3. Sogang University: Center for Korean Studies (CKSS)

a. Farah Emory-Muhammad, Summer 2018 Final Report

If you’re reading this program report then you’re probably thinking about going to Korea, thinking about studying abroad in Korea, are a Light Fellow, or you’re just curious and you’re snooping around on Yale’s study abroad website. And if there’s one thing you should get out of this program report, it’s that you should definitely do it. Go. To. Korea. Right now, if you can!

I’ll start this program report by covering the easier subjects such as accommodation, food, etc., then I’ll move onto the heavier topics. Feel free to skip to whichever section you feel you need to read up on!

A lot of students studying abroad in Korea (even students coming from other countries) stay in what is called a “goshiwon.” It’s basically a very small studio with upgrade options such as a window, a shower booth, a toilet, air conditioning, and more space. They also usually have shared kitchens, laundry, and free kimchi and rice.

For the first month in Korea, I stayed in a goshiwon in Sinchon (a 7 minute walk to Sogang!) for 450,000 won a month called Fullhouse Livingtel. The owner is very kind (he went to the bank with me to help facilitate communication with the bank tellers and he even drove me to my short-term air bnb in order to get my luggage). The goshiwon is very neat and extremely convenient in terms of location. It’s right next to the Sinchon subway entrance.

I will say, since I was near the ground floor in a very popular area in Sinchon, my bathroom did smell like a city (but only at night, for some odd reason). However, if you’re looking to save some money- and there are cheaper options than the one I booked- this is definitely a great option!

For my last two months in Korea, I actually moved in with some Light Fellows into an apartment near Mapo-gu cheong office station. That was much more convenient for me, since it allowed me to cook my own meals and store them, live in a bigger space, and live in a quieter neighborhood. Our apartment was on the 15th floor so our view was amazing; we could see Lotte Tower (on good days) and Namsan Tower. I actually ended up paying about the same as I was paying for the goshiwon, so this was a way better deal.

When I lived alone in the goshiwon, I ate out at Korean restaurants every meal. The Light Fellowship definitely budgets enough money for you to do this! However, I don’t find Korean food to be filling and it lacks the vitamins I need, so after I moved into the apartment, I cooked all of my meals. I ended up saving so much money by cooking my own meals since I would do one big grocery trip every two weeks (which came out to about 30 dollars a week, and you could go lower if you don’t buy expensive fruit or kimchi like I did).
However, if you do want to eat more Korean food, then my favorite dish of all time is Samgyetang. It is a little bit on the expensive side, but it’s extremely healthy! (It has ginseng in it.)

One of the reasons why I love Seoul so much is because the transportation system is so convenient and cheap! Also, meals tend to be cheap as well. There are also a million things to do in Seoul. I tried to go sightseeing as often as I could, but I always felt like there was so much more I wasn’t experiencing. One of my favorite things to do was going to Hongdae (a student-vibe neighborhood of Seoul) at night to watch street performers. One of the light fellows even danced with them in front of a crowd one busy night!

A couple of days after arriving in Seoul, a couple Yalies and I went to Jeju Island. Almost everyone from back home recommended going, and don’t get me wrong, I certainly wasn’t disappointed in my trip to Jeju, but you really should identify what you want to do there before going.

My friends and I stayed in Seogwipo (a city in the south of the island) and I recommend that people stay there if they are interested in hiking, exploring things on foot, seeing caves and waterfalls, and doing mostly outdoor activities. However, if this isn’t for you, then you should probably stay in Jeju-si, the city where the airport is.

That being said, knowing what I know now about Jeju-si, I’m not sure if I’d go all the way to Jeju just to stay in Jeju-si. It’s basically mini-Seoul (with all the shops) but without the nightlife and cool things to do. So, if you’re interested in outdoor activities (and hiking Hallasan, which I totally recommend!!!!!) then go to Jeju and stay in Seogwipo. But if not…. I’m not sure if it’s worth it to go to Jeju at all. You could probably save your money and go to Busan. I didn’t get the chance to go to Busan but when I go to Korea next, I definitely will go there!

Something worth noting that I don’t think other Light Fellows talked about is that travelling while being a foreigner, especially POC, can be very difficult. Especially when you’re a female and you’re travelling alone.

My trip to Jeju was a little different because I was travelling with a group of people who were all visibly foreigners (and people on Jeju seemed to be much kinder than people in Seoul). But if you’re a POC (female), travelling alone throughout Korea will be mentally and emotionally demanding. I’m not saying that you shouldn’t, but you will face some hostility and intense staring. I’m saying this because this is what I experienced in Seoul, a city that is much more exposed to foreign cultures than other cities in Korea, and I (and other light fellows) have witnessed people (mostly old people) stare at us hostilely, move away from us, sneer at us, etc. Whereas, I heard a lot of non-POC people saying describing their adventures around Korea, where people would people would stare but also would go out of their way to help them, be kind to them, etc. I’m not saying Korean people won’t do this to POCs, but it is rare. In the end, be confident in who you are and don’t let it get to you. Acknowledge that people will always have their own prejudices and move on.
That being said, I’ll move on to my report on Sogang University. Every Yalie enrolled in KGP 200 Morning and attended class for four hours every day. We had one writing class, two speaking classes, and one listening/reading class. Most Yalies who completed L1/L2 at Yale end up taking Level 2 at Sogang. You do learn a couple grammar structures in L2 Sogang that overlap with Yale L1/L2, but I still feel like I learned a lot of new material, especially vocabulary. I do feel like if I really had pushed myself, I could have taken L3, because L2 felt a little easy at times. But I’m not sure my speaking skills would have been on par with L3 Sogang.

I highly recommend Sogang to people who are looking to improve their speaking skills. I definitely think I spoke (and understood) better by the end of the summer, and I felt confident in my ability to hold a conversation. It’s also a very manageable workload and the teachers are incredibly kind and helpful.

I also really liked the people in my class. They were mostly from Taiwan, Japan, and Hong Kong/Macao, but there were some Americans and other English-speakers in the mix.

The exams (midterm and final) are also very manageable if you regularly pay attention and class and study. However, one critique I do have of Sogang is the partner interview test. For the midterm, you must complete an individual interview and a partner interview, in which you prepare nine sets of dialogues with your partner beforehand and randomly choose two during the interview. Maybe I would have had a better experience if I was able to choose my partner (and my friends in other classes were able to choose their own partners), but I was assigned to someone with a totally different learning style than mine and preparing for the interviews was a little difficult. Normally, this would have been a great learning experience full of personal development, but the difference in our learning styles was so stark that it was more of an emotional drain than a learning experience.

My advice regarding the pace of the material in class is to preview each lesson before it starts, just so you’re prepared when you’re later introduced to the material in class. I also recommend reviewing the material for 10-15 minutes every night, just so the vocabulary is well-reviewed when you start studying for the exams.

One aspect of the Light Fellowship-Sogang partnership that I’m not sure will continue in the future is the “private” tutoring sessions we had twice a week for five weeks. Some people might have had one-on-one sessions with their Sogang tutor, but I myself had a three-on-one tutor session and I feel like the experience could have been more productive if it truly had been one-on-one. We really only reviewed what we learned in class and because of that, I’m not sure it was worth the money, especially considering that we only had sessions for five weeks and mine wasn’t necessarily a “private” session.

Since Sogang doesn’t have a formal buddy program like SNU does, I strongly recommend that you go out of your way to engage with Korean people. I didn’t do this as much as I wish I had, partly because I didn’t know how to. Nonetheless, I still do recommend having a strong relationship with a fellow Yalie, or even a fellow U.S. citizen, to reflect about your experience as a foreigner in Korea. I lived with a couple of Yalies so I had the space to vent and
express the hardships of being a (POC) foreigner, but I can see how unhealthy your time in Korea could be if you internalized those sentiments. I personally didn’t experience the “U-Curve,” and I think it was because I had a space to go to if I was feeling frustrated and needed to talk.

In conclusion, the Light award definitely covers everything that you need and, in my experience (with good budgeting), everything you want. A million thanks to the staff who work at 55 Whitney, as well as all of the board members for the Light Foundation. I am certain that I wouldn’t be the person I am today without this experience. It truly, truly does reshape the way you think about yourself, your connection to your environment, and how other people define “the self.”

b. Kate Kushner, Summer 2018 Final Report

안녕하세요! First, I just want to start off by saying thank you to the Light Fellowship, 최선생님 and 이선생님 and everyone else at Yale who makes this possible for us! I had such an amazing summer and I’m really grateful that I was able to study Korean in Seoul through the Light Fellowship.

I could write pages and pages about the summer, but I’m going to try to keep it relatively brief and include some information and suggestions that I hope will be helpful to future Light Fellows. I’m also happy to get in touch if prospective fellows have any questions I could help with (my email is kate.kushner@yale.edu).

Choosing a Program

When I applied to the Light Fellowship, I planned (and fully expected) to chose SNU if I got the fellowship, but after I heard from Light and I started to think even more seriously about the summer, I changed my mind and decided to go to Sogang. At first I had thought that SNU would be better for me because it seemed more balanced in its emphasis of speaking, reading and writing. However, as a first-year last year I took L3 with 최선생님 in the fall and L4 with 이선생님 in the spring, and I would say that 이선생님’s style of teaching definitely focuses on speaking more than 최선생님’s. Having a more speaking-focused class at Yale made me start to think that speaking was where I really needed to most improvement, so as the spring semester went on I started thinking that Sogang would be the better match for my language goals. I also started to think that Sogang’s location would be an advantage, since it’s north of the river and closer to a lot of well-known tourist areas and places like Sinchon and Hongdae that I had heard were very student-friendly. I was worried that if I went to SNU, I’d be tempted to stay on campus much more of the time than I wanted myself to, so I thought that Sogang would be better for getting myself to go out and do things.
Now having been there for the full summer, I can say that Sogang’s location is pretty great in relation to a lot of other cool things to do in Seoul. That being said, I did have friends at SNU who I met up with every so often and went and did fun things with, and it seemed to me like they were doing just fine getting out and exploring beyond the campus bubble. So I think that if you’re thinking about location, it’s up to you to know yourself and think about how likely you are to want to venture a little further, and to think about what some of your goals are for the summer in terms of seeing lots of Seoul or staying closer to campus.

Studying Korean at Sogang

Korean classes at Sogang are divided into four periods. From 9:00-9:50 there’s writing, from 10:00-10:50 and 11:10-12:00 there’s speaking and listening, and from 12:10-1:00 there’s reading. The three classes are all taught by different teachers who rotate out of the same classroom with about 15 students, and the speaking and listening teacher is considered the homeroom teacher. All three of my teachers were very nice, and I appreciated how patient they were with me.

I had just finished L4 at Yale before coming to Sogang, and 이선생님 used Sogang’s 3A book – but not 3B. When I took the placement test at Sogang they placed me into L4. The first classes were kind of rough because they were mostly review of L3, which I didn’t know almost half of, but I decided to stick with it instead of dropping down to L3. I think that worked out in the end, and I’m glad I stayed in L4. Once we started L4 material instead of review, I started to feel like I wasn’t really too behind and I could keep pace – I also think that after a few classes I started to gradually feel less rusty and get back into the groove of reading and speaking Korean. I think that L4 covers even more material than the earlier levels, so taking L4 helped me to learn a lot of new grammar patterns that I could use to have conversations with more nuance and complexity than before this summer.

Perhaps my experience has biased me because I was in a very small L4 class at Yale, but I felt like Sogang’s program isn’t any more focused on speaking than 이선생님’s class. It still is speaking focused and you get a lot of opportunities to practice with your classmates, I’m not trying to say that you don’t, but I think that 이선생님’s class is similar (or, at least, it was the semester that I took it). I would also say that Sogang does a good job of balancing speaking, reading, and writing, more than I was expecting. I think that my reading skills especially improved this summer (though of course, they could still use a lot of improvement!).

I almost always spent at least 2 hours a day studying, sometimes more like 3 or 4. It kind of depends on how much you have day to day, if there’s a test coming up, and how much of the workbook you have to do. Your grades are mostly the midterm and final written tests and the midterm and final interviews.
**Housing**

I lived with another Light fellow in a sharehouse near campus called 42Share. While my roommate was awesome and I really liked living with another Yale friend, I can’t really say that I would recommend 42Share. Before we came to Seoul we had signed up for (and paid a deposit for) two single rooms in our own apartment with a small kitchen and a bathroom, but two days before my flight they told us that wasn’t possible and moved us into another apartment. We shared a double and there were two other girls who we shared the kitchen and the bathroom with. That ended up working out fine, and the fact that it was cheaper maybe meant that it ended up being a good option – but I still can’t really say that I would recommend 42Share to other people when they changed our reservation on us so last minute. There was also a weekend when they had to do work on the plumbing and we weren’t able to use our bathroom.

I think that your housing options in Korea are pretty much goshiwon, sharehouse or haksujib, or finding a homestay. I did a homestay in Korea two summers ago and I think that they can be wonderful experiences and really help you see more of Korean culture while improving your language skills. I think that if I had done a homestay again I could definitely have gotten a lot out of it, but it was also nice in some ways to have a little more independence and downtime – I can see the pros and cons both for doing one and not, so I think it’s a personal decision. Unfortunately, the Korean programs for Light don’t offer homestays, so it’s up to interested fellows to find them themselves. I think the two of my friends who did them this year both found theirs through family, but if you don’t have family in Korea (I certainly don’t) it can be a bit harder.

From what I know about them, goshiwons can be really variable in quality/reliability. I know one Light fellow this year who tried one out at the beginning and then ended up moving into some friends’ Airbnb because it was so difficult to deal with, but I know that a lot of Light fellows make them work, so it’s probably possible to find decent ones if you go digging and visit in person.

**Food**

You will always have easy access to food in Korea! The Light budget of $19 is more than generous. Restaurant culture in Korea is a bit different from the United States, in a number of ways. It feels to me that in Korea there aren’t a lot of fast food restaurants, but there are a lot of casual restaurants in between fast food and typical American sit-down restaurants (like think diner type dining, maybe?) that are pretty quick and cheap. Generally going out to a sit-down restaurant feels more casual and cheaper here than in does in the States, in my opinion.

You can find cheap eats relatively near Sogang’s campus, and of course in Hongdae, but I would also recommend that while you’re here you do some reading on where to find the best restaurant for particular dishes that you’re interested in! If you’re here for two or three months, I
think it’s worth it to go to a highly rated restaurant or two and get a good meal. I went to a temple food restaurant in Insadong with two friends called 산촌 that was amazing and that I would definitely recommend (especially to fellow pescatarians or vegetarians out there). I also found a really good bibimbap spot in Hongdae called 나물 먹는 곰 (which was around 10,000 won, so not expensive).

I went out from time to time, but most of the time I ate at the apartment and cooked for myself. This is partly personal preference, but it also saved me a ton of money, that I then felt like I could use to splurge on a nice meal every once in a while or go to performances and museums that charge.

If you’re interested in buying your own groceries, it can be a little more complicated than in America because Seoul doesn’t seem to have many large supermarkets similar to the American versions. I would typically pick up a few things at a small grocery store, like a Lotte Super or a family-owned mart, a few things at a fruit and vegetable store near Sogang and the apartment, and maybe one or two things at a convenience store when I needed one. Another cool thing about Seoul is all of the traditional markets. I went to a lot at the start of the summer, and I think they’re definitely worth checking out! 청량리시장 is a really good one for fruits and vegetables, and if you go earlier in the day 광장시장 has lots of ajummas selling kimchi and other banchan. In general, it seems that the earlier you get to a market, the better. My roommate and I went to 청량리시장 once at 10:00am and it was pretty busy, but it seemed like it had been pretty busy for a while and going earlier wouldn’t have been a bad thing. One thing to be aware of for the markets is that they usually only give you things in large quantities. That’s fine if there are things that you might know you’ll eat a lot of, like fruit you like to snack on, but if you’re just cooking for one or two people sometimes it can be too much.

Other things about living in Seoul

Overall, Seoul has tons to offer and it’s definitely worth your while to explore different parts of the city. Some areas are known for different things, and the subway makes it really easy to go almost everywhere. I went to a ton of museums this summer and to several parks. I would recommend checking out all five of the palaces in downtown Seoul, Jongmyo Shrine, and Cheonggyecheon Stream. If you like hiking and/or history, there’s a really nicely-done course all along the old city wall that encompasses the inner part of Seoul and gives really great views! My roommate and I completed it over the course of two days and it was a ton of fun.

It’s also cool to see if there might be ways for you to explore different things that you’re interested in at Yale or back home in Korea. For example, I took a few dance classes at 1Million Dance Studio with two other Light fellows. For people who play instruments, if you want to get a chance to practice while you’re abroad, there are practice spots for bands scattered around that