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“I had to live. I had to survive.”: Continuous Adaptation on KyungIn’s Trilingual Journey

Ah, those big round glasses, the kind of intonation that only Koreans realize between themselves –which people normally call *Konglish* –and those familiar unconsciously-muttered interjections between her conversations that I used to hear back at home in Korea. And most importantly, her last name, Kim. It was at the week-long intensive course during Winter break held at Bryn Mawr that I got to know her. She introduced herself as Julia to everyone in the classroom, however, nothing more, nothing less. After quietly collecting all the evidence of her, I concluded that Julia must be Korean. Because there are not many Koreans around Bryn Mawr and even less at Haverford, the kind of inexplicable joy of finding someone from similar background and same nationality was so overwhelming that I couldn’t wait to say “*An-nyeong*” (‘Hello’ in Korean) to her.

Even though she knew I was Korean, she always responded back to me in English. That awkward moment when I found out my own conclusion derived from the carefully collected evidences went awry and her response in unexpected language will never be forgotten. But at the end of the week, she approached to me, and for the first time since we had met, she asked me in Korean to have dinner together sometime. And then she told me I could call her by her Korean name, ‘KyungIn’.

Thus, KyungIn was the kind of girl who left a big impression on me before I got to really know her. KyungIn was born in Korea and lived in a small rural town called Anseong for seven years with her family. Then she moved to China without knowing what obstacles she would face in the next phase of her life, just by holding her Mom’s hand on one side, her brother’s on the other. Without knowing any Chinese, for the first two years, she had “barely survived”. She told me not a day passed by without a hear in her first month there. But as she spent five more years of her youth in China, she got more comfortable speaking Chinese and ended up being able to speak the language up to “native level”. (18) Because her parents wanted their children to be

exposed in English-speaking environment, she then moved to Hawaii for a year and moved to Fairfax, Virginia to have a better education than she had received in Hawaii, and she has lived with her mom and her brother since then. She is now a Junior at Bryn Mawr College, and she is planning to work in the US as her family has lived in the US for quite a long time and gained green cards very recently. Her Father, however, who has always been in Korea, was not able to apply for one. (3)

When I asked her what languages she could speak, with the smile that she musters only when she is confident or proud, KyungIn told me she is trilingual –Korean, Chinese and English. (4, 6) She always speaks Korean with her family, whom she lived with for twenty years (2), but her brother sometimes speaks English to her and she responds back to him in English. (8, 9) Since Korean has been the language that she could speak only after the daily work from exhausting school life was over, she described Korean “as a means of reminiscing the feeling of real home with [her] father.” (7) Minor in Chinese, she has continued practicing the language by taking classes at Haverford. As a Computer Science major, she always communicates with her peers in English on her lab projects. Also as an outgoing person, she rarely eats alone. She always has some of her friends join her for lunch or dinner at Haverford College. (8) Because of the environments she was in and had to adapt to, she can perfectly express her opinions and feelings in those three languages. (6, 11)

“Everything was difficult”, she grimaced as she recalled her memories when she encountered a different culture for the first time ever in her life. “I had to *live*. I had to *survive*. I had to understand what they were *saying*.” Thanks to one of her Korean friends she met when she was in elementary school, she was luckily able to get a translation for every word that came out from the mouths of teachers and her classmates. As she started to catch some of the words and phrases as months passed by, the comfort level she felt for the Chinese language and culture increased. Then her parents decided to move their children to an international school in China in the hopes of their children acquiring both Chinese and English. That was KyungIn’s second encounter with another language with which she was not familiar. But as she could communicate with people in Chinese, she wasn’t very stressed like before. Thus, she was able to pick up English in a more relaxing environment, where more people spoke a language that she could also speak. (12)

She expresses being trilingual as her most invaluable asset that contributes to her identity. “I don’t know how I would have made myself unique from others if it were not for those three languages.” (19) Then she carefully addressed what her mother told her when they moved into Virginia few years ago, “*Umma* told me it was all *Abba*’s plan.” She heard her dad really envied his friend’s daughter who could speak three languages very fluently. And that is how he decided to send the rest of his family overseas from the little rural town. Her father’s immeasurable love toward his children and his yearning for them to speak languages that are widely spoken, however, have led the family to live separately, which was all possible solely based on her father’s willingness to sacrifice. The separation her father voluntarily made for his family has become steeper and will unfortunately be irrevocable as they will continue living in different continents.

“It wasn’t a long time ago that I realized my identity has been shaped based on my parents’ sacrifice,” KyungIn said with a bitter smile, “whether my citizenship status would differ from my *Abba*’s, I will always be his daughter, his flesh and blood. I will always be Korean inside and out.” Even though she has lived in a number of areas with different cultures, she showed her confidence that she is Korean, nevertheless. (18) She thanks her Korean identity for being able to enjoy K-Indie, K-drama, Korean TV shows, and she always catches up on what is happening in Korea through all kinds of media. KyungIn even went to New York few weeks ago to see her favorite Korean idol boy group, B1A4. As much as she is passionate about Korean culture, she strongly identifies herself as Korean and loves talking about Korean culture with her friends. (21)

She also has a habit of talking to herself in Korean; most of her thinking processes are also done in Korean as well. (14) “I tend not to swear,” KyungIn said calmly, “Korean curse words, or curse words from all around the world, are based on dirty sexual expressions.” Whenever she gets frustrated, however, she curses in Korean solely because of phonological reasons as most of the Korean curse words contain tense sounds such as *kka*, *dda*, *bba*, *ssa* and *jja*. She says those strong words alleviate her anger as she says them aloud. (16, 17) Since Korean is her main language, she dreams in Korean but not in any other languages. She told me some of her Haverford friends appear in her dreams and speak to her in Korean. Even though it was surprising at the first time and she felt that it was weird to hear some white guys speaking to her in Korean, she did not take it very seriously while she was dreaming. (15)

Although she has a strong Korean background, she identifies herself as “East-Asian.” (18) When it comes to a discussion on Chinese politics, economics and cultures, KyungIn speaks with great fervor. (21) Her Chinese professor even questioned her nationality as her Chinese is comparable to that of native Chinese speakers. (29) Her English is also very comparable with that of native English speakers, even though I could sense some familiar sounding interjections between her conversations on the day we first met.

KyungIn, however, said she would not like to identify herself as an American. “Language plays a big role in shaping one’s identity; however, language isn’t everything,” she says. She believes the degree of affection toward a society affects how one’s identity is shaped; and her little to no affection toward American society detached her from here. When she came to the United States for better education, she had a difficult time not because of the language, but because of the white-dominant society. The fact that having to be a part of the society where she automatically was considered as a minority, solely due to her darker skin, made her feel indifferent toward this country. The Trump presidency made her determination even more firm. (20) Thus, even though she does not have any problem communicating with people in English, the detachment she had toward American society played a big role in her identifying as an “East-Asian.” It was not only the Whites, but also Korean Americans influenced the shaping of her identity. “Whatever those second-generation Korean Americans, “bananas”, “twinkies” said about me at my back, I really did not care,” said KyungIn bitterly. “They looked desperate to be a part of the Whites’ community. They looked ashamed of our culture, looks and heritage.” She says, because of them, she tried to keep her Asian identity for she did not want to be like one of them. She was proud of her trilingualism in the United States. Rather than focusing on how she could be a part of this white society that she encountered, she focused on how she could cherish the cultures she like to be part of and the uniqueness of her great ability to speak three languages fluently. (31)

As much as she cherishes Korean and Chinese cultures, she becomes extra considerate when dealing with either Korean or Chinese people. Because of her bad memories at her high school, she tends to be more cautious with her use of language and speaks in a comparably lower tone. “There are also etiquette systems that Koreans must abide by. It is not bad to keep some distance between people whom I first met for cultural reasons.” (27) Listening to her and putting

myself into her shoes, I then could understand why she had built a wall between us at our first encounter. Of course, the wall was torn down after we had established a trustworthy relationship.

When it comes to speaking different languages, however, KyungIn's tone and attitude dramatically changes. Four different intonations in Chinese and up-and-downs in English make her unconsciously be more lively and active. (27) Because she speaks languages that show her personality explicitly, she has communicated, sympathized and identified with people with all different stories effectively. (31) Having experienced the virtues of learning new languages, she took a Beginning Japanese class last semester in the hope of learning another East-Asian language and being able to communicate more effectively with her Japanese friends. As she learned that Japanese and Korean share similar grammar structure and Japanese characters are based on Chinese characters, she was able to consolidate even more of her "East-Asian" identity while learning Japanese. Needing to fulfill her major requirements, however, she wasn't able to expose herself much to a Japanese-speaking environment, and thus has forgotten what she had learned last semester. (13)

The effort KyungIn has put into to becoming trilingual is so tremendous that no one will be able to fully describe her efforts with mere adjectives. She also did not take trilingualism for granted because she knows that it is an invaluable fruit of her struggle to survive and her father's poignant sacrifice. This fruit of hers has led her family and friends, including myself, to enjoy every bit of her enthusiasm, intellectual curiosity and her warm heart. Her journey to learn more languages and being able to communicate with more people around the world has not ceased. She plans to learn German and Italian in the hopes of traveling around Europe and reading more of Michael Ende's books and *Ulysses Moore* by Pierdomenico Baccalario in their original texts. As a great explorer with confidence and intelligence, KyungIn will surely flourish in her career and in her life by keeping her unique identity as an "East-Asian".