

# 'You don't understand Korean culture'

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— Brian Deutsch

By Bart Schaneman

In 2007 and 2008, in a span of 12 months, seven school children from Jeollanamdo died in traffic accidents. Suncheon-based teacher Brian Deutsch found it interesting how educators mobilized their students to protest American beef imports, but said little about traffic safety.

He wrote an opinion piece for the Korea Times titled "Rallies Have Little to Do with Food Safety."

In the piece Deutsch, an American, wrote: "Encouraging students to skip school to attend these candlelight vigils and rallies is not only inappropriate and outside the bounds of a teacher-student relationship, but it detracts attention from more pressing issues students are facing."

"Namely, they are far more likely to be killed on field trips or while walking home from school than by contracting mad cow disease, which as of yet has claimed no Korean or Korean-American lives."

Add that to a previous piece about the use of Nazi imagery in a Korean company's skin care ad, both of which were used in a modified version for the Gwangju News magazine, and Deutsch had attracted the attention of the netizens.

## Who told you to talk, foreigner?

The internet campaign was led by a Gwangju native, Kim Hong-su. He started two blogs to counter Deutsch's stories and posted the American's name, blog url, and Facebook profile online in Daum cafes along with an accompanying letter. He also posted the names of Deutsch's schools and advised people to direct their complaints there. Deutsch went to the police but was told they were too busy.

Kim's message was written in Korean, and it was then translated on Deutsch's blog.

"What galls me the most is that these foreigners are growing fat and rich in Korea teaching their native tongue while making fun of the same people who are paying their wages," he wrote. "I need your (other Koreans) help in correcting this kind of behaviors (sic) from foreigners. I would like you to e-mail the editor and those of you who are local to Suncheon should track down this Brian Deutsche (sic) and find out which school or hagwon he teaches in. You can assist me when you find that information. I seek full and unfettered cooperation in my campaign to correct this foreigner's behavior. If we cannot do that to a foreigner on our own soil, how can we hope to correct the behavior of U.S. President Bush?"

Kim was contacted for comment in this article, and responded via e-mail. "Before you try to learn about Korea via a Korean, you should learn Korean and ask the questions in Korean first," he wrote.

The Gwangju News is operated by the Gwangju International Center. When Deutsch consulted with the staff at the GIC, they told him they didn't like his articles, either. They didn't like the Nazi story or the traffic safety story, and they also didn't like the story he wrote about the death of a 14-year-old American boy, Michael White, who drowned in a sauna near Daegu.

Staffers told him the magazine was publishing stories that were too

foreigner-intensive. On top of that, the publisher of the magazine told Deutsch that they might as well close down the magazine if it wasn't going to be appreciated by foreigners.

Deutsch quit the magazine, but his troubles weren't over.

## 'Generalizations are kind of fun'

Anyone can be a blogger. It takes minutes to sign-on to Blogger or Wordpress, then you can put up a few pictures, spew some vitriol and start checking the site meter for hits. While living overseas it's a good way to stay in touch with friends and family. The days of the mass e-mail are over — they can check the blog for live updates.

It's common for English teachers and other non-Koreans to start up a blog. Most of their sites die a slow death, however. It's difficult to update often enough to keep readers; what seemed like a good idea at the time can easily turn into a bore.

Still, there are a few prominent expatriate blogs in Korea that receive a lot of hits. The six we are interested in here are: The Marmot's Hole, Scribbles of the Metropolitician, The Grand Narrative, Ask a Korean!, Roboseyo and Deutsch's — Brian in Jeollanam-do.

The Marmot's Hole is run by Robert Koehler. It is the most heavily trafficked blog of the foreigner-in-Korea set. Koehler, with the help of a handful of guest bloggers, posts news items, analysis, entertainment and pictures of old buildings. Koehler is American, the editor-in-chief of SEOUL magazine, and has been operating the blog for five years.

"Our role is to offer commentary and criticism from a fresh, outside perspective," Koehler said. "That being said, it's easy to overthink these things — personally, I don't think the 'foreign observer' has any special role beyond that of any observer, which is to say, relating observations he or she has made."

"All countries are open for criticism. The question that really needs to be asked is whether anyone should take what we write seriously. For the most part, the answer to that would be no."

"Most of us are guys with too much time on our hands who like to bitch about things we don't really understand. Which, granted, would make our uneducated rants little different from much of what passes for commentary on Korea, Western or Korean."

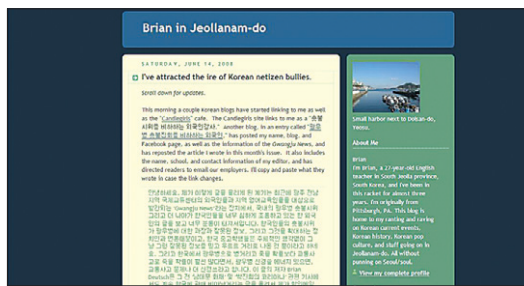
"I have a warning on my blog asking readers not to generalize from anything they read on my site, but still, many seem to do it anyway. Besides, generalizations are kind of fun — nationalistically hysterical Koreans, pot-smoking over-sexed English teachers, condescending expats — who doesn't love 'em. It's all a question of how seriously you take what you read."

## Do you see what I see?

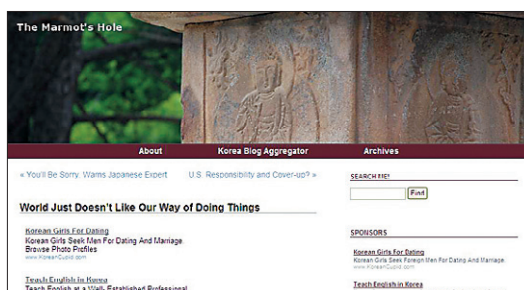
Scribbles of the Metropolitician comes from Michael Hurt. The blog is a mishmash of social criticism, international politics, pop culture and comments on Korean media. Hurt first came to Korea from America as a Fulbright English teaching assistant in 1994. After earning his master's in ethnic studies from the University of



Scribbles of the Metropolitician — metropolitician.blogspot.com



Brian in Jeollanamdo — brianddeutsch.blogspot.com



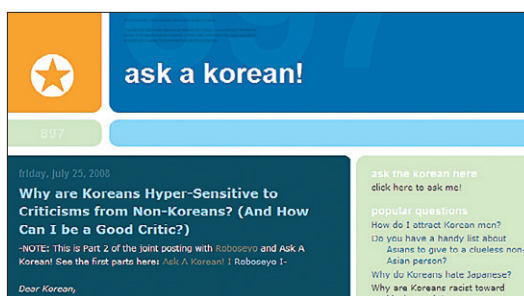
The Marmot's Hole — rjkoehler.com



Roboseyo — roboseyo.blogspot.com



The Grand Narrative — thegrandnarrative.wordpress.com



Ask a Korean! — askakorean.blogspot.com

California-Berkeley, he came back in 2002 to finish his dissertation research on Korean nationalism. Now in his eighth year in Korea, he edits the Korea Journal and teaches social issues at Hongik University.

Both Koehler and Hurt brought up Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman who wrote "Democracy in America" in the first half of the 19th century. Both men consider this book a great commentary on the United States.

"The fact that we're foreigners shouldn't disqualify us. I look at American social commentary and social criticism and some of our sharpest and best social critics have been foreigners, people coming from a foreign perspective," Hurt said.

"We have eyes, we have ears. We can read your newspapers. We read what you read. We have access to your information."

"I pay taxes, I buy (things), I live here, so why do I have any less say than you do?"

"Why would I put all this effort, why would I even care, or put myself out there, why would I do this if I didn't actually give a (expletive)?"

## We're not that different

New Zealander James Turnbull runs The Grand Narrative. He calls it "An irreverent look at social issues." Much of his work deals with Korean advertising and media as well as social commentary. In his eighth year in Korea, Turnbull teaches English in Busan.

"I find the notion that only Koreans are 'permitted' to speak about Korean problems simply absurd," he said. "That isn't to say that all foreigners' opinions on them are equally valid, but if the roles were reversed then I'd be quite happy to hear the opinions of, say, a Korean person who had spent some time in New Zealand and who made an active effort to study and know New Zealand society and learn the language. In fact, probably more so than someone who was merely born there."

"The majority of netizens aside, I've actually found a significant number of Koreans to feel much the same way about the opinions of non-Koreans."

"Koreans are not unique in readily dismissing the opinions of foreigners, but they do seem more defensive about foreign criticism than most. For that reason, it is very important to use Korean sources as much as possible."

"Another advantage to using and considering Korean-language sources as much as possible is that it makes you realize how much you may stereotype and generalize Koreans yourself without being aware of it."

"Without any Korean ability, foreigners are usually forced to rely on either the limited English language media or books for the bulk of their information, and both have problems: the former for often presenting a rose-tinted version of Korea to the world, and the latter for being quickly out of date in a country as rapidly changing as Korea."

Koehler also emphasized using the native tongue.

"Do it in Korean, and in a major Korean newspaper," Koehler said.

Writing complaints in English may be "cathartic," he said, but it does no good.

## Why do foreigners complain so much?

Another pair of bloggers, a Korean man living in America (Ask a Korean!) and a Canadian teacher in Seoul (Roboseyo) put together a two-part series dealing with foreigners' criticism and social commentary.

Ask a Korean! wrote, "many complaints from expats that the Korean has seen show a certain level of ignorance. This is not to say that complaining expats are dumb. It is only to say that were they more aware of certain things about themselves and about Korea, they would not be complaining as much, and the pitch of their complaints would not be as strident."

"Expats rarely venture out of large cities in Korea, and they only really interact with Koreans who are fluent in English. Do you know what makes a Korean fluent in English? Money, tons and tons of it. So not only are expats insulated from older Koreans, they are also insulated from younger Koreans who are poorer. What kind of understanding about Korea could an expat possibly have with this kind of limited exposure?"

About social critics, Roboseyo wrote,

"Naming a problem is the first step to solving it, and maybe some of these critics are attempting to be a legitimate part of that process — that is, they're writing because they want to see Korea become a better place — in which case, Koreans who are upset about non-Koreans criticizing Korea need to stop and take a careful look at why that upsets them, because the problem does not lie in the complainers or their intentions."

"To be fair, sometimes the social critics' intentions are good, but their methods are poor: the sometimes bitter and mean tone of certain critics can be hurtful, and as I've said to some of my friends who complain about Korea with a rude or condescending tone: 'when you talk so harshly, even when you're right, you're wrong, and even if you win the argument, you still lose.'"

## 'You don't understand Korean culture'

Deutsch plans to continue writing for the Korea Times and updating his blog.

"I like doing it and I like staying on top of current events and discussions. On the one hand I totally recognize that I'm being paid to teach, not to think, and I say that without being cynical at all. Most people couldn't care less about the particular issues foreigners face, whether in the classroom or in society at large, and hearing a foreigner talk about them probably isn't very interesting."

"I've also had to question how welcome those opinions are. My colleagues themselves told me that it was not my place to opine on what are called 'sensitive issues,' and a recent letter to the editor in the Gwangju News suggested that I, and foreigners, mind their own business and not worry about Korean internal affairs."

"But I think foreigners do have a right to speak about problems in Korea and to address sensitive issues from our own perspectives. At the most basic level we are invested in this society, even if for only a short time, and we pay taxes, function as consumers, participate in local communities, and teach local children."

"Moreover these issues are so prickly because they're not black and white. While it might be unpleasant for some Koreans to hear the other side of the story, I don't think it's inappropriate for it to be raised."

"Our opinions are often dismissed with a line about 'you don't understand Korean culture.' Often this comes when something unpleasant happens to a foreigner, or when a foreigner expresses an opinion disagreeable to the Korean listener. It's well beyond my abilities to explain why this happens, but it's patronizing and inappropriate. I do believe that although foreigners can sometimes dwell on the negative when writing or talking about Korea, I think taking a critical look shows an interest in the host culture that can be healthy if applied properly."

"I realize that a greater measure of tact is necessary when addressing sensitive issues and when trying to foster conversations across cultural boundaries, but even with a lot of dodging I remain cynical that people are ready to hear what we have to say just yet."

"I would love to have Koreans who disagree with me take the time to point out their objections, rather than simply railing against a foreigner who dares to publish something against the grain. And I would love to have Koreans spend more time trying to educate us about their culture and their views, then, since so much energy is spent telling us how wrong and misinformed our opinions are."

Deutsch said he was asked by his school to drop the case against Kim, and that his job was also placed in jeopardy because of what he has written.

**Brian in Jeollanamdo:**  
http://brianddeutsch.blogspot.com

**The Marmot's Hole:**  
http://www.rjkoehler.com

**Scribbles of the Metropolitician:**  
http://metropolitician.blogspot.com/  
scribbles\_of\_the\_metrop

**The Grand Narrative:**  
http://thegrandnarrative.wordpress.com

**Ask a Korean!:**  
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**Roboseyo:**  
http://roboseyo.blogspot.com  
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