Ministero dell' Istruzione, dell'Università e della Ricerca

CERTILINGUA®

"IS PEACE AN UNATTAINABLE HOPE FOR SOUTH KOREA?"

17th July 2018

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MOTIVATION

When I first heard about the possibility offered by my high school of living for one week in another country, to be precise South Korea, I did not immediately understand that this kind of adventure would change me forever in many aspects.

Before participating in this project I just wanted to get in touch with someone of my same age from a far away country and to share ideas about our ambitions and prospectives for the future.

My initial expectations about this school exchange were, however, wrong. Firstly, I did not care about the difficulties and the troubles I would have to face during that week, such as misunderstandings and a different approach with whoever I met.

I quickly realised that it would not be like having a holiday with my classmates, or even my family, staying in a hotel and visiting tourist attractions. It would consist of sharing ideas, expectations, lifestyles and habits with someone else, someone who is totally different. It was not about visiting monuments, and museums, but instead about focusing on something more special, that could allow you to know and understand how people in another country live, the reasons for their habits, their country's history and cultural, social background.

Despite all those things, I was excited and really interested in finding out more about the differences, and the similarities between myself and another teenager who lives on the other side of the world.

A DEFINITION

Now, after having this experience, I can explain what a "cultural" exchange means to me.

Its primary aim is the education of young teenagers all around the world. An inter-cultural experience involves not only the personal growth of teenagers, but also the exchange of knowledge, points of view and ideas.

For all of those reasons a cultural exchange is the perfect opportunity for a teenager to learn more about different societies, habits, and to discover a different approach to topics like the environment, art and education.

INTRODUCTION OF THE PROJECT

This kind of experience teaches you that such an intercultural project is, in general, an instrument for modernisation that characterises a developed country. It allows people in a society, especially teenagers like myself, to open their minds to other lifestyles and to accept them.It teaches you that everyone all around the world is equal in their diversity.

This is a way to prevent racism, intolerance and discrimination. It teaches you that if someone is not like you, they can be a great source of richness not only fear.

In fact if you ignore the traditions and the mindsets of another population, there may be arrogance and superiority in dealing with other nationals living in your country.

In my opinion, such projects could make the difference in the future, since they allow you to take an enormous leap forward towards a future of peace. If we get to know each other and learn who we are, we are not scared of diversity, because we are familiar with it and we are aware of its potential.

Today, it is also easier to compare ourselves with others from foreign countries thanks to social networks, emails and all the softwares that have made communication easier and faster.

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

The project consisted of hosting a South Korean students in January for one week and being hosted by that partner for another week in March. What impressed me the most was that after one week spent in Korea, everyone could notice the desire of the Korean citizens to lead a life full of peace and order. It may be an ordinary thing for European people, but we were able to understand their feeelings better by widening the knowledge of the history of this magnificent country.

The principles of peace and order were first introduced by the most loved king of Korea, the only one who was called "The Great" during the entire history of this country that has had more than 5000 kings and queens.

King Sejong the Great ruled the kingdom of Korea for 32 years during the fifteenth century. King Sejong introduced for the first time the concept of the importance of the citizens in a country. In

fact, in one speech he said: "the population represents the fundamental part of a country. A country becomes stable and prosperous only if the population of the same country is strong".

This principle is still alive in the Korean culture after centuries of war and foreign dominations. It represents part of the current core philosophy and it means that everyone can contribute to the prosperity of the country, increasing their own knowledge and supporting the country's values with effort.
King Sejong the Great, introduced democratic measures in favour of the Korean people and built strong and polite links with neighbouring countries, such as China and Japan, regarding commercial and political agreements. Unfortunately his innovative thought was rejected by his heirs over the following centuries. Probably this person was the first one who was introduced us during our school lessons attended in South Korea.
I have understood that this ancient King is an example of life of every South Korean citizen, because he firstly taught to take care about the people who are around us.
For this reason this man has became a symbol for us too because many times these principle in our society are missing. The teaching was to be generous, to avoid every selfish behaviour and to dedicate some time to people who are around us because it pays back with happiness and serenity.

As everyone know, nowadays South Korea occupies the lower part of a peninsula surrounded by other countries that have been distinguished throughout history for their power and influence in the balance of the world: Russia, China and Japan.
In addition to these countries, many other nations were interested in the land of South Korea due to its strategic position. The United States and several European countries, including France and the United Kingdom, have all tried to establish their presence.

As a result, Korea was invaded many times by neighbouring countries that exploited its resources and people with cruelty, violating human rights and the Korean citizens' dignity.
Therefore, due to the multitude of countries that had an interest in the peninsular territory, Korea had little possibility during the past to express, emerge and define its own strong identity and influential presence.
Korean culture was subjected to many influxes of neighbouring countries, starting with China, that imposed its presence even if it did not occupy the peninsula, at the end of 15th century with the intention of changing Korean traditions, considered less prestigious. The Chinese alphabet was declared mandatory and was used over the years to write documents, in particular with regard to education.

As was explained to me in the Korean War's museum, the most recent, and most hated conquest was the invasion by Japan. In 1905, Japan imposed its supremacy over Korea and the peninsula was officially declared part of the Japanese empire in 1910, becoming a colony. Slavery was introduced and the Korean culture was abolished and declared illegal. All Korean literary books were burned, and citizens' names were substituted with their equivalent in Japanese up to the end of the Second World War.

Korea became a colony to exploit: tax policies were changed, school life and programmes were reformed, shintoism was imposed as the national religion, rice production was totally moved to Japan, thus depriving the Korean citizens the production of their core and basic food and provoking a series of famines.

The speech of the musem's guide remind me the story recounted me by my grandparents over the years spent during the Fascist regime. Even if the guide was trying to explain us as better as he could about the situation in that years, I have realized that none of us was able to figure out deeply the tragic circumstances of that period.

Although that, a sense of terror invaded my body, as I was one of the protagonist of the Korean citizens and I was exposed to the expropriation of every single of my peculiarity.

Following the principle of the United States President Wilson, "the self determination of people", many rebels resisted the Japanese government, many manifestations took place in the main Korean cities always ending with the intervention of the Japanese army. Many civil wars took place up to the end of the Second World War, co-ordinated by the Korean provisional government based in Shanghai.

As anyone would suppose, Korea never felt part of the Japanese empire, and it never shared a common identity and culture with the occupiers. This is why its citizens tried to express their feelings in many ways. One example is often recounted, one that let other countries around the world know how the Japanese were treating the Korean people.

In 1936, a Korean athlete, named Sohn Kee Chung, was standing on the highest step of the podium, after winning the gold medal in the marathon, beating all the records, at the Olympic Games hosted in Berlin.

During the medal ceremony, the Japanese national anthem was played, and the Japanese flag was hoisted above Sohn's head, the same flag printed on his vest. The athlete was registered with the name Son Kitei, the Japanese equivalent of his Korean name, but during the medal ceremony he hid the Japanese flag displayed on his chest with flowers. After crying tears of anger, Sohn tried to let every participant and spectator at that Olympic Games know what his own country was, by signing

postcards with his Korean name and using it during the interviews too, even if it had been prohibited since the invasion. The main Korean newspaper posted Sohn's photos deleting the Japanese flag above his head. Such actions provoked the Japanese government and many journalists of that newspaper were sent to jail. A few days before, in the same stadium, the African American athlete Owens had won four gold medals in front of Hitler and all German people. These two men became the symbol of sport worldwide, seen as an example of strength, bravery and national pride. The athlete statue was shown us with proud in the lobby of the school that hosted us during our journey because Sohn was a student of that high school.

During the Second World War, as we have learnt in the Korean war's museum, Korea was obliged to take part in the conflict with Japan. Korean women were used as sexual slaves, called "comfort women" by Japanese generals. At the end of the Second World War, although the hope to rebuilt a country with its national identity was still alive, all of its dreams failed when Russia and China took the political control of the northern part of the peninsula, establishing a communist regime.

The remaining south part was characterised by the influence of the United States that promoted a capitalist economy. The country was definitely broken into two, at the 38° parallel, the place where the border was set. The division should have been temporary, until the United Nations had defined what would be the future Korean administration and government.

However, with the explosion of the Cold War in 1946, the Korean territory became one of the places where the two biggest military powers, the United States and Russia, clashed. The conflict peaked

on 25 June,1950, with the beginning of the War of Korea. On this date the North Korean army invaded the majority of the South Korean territory.
South Korea decided to attack North Korea back, supported by the United States and seventeen other countries that were part of the United Nations and that sent soldiers. At the same time other members of the United Nations supplied medical assistance, for example Italy. North Korea was subjected to a disastrous defeat and the majority of the North Korean territory was conquered.
With the following Chinese intervention in the conflict and the introduction of Russian modern and technologically advanced airplanes, the border was moved back to the 38° parallel.

The war continued until 1953, the day in which the Panmunjom armistice was signed; a DMZ was created (demilitarised zone) and two new countries were officially instituted: North Korea and South Korea.
We had the chance to visit this place during our travel in Korea. It was a rainy day and that weather underlined the negative atmosphere around us.
The word that can describe perfectly the scenery in front of us is tragedy and horror.
I have never seen in my life such a scary place, surrounded by mines, weapons and militaries.
In that place the sound of silence triumph, so much so that a group of teenagers like us, did not whisper a single word in the whole day.

In the north part of the peninsula was born a totalitarian and communist regimen, led by Kim Il Sung; whereas the southern area became a democratic republic and a capitalistic territory under the protection of the United States.

Since the division, there have always been peaceful phases alternating with constant threats and, despite the armistice, North Korea was always ready for a new war.

In fact, four tunnels that join the border of North Korea with Seoul were discovered. The first one was found in 1974 and the last one in 1990. These tunnels were disguised by coal mines and were discovered only because of the seismic waves provoked by TNT used to build them. They were aimed to attack South Korea and invade it rapidly.

Nowadays, it is not certain that there are not other tunnels that directly threat the South Korean capital, but it is held to be true that these tunnels were dangerous for a possible invasion.
During our visit to one of the tunnels built by North Korean citizens, we have comprehended how North Korean's army was determined to conquer the capital of South Korea: Seoul.
The tunnel was narrow and suffocating and it was many and many meters under the ground.

The absence of light and the color of the walls of the tunnel, that are black, contributed make us feel scared and little in front of that complex tunnel that could be the cause of an invasion.

Since the division of the nation, South Korean has been in favour of a future reunification because, at the end of the Korean War, many families were separated and never given the possibility to communicate with each other, as the Korean teacher that carry us into the DMZ explained us while he was crying.
In fact he cleared up that his family too was divided and he had no information about his relatives since the separation.

Although there have been numerous attempts of reconciliation, the nation is still divided.

From the moment of their division, the two Koreas have developed at two different rates. The south is technologically developed and it is a highly globalised country. On the other hand, the north is still imposing the rationing of food, the isolation from foreign countries, and has made limited technological progress.
The two countries have radically changed over the years in social, cultural and economical aspects. Before the division, the nation was characterised by a common language that has diversified more and more over the years and a common economy that today could not be so different.

The North Korean economy is focused on subsistence agriculture and opium plantations, whereas the South Korean economy is based on various multi-national companies, worldwide leaders in many sectors, starting with technological ones such as Samsung and LG, and then arriving at sectors including automobile such as Hyundai and Sang Yong.

As we have seen into the Samsung delight store, South Korea is up to date regarding technology, in opposition to the only one North Koren village that we had the possibility to see by the Observatory based into the DMZ.

The United Nations made an effort during these decades in order to get the two economies closer, in order to reduce the gap between them. Following this objective, an industrial area was built in the Demilitarized Zone (known worldwide as DMZ) as we has seen by the observatory built into the DMZ.
In addition to that monetary support has always been sent to North Korea.
However, despite this effort, the two economies are still very different and the two countries today have never been economically so far apart.

The division between these two counties is not just economic and cultural, but physical too. In fact, North Korea wants to preserve its strong identity, sending constant threats to South Korea.

As the Korean soldier who became our guide during our travel into the DMZ explained, inside the DMZ, in the North Korean part, there are cannons that can fire missiles to bomb Seoul in less than fifteen minutes. The DMZ is also full of mines and gunshots are often heard.

Although this critical situation, South Korea is not scared. As a reply to the continuous threats, South Korea has decided to built a school in the DMZ as a symbol of peace and knowledge.

The school is situated in the only South Korean village that is located in the DMZ: Tae Sung Dong, known as "Peace village". In my opinion the name "Peace village" does not suit well to this little village, located in the area that has been defined as the "scariest" in the world. As a soldier explained us, only people who lived in the village before the Korean War, or are descendants of those who participated, are allowed to freely move there without special government permission. Because of the danger that residents are exposed to, they have some benefits: they are exempt from national defence duties and from paying taxes and they have been given portions of land bigger than anywhere else in South Korea. As a consequence, farmers who are based there have some of the highest earnings in the whole country.

As the construction of the "peace village" shows, the main will of Koreans is freedom and guaranteed peace in the long run, that can be achieved only by an agreement with North Korea. On the other hand, North Korea seemed to have no intention to negotiate with South Korea.
In fact, many missiles have been launched into the Japanese sea and many others have flown over the Hokkido island as a warning.

More recently, a few weeks before the beginning of the Winter Olympic games that took place in Pyeongchang in February 2018, the hope of reconciliation between the two countries that form the Korean peninsula, started to grow.
The negotiations involved the United States president, Donald Trump, the dictator Kim Jong-un, and the South Korean president Moon Jae in.

Everything started with the partecipation in the games of a North Korean athletes' delegation who, competed with the South Korean athletes as one team. This signalled the beginning of effective political negotiations between the three countries.
Kim Jong un expressed his desire for reconciliation with the United States and South Korea. As a consequence, the dictator guaranteed his willingness to denuclearisation in order to establish a

peaceful relationship with the two counties involved.

The reconciliation peaked on the 27th of April when Moon Jae in met Kim Jong un in the DMZ. On that day, the two leaders signed a treaty of peace for the Korean war that ended in 1953, but that was formally never concluded.

In addition to the signature of the peace treaty, for the first time in history a Korean dictator crossed the border and walked on the soil of South Korea. The relevance of the moment was underlined by the handshake and the hug between the two leaders, unusual in the Asian culture.

REFLECTIONS

In conclusion, after centuries of wars and devastation, all South Korean citizens want is a period full of peace and order without any kind of threats. All of them invoke stability, a fearless world and hope to build a country based on prosperity and polite relationships with its neighbours. In fact, the proverb "Love your neighbour as you love yourself" is one of the fundamental pillars of Korean culture.

Peace remains one of the most important values, one that can be articulated as freedom and respect for human diversity. As a direct result of this, in 1984 the U.N. drafted a declaration regarding the right of all people to live in peace. This declaration was inspired by the teachings and the speeches of Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

My experience in South Korea has radically changed my ideas and points of view regarding freedom and peace. Most young people in Europe cannot understand the condition of war as they have never directly lived in such a terrible situation. Peace is a value underestimated and taken for granted and was achieved in Europe only after two devastating conflicts fought in the last century. Thanks to this new awareness I have re-evaluated my priorities and I have learnt that it is essential to appreciate every single moment of quiet and coexistence with others in harmony. For this reason, in South Korea everyone wants to achieve peace by talking, since dialogue is an essential part of human strength and intelligence. Once achieved, peace, happiness, and well being are direct consequences.

As my partner in the school exchange taught me unintentionally, living in Europe is a luck.
We can cross the border with other countries freely without special permission.
We have the possibility to study and reside anywhere else and feel like we are at home.

Even if we visit foreign countries we are hosted with pleasure.

The last but not the least thing is our fortune to be a joined nation with a strong identity.