

UMUC/UMGC Memoir

Norris Smith--August 2020

Cognizant of time, I am submitting my memoir as assorted observations in a more scattered form rather than in an organized sequence. I was teaching psychology in Korea and Japan from 2000-2007, beginning with an orientation in Tokyo and then another orientation in Seoul. I recall Joe Arden handing out sodas on the bus from Narita airport on the way to the New Sanno hotel. We enjoyed considerable meals & drinks in both locations, including a visit to the Korea House. I learned of a faculty member who took advantage of the extreme drop in the Korean won to exchange enough money to pay his rent for quite a while. As the internet bubble was popping in the states, I began my life in Asia, which meant first-hand contact with languages, cultures, and everything else from personal relationships to the history of countries and regions, all in the context of American town-like military bases with post offices and fast food restaurants.

I remember meeting an ethnically Korean American Army officer at the DHL (Dragon Hill Lodge) who grew up in Kansas/Nebraska as the only Asian guy in his class. He found himself stationed in Seoul speaking no Korean. A trip to the DMZ was memorable, as anyone who has done it can attest. Walking around the negotiating table to find myself in North Korea – and avoiding eye contact with the soldiers on the other side, as instructed – makes a great story to tell, as did keeping the waiver I signed that prevented me from holding anyone responsible for anything that happened to my body. While taking a new high-speed train, I recall a Korean man sitting across the aisle wanting to converse in English. He proceeded to inform me how Korean women are the best, with several supporting points as if rehearsing a well-organized paper, and I should marry one. It felt like he wanted to follow up to check.

When I started with UMGC I was younger than most of the faculty and consequently heard plenty of stories of yesteryear and far off locations. Someone stationed on Kwajalein reported that the most serious issue at the moment was where he left his shoes . . . hair length and style seemed to stand out . . . in Xian, China was an aeronautical university to which Maryland would send volunteers for a Summer program. It was described as “out there” but the devotion of the students was remarkable. One of the best parts was travel during the breaks in between terms. A group tour of only 4 persons to Beijing meant I could choose where to go, even if gem shops were mandatory stops. Usually I would venture out on my own on breaks or during military exercises, as did many faculty members who have notable stories.

Holding classes on base often meant decent conditions indoors, though on occasion I needed some creativity, especially compared to academics in the states. One time on Yokosuka Naval base in the Tokyo area, the classroom was locked and finding someone with a key became a bureaucratic maze with a metaphorical slippery floor and no exit. I noticed an area with exercise equipment and quickly decided that to avoid having a make-up class, we would gather around to discuss psychology right there on stationary bikes and whatever else we could sit on. At other locations it was difficult to reconcile walkways in the woods and golf courses -- such as at Zama -- with the less aesthetically pleasing yet highly functional bases. My aunt informed me she gave birth to a son there 50 years prior and remembered the two-lane roads around the area with speeding trucks. Another item that stuck me about Zama was the well-stocked library with progressive films and series on war-related topics. I gradually grasped the numbers of persons

overseas who were severely critical of American foreign policy even if working for the DOD in some form.

I mentioned a comparison with teaching in the states and how adjustments were necessary with TDY/PCS students, not to mention various administrative peculiarities, but a contrast with universities I worked for after Maryland immediately revealed its stability and predictability (at least until Adelphi became increasingly detached from tradition and common sense). What was supposed to be “Maryland in Thailand” that Joe Arden strove for was eventually taken over by an American university that I ended up working at. There were several persons without qualifications and in some cases without exposure to even the basic ideology and ethics of Western academics. Without UMGC however, I would likely never been in a position to travel and experience so much, whether funny or bizarre or frightening or eye-opening.

Other times that stand out include taking classes at Yokota Air Base, the headquarters of Maryland in Asia. I was teased by the Japanese language teacher for arriving to class with (a small amount of) blood on my leg after a bicycle accident. I expected blood to appear masculine, but she put me in my place to show her strength. Also, her expected pace of learning was quick, and I found myself in trouble for not keeping up! I also took a class with Dennis Doolin, whose extensive knowledge of China – and his 7,200-character knowledge of Mandarin – was fascinating. Notwithstanding his high DOD position in the Nixon administration, he gave us an opportunity to expose ourselves to mindsets at the highest level. I particularly recall unsolicited episodes of his encounters with Henry Kissinger after I challenged him on Kissinger’s comments supporting Tiananmen Square, rivaling any Ivy League education for intensity and proximity to the source of power. Now that I reflect on it, taking classes was a major part of the overseas experience. In a similar way, the history and continued influence of events in Southeast Asia have been expressed in film screenings along with their directors that I was able to attend in Thailand at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club in Bangkok or elsewhere. The largest and secretive military base in Laos was one topic, at which a woman during the Q&A spoke up with strong emotion to say she used to stay at. Another was upper class Cambodians studying in Paris during the Khmer Rouge takeover who returned to Phnom Penh at the wrong time, and *The Act of Killing* about the cold war period in Indonesia in which self-titled “gangsters” murdered ethnic Chinese and now enjoy themselves on camera. When history becomes the present, I feel grateful to be a part and experience it more directly.

With no particular emphasis, I will finish with a few more. One time a student came to class and informed me of how long he had been awake. He carried a large coffee and asked that I not be upset if he fell asleep while I lectured! During the break, he said he couldn’t stay awake and needed to leave to sleep. At one shop near Yokota, service members were buying psychedelic mushrooms and the base asked it to consider stopping. The shop’s reply was that it was part of the heritage and legal, and it politely declined, after which the base designated it as a no-go destination. After 9-11 happened while I was living off base, I entered Yokota by explaining I had only a radio and no TV and wanted to find out what was happening. I went to a room with a large TV and pilots gathered around who were especially excited about the drama, likely viewing it as an opportunity to go kick ass. I also was stopped by the military police for riding a bicycle without a helmet and instructed to walk the bike if wearing no helmet, part of a higher level of security. Finally, when I played a documentary about the privatization of military jobs that became widespread under the Cheney administration, I witnessed the opposite of apathy in the classroom! My obsession over the invasion of Iraq based on a massive public relations

campaign including “information warrior” John Rendon’s “perception management” skills took a turn when I moved to Iraqi Kurdistan to work at a university with some excellent researchers but also the occasional missionary, embezzler, unhidden spy or mild conman.