work for love and not money. Though if one visits the *Radical History Review* journal web site, one can find a T-shirt for sale saying: "Earn Big Money! Become a Historian." Differentially, of course, this T-shirt is meant to be a joke. Yet, in all seriousness, being fortunate (and well-prepared) to receive a research fellowship can be an awesome responsibility. This is a valuable opportunity in the short-term to pursue and to complete successfully our important projects, and use our experience in the long-term as a stepping-stone in our lives and careers. In this way, all of our memorable experiences in Korea serve as an investment for the future.

Paying it forward is also about enjoying life while it is happening in the here and now, and not worrying about the race against time. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation - All Good Things...* (1994), Captain Jean-Luc Picard says: "Someone once told me that time was a predator that stalked us all our lives. I rather believe that time is a companion who goes with us on the journey and reminds us to cherish every moment, because it will never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we've lived. After all Number One, we're only mortal." In addition, Jack Nicholson's character in Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) reminds us that: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." Hence, pay it

forward while you can by having fun too! This is an important aspect of living that helps us relieve stress and temporarily forget all of our worries. In Disney's *The Lion King* (1994), Timon and Pumbaa say it best: "Hakuna Matata! What a wonderful phrase. Hakuna Matata! Ain't no passing craze. It means no worries for the rest of your days."

Speaking of Korea Foundation fellows having fun, one of the memorable highlights of 2005 was the Autumn Fellows three-day cultural field trip (November 3-5) to Jeju-do (Jeju Island). Over this long weekend, the special sights, delicious meals, fellowship/bonding, and singing on the bus and at the noraebang brought the travel group (about 30 of us) close together. It is difficult to describe the experience in words, but we became sort of a family. Reflecting back on the trip, some of the participants remarked:

"I was glad to meet with you family! The trip gave me so many unforgettable memories. All the best for the new year!!"

- An, Rimma, Professor, Korean Language, Kazakhstan Economic University

"Spending those unforgettable days in Jeju-do with Korea Foundation, the sea, volcanic mountains, mandarin trees, stone harubang (grandfather) sculptures, and the excellent company was one of my best experiences in Korea."

- Beatrix Mecsi, Post-Doc., RA, Institute of Art History, University of Budapest

"The Dolhareubang seem like old friends from some forgotten part of my past."

- Christopher Liao, MA Graduate Student, Korean History, Seoul National University

"The Hareubang Park was the best. All of the different shapes of harubang and halmang living together in harmony were just like us who were from all over the world."

- Ae-Gyung Shim, PhD Candidate, University of New South Wales, Australia

Each day of the field trip to Jeju-do was jam-packed with diverse activities, ranging from watching a breathtaking acrobatic show with daredevil motorcycle racers in a wire cage, eating fresh-gilled fish while overlooking the scenic beach and touring one of the longest lava caves in the world, to riding excited horses and learning at the Jeju Peace Museum about the history of the military tunnels built during the colonial period. Actually, all of the activities (too numerous to mention) were special, including hiking on Udo (Cow Island), and visiting the Folklore and Natural History Museum and Hallim Park - a 27,000-square-meter botanical garden.

However, the visit to the Jeju Peace Museum stands out above all, because it enlightened us and reminded us to pay it forward - that is, to face responsibility for the future. The Jeju Peace Museum was founded in 2004 by Yi Young-geun, who had dreamed for many years of preserving this site and inviting people to learn more about its important role in Korea's and Japan's shared history. Yi's father was one of the local Jeju people who helped build the original expanse of tunnels here. The museum is located at a highly strategic site where the Japanese forces were stationed during World War II. To begin with, visitors enter the hall of peace, which uses enlarged, grainy black-and-white documentary photographs to bring us back to the past. The photos serve as a vivid reminder for all of humanity to seek reconciliation and prevent war on the Korean peninsula and everywhere else in the world. Next, a large DVD-equipped theater (with a 240cm screen) offers an introductory video, which showcases the beauty of the island and explains its dark past. The video contains numerous interviews, offering eyewitness accounts of the area's history. It is hard to hold back the tears while watching some of the elderly local people reveal their emotional experiences. On display in the museum's largest room is a fascinating collection of almost a 1,000 artifacts from the colonial period, including Japanese military uniforms, various building tools, and weapons, as well as an array of documents (official Gazette of the war and industrial articles) published by the ministries of the Government General of Chosen. After perusing over all of these precious archeological remnants, visitors enter the dark and

musty maze of tunnels, which are very well preserved.

Finally, after resurfacing, Yi Young-geun gives a moving speech about how important the site is for Koreans, Japanese, and all others around the world. His central message is that no matter who we are or where we come from, we should always endeavor to seek peace in the world. In essence, in the opinion of this writer, Yi has a practical message, which is to pay it forward in the long-term. That is, he hopes that he will inspire visitors to carry his message of peace as far as possible - in perspectives of both distance and time.

So, exactly how do we "pay it forward in the long term"? Paying it forward is all about living in the here and now and spreading one's enthusiasm about Korea and Korean culture in any and every way possible. Invite a few people over for a Korean film night. Take someone out for Korean food and/or display a few scenic photos of Korea in your office or study carrel. Organize a panel at an international conference, propose a special Korean Studies theme issue for an academic journal, and/or write a newspaper article or two for the local paper/university magazine. Actively maintain a network of contacts established either through Korea Foundation activities, the Yonsei-KF Korean Studies Forum, or Koreanists website, where a free online database provides up-to-date information about scholars of Korean Studies around the world (see: www.koreanists.net). Most of us already do these things as a matter of course.

In short, we are all cultural ambassadors for Korea. We have all dedicated ourselves in some way to understanding Korean culture and society and their surrounding paradoxes, developments and complexities - all of the particular things that make Korea and its long history unique. It is ultimately up to each of us to "pay it forward" in our own way. Aspire and be inspired as a Korea Foundation fellow! May the force be with you.

[LIST](#)