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🇰🇷🇸🇪 A Swede in Korea, 1990: What I Learned About Culture From Chili, Traffic, and Respect

A true story of code, kimchi, and cultural logic — told with humor, hindsight, and gratitude.

8 min read · Just now



Gunnar Östberg



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Picturing me and my car in Seoul 1990. Image generated by Google Nano Banana Pro.

1. Where to begin

Raw octopus, still moving on the plate.

Sea cucumber, slippery and still twitching from the tank.

Flatfish, taken straight from the tank and filleted right before serving.

In South Korea, meals are not just food — they're teamwork.

You don't eat alone, you don't start first, and you never say no.

Whether it's raw octopus or fire-red soup, you smile, nod, and go for it. That's the polite thing to do.

I learned this quickly during my months in South Korea in 1990.

I was a Swedish engineer working for Ericsson at OTELCO, a joint venture between Ericsson and Korea Telecom. I was performing software fault-finding analysis for AXE telephone switches in Seongnam, just south of Seoul. The engineering office was inside the 1,000-man factory that produced the telecom equipment.

I came for the technology. I stayed for the culture shock — and for the people who taught me how to navigate it with a smile and the occasional extra spoonful of chili powder.



When business dinners become cultural adventures.

2. The factory and the ringing bell

The Seongnam factory ran like a clock. A bell signaled when to start, another when to stop. When the bell rang for break, hundreds of workers poured outside to play volleyball on a dusty court. Ten minutes later, another bell — and silence returned.

Our system test room looked like a classroom. Desks in rows, all facing the boss at his “teacher’s desk.” Nobody left before he did. It was always a he.

We debugged software in ASA code, an assembler-like language that controlled call routing in the AXE system, and this was a high-status job with complicated problem-solving. The software was once written in Plex, a high-level language, a programming job with lower status. Calls rang in and out; we chased tiny logic errors through endless log files (crash records).

There were a few women in the department, and they were the tough kind. In the Korean culture, if a woman ever made coffee for her male colleagues, she’d instantly lose status, for good. Everyone knew the rule. Nobody said it aloud.

Discipline was absolute. Hierarchy unquestioned.

And yet, beneath it all, there was pride. We were building the digital backbone of a nation that was beginning its technological rise.

The Korean engineers dreamed of owning a car someday. Today, 35 years later, Korean cars are everywhere and among the best.



System testing at OTELCO, Seongnam — discipline in every byte.

3. The chili reality

Factory lunches were brutal.

Soup red as paint, dishes of unidentifiable meat parts. Sometimes I skipped lunch entirely. Even rural Thai food feels mild in comparison.

But once outside the factory, Seoul unfolded like a sensory explosion: street vendors, sizzling woks, fermented smells, and constant noise. Korean food wasn't refined — it was alive.

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner were almost identical: rice, tea, kimchi, and fermented vegetables. Lunch might include a few dried fish; dinner, a little meat; or a spicy bone soup. *Bibimbap* was made with leftovers. *Bulgogi* and *Kalbi* — the dishes Westerners know — were considered luxury back then.

The everyday food was simple, fiery, and full of pride — especially the kimchi.



Lunch break. Same heat, different day.

4. The octopus lesson

We were five colleagues — four Koreans and me — eating in a coastal town. The octopus arrived freshly chopped, still twitching. A gas table grill stood in the middle of the table. We were supposed to grill the pieces, but hunger won.

My colleagues started eating raw tentacles.

“Chew fast,” one said, “so the suckers don’t stick to the roof of your mouth.”

I obeyed. Because in Korea, respect matters more than comfort.

And surprisingly, it wasn’t bad. Just ... animated.



Chew fast — respect first, taste later.

5. Pig’s feet, sea cucumbers, and a lesson in politeness

Another night, the same colleagues took me to a “fancier” place. Their way of honoring the foreign guest was to serve the best they knew: pig’s feet and ears. The ears were chewy. The feet were excellent — gelatinous, rich, perfect with chili paste.

On a different night, a wealthy businessman drove us for hours to a shack by the sea. We picked a sea cucumber, a sea urchin, and a flatfish from the tanks. The chef killed and filleted them while they were still moving. Served raw, with wasabi, chili paste, and soju.

We smiled, toasted, and ate.

Two days later, I met Korean medicine firsthand: amoebic dysentery, the less

glamorous souvenir.



Hospitality sometimes comes raw.

6. Kalbi heaven

Not every culinary adventure ended in a hospital. *Kalbi* was pure joy.

In Seoul's northeastern outskirts, there were enormous outdoor *Kalbi* restaurants — thousands of tables, nothing but marinated ribs. Families came on weekends.

Staff brought a cast-iron grill full of glowing charcoal and placed it in the center of the round table. You grilled your own meat and garlic, wrapped rice and beef in a lettuce leaf, and ate it with your hands.

It was smoky, loud, communal — and completely wonderful. A cold beer made it perfect.

If you ever want to understand Korea, start with a *Kalbi* grill. It's teamwork, ritual, and joy in one meal.



Kalbi — teamwork, ritual, and pure joy.

7. Driving like a local (almost)

I had a Hyundai Sonata, and one night I tested its limits — hours at top speed on an empty highway. Then a policeman appeared out of nowhere, waving a small red paddle.

I slowed, rolled to a stop far ahead, and switched off the engine.

He had to walk eight hundred meters to reach my car. When he finally arrived and saw I was a foreigner, I smiled, spoke Swedish, and showed my driver's license. He looked at me, sighed, and walked back. There was no way he could communicate or give me a ticket.

I continued. Slightly slower.

Another time, in downtown Seoul, I had a large map on my knee while driving, everything in Hangul, and it was highly stressful. I crossed a double line and got pulled over. The officers and I had zero common language. After a few minutes, they gave up.

I drove on along Sejong-daero — ten lanes each way, horns blaring, chaos everywhere. I was trying to turn from the far right to the far left. The only tactic was

to nudge diagonally until the car behind had to stop, then slide in. By the time I reached the turn, I was drenched in sweat.

Driving in Seoul was a sport. You needed a car with both a pool and noise-canceling headphones.



Ten lanes, one rule: don't blink.

8. The hospital chapter

A month later, my body collapsed.

I'd been sick for weeks, weaker each day, until I couldn't get out of bed or even drink water. I called a Swedish manager in Seoul. He understood my croaking voice and sent an ambulance.

I woke up in Cheil General Hospital.

They put me on IV fluids immediately. Doctors peered into my throat, recoiled, and started antibiotics, which only made things worse. Test after test, no answers.

Finally, samples were sent to the U.S. military hospital's lab outside Seoul.

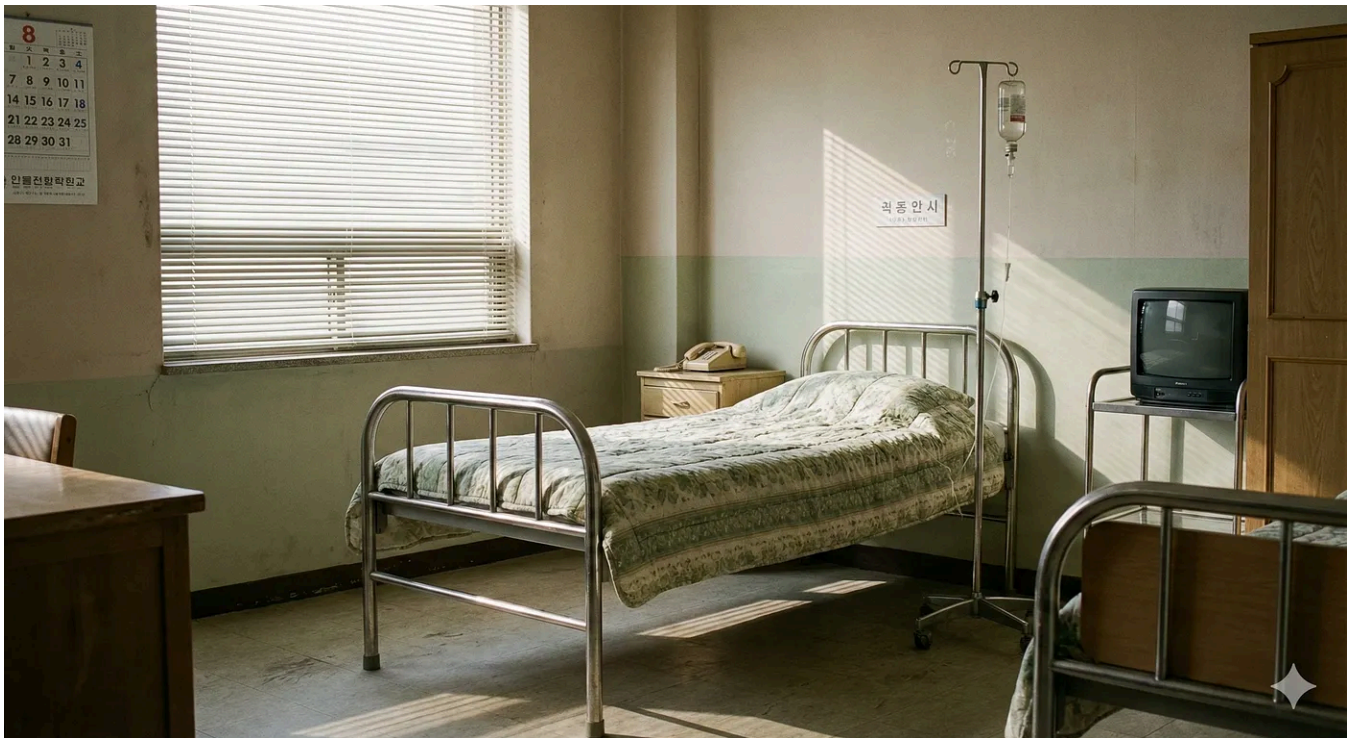
Diagnosis: infectious mononucleosis — glandular fever. Familiar in the West, almost unknown in Korea.

I was, they told me, the third recorded case in the country. They photographed me for medical journals. I became a research example.

Thirteen days in the hospital, eleven on IV without food. My weight dropped from 82 to 66 kilos (181 to 146 pounds). It took a whole year to recover.

The hospital itself was luxurious — private room, sofa, kitchenette — though I could barely move. My travel insurance covered it.

When I was finally discharged, I could stand, walk a few steps, and smile weakly at the nurses. I never found out how I caught it. I was probably infected in Sweden; the incubation period can be long.



Thirteen days on IV — the third recorded case.

9. What I learned

Looking back, I realize I learned more about culture than about telecom systems.

In Korea, rules are strict, but the community is strong. Hierarchy defines everything — who orders, who pays, who leaves first — yet under that structure lies immense warmth and loyalty.

Swedes and Koreans share something essential: discipline and pride in doing things right. We express it differently. Swedes hide it behind understatement; Koreans show it through intensity.

When Ericsson partnered with Korea Telecom, it wasn't just a business venture. It was a meeting between two cultures that both value skill, structure, and long-term

thinking. The result helped build the networks that still connect the world today.

The other side of the story: the Swedish CFO had one clear mission — to ensure the right money went home to Ericsson.



Discipline and pride — expressed differently, valued the same.

10. Final thought

If I were invited again, I'd still eat the octopus.

I'd smile, chew fast, and say it's excellent — not because it is, but because respect matters.

Korea taught me that accurate cultural understanding doesn't come from reading about customs. It comes from living them — from chili that burns your lips, from traffic that tests your nerves, from colleagues who never leave before the boss, and from friendships that outlast the confusion.

And for that, I'll always be grateful — both to Korea for teaching me, and to Sweden for sending me.



Two nations. One shared respect for doing things well.

About the author

Gunnar Östberg is a Swedish engineer and management consultant who writes about technology, culture, and the logic of human systems — from AI to everyday life.

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