

**Narrating Waegook Identity: Building Transitory Foreign-Teacher Community through  
Folklore in the Republic of Korea**

by

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## **Abstract**

With increasing global mobility, itinerant expatriate groups – whether of teachers, retirees, students, or backpackers – constitute transitory folk groups easily overlooked by folklore studies. This thesis is an ethnographic study of a transient folk group of foreign teachers in Suncheon, Republic of Korea, and of how narratives about their experiences inform their sense of identity within that community. My observations of such groups in the Republic of Korea include working as a foreign English teacher in the 1990s, conducting fieldwork as a participant-observer from 2006-2008, and through additional research in 2017-2018 via the Internet. As a former foreign teacher, this work is auto-ethnographic in nature, as my time in Korea has informed not only my approach to this research, but who I am today.

Alan Dundes famously suggested a folk group may be comprised of as few as two people (1965, 2). Folk groups can also coalesce for brief periods, even the duration of a conversation, wherein the content of narratives facilitates construction of shared identity, as in the “transitory community” of foreign teachers I studied. With little else in common, foreign teachers share narratives – of their work, the challenges they face, and personal experiences of life abroad. This creates bonds and equips them with vernacular knowledge specific to that community. These exchanges develop connective tissue for this transitory community, provide a mechanism for survival in an unfamiliar environment, and help create a sense of belonging in Korea, despite the teachers’ outsider status.

Esoteric knowledge is employed within the transitory community as a status marker, providing evidence of competence as well as channeling information to those who need it. Additionally, the themes of some narratives reflect feelings of marginalization among people who, as white Westerners, sense a loss of standing and power. This change of status is often contradicted by how they position themselves in their narratives, wherein they present themselves as more competent, worldly, or knowledgeable than Korean counterparts.

## Acknowledgments

My choice of topic herein was inspired by encounters with other former foreign teachers, as well as by an ethnography course at Memorial University of Newfoundland, taught by Dr. Diane Goldstein, which required me to use network theory in a fieldwork project. The methodology evoked memories of Korea and of how vital interpersonal connections, and the vernacular knowledge transmitted through such conduits, were to survival there. I am obliged to Dr. Diane Goldstein for suggestions she made in the early stages of writing.

This thesis is based on fieldwork conducted among foreign teachers in the Republic of Korea between 2006 and 2008, as well as online communication after that period. I am grateful to the foreign teachers who so generously invited me into their homes and shared their thoughts, stories, and time with me. Without them none of this would have been possible and they have my heartfelt thanks. I am especially grateful to have had the opportunity to know Margaret Scates and was deeply saddened to hear of her passing. I enjoyed her resilience, feisty attitude, and sharp wit and hope that some small part of that is conveyed in these pages.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 English Teachers in Korea**

Conceptualizations of folk groups have ranged from small bounded groups (Redfield 1956) to groups as small as two people (Dundes 1965, 2), but folk group formation is a process, or perpetually in process, as well. Folk groups are not static; in some, the pace of change may seem glacial while in others members are continually being replaced. This thesis is an ethnography of a branch of the network of foreign English teachers in the Republic of Korea – its emergent networks, the manner in which its folklore both reflects and is affected by its power or lack thereof, traditions of helping new members adapt, and the centrality of narrative performance to their social life in Korea. Because these teachers exist in a context where the pace of migration is accelerated, bonds form quickly among new-met strangers and the vagaries of life as a foreign English teacher in Korea generate a sense of connectedness among them. Their occupational folklore, foodways, and personal experience narratives are central to their dynamic vernacular culture and are instrumental in enabling them to survive and succeed. As Alan Dundes has pointed out, the definition of identity “depends as much upon differences as upon similarities” (1996, 3) and storytelling within the foreign teacher community emphasizes differences between foreigners and Koreans, home and Korea, and employers and teachers. At the same time, foreign teachers’ narratives about their interactions with Koreans reveal their understandings of the culture and their place in it as constructed through personal experience, narratives which are presented to peers who will grasp their meaning. Since it is the lore of these people in this time and place that connects them as a folk group, understanding that lore gives insight to the group. Folklorist Sandra Dolby-Stahl once remarked, “We can no longer separate the lore from the folk” (1985, 46) and this is certainly true of foreign English teachers. Similar to the “virtual communities” found online, these transitory communities connect in complex ways.

Lacking permanence or relational bonds, this group is unified by circumstances, occupation, and location, developing fragile and temporary ties that are constructed and maintained through folklore, especially narrative.

This thesis is an investigation of – among other things – how narrative exchange among foreign teachers serves to shape both a sense of collective identity or belonging for the group, as well as individuals’ personal identities within it. Elliott Oring defines collective identity as “those aspects of personal identity that are derived from experiences and expressions common to a group. It is recognition of this collective aspect of personal identity that produces a deep sense of identification with others” (2009, 212). Foreign teachers share a vocabulary, a sense of their outsider status in Korea, and a wealth of similar experiences of life there, all of which are integral to their construction of collective identity. Foreign teachers are in Korea to work, and their social interactions are marked by narratives of life and work experiences in Korea and adjustments to local foodways, inescapable elements of their adaptation to that life. Exploring the ways in which personal experience narratives especially are used to construct, reveal, and reinforce identity within the community in the chapters that follow, I use personal interviews, academic research, and auto-ethnography to unpack the significance of the folklore within this folk group. By auto-ethnography, I mean this is an ethnography of a group to which I belong, and have since 1994, and it is also auto-ethnographic in that I include personal narratives of my own experiences as part of my data. The extent of my own life experience as a foreign teacher in Korea inevitably colored my approach and interpretation, but also provided valuable insight into the lives of my informants and the interpretation of narrative texts.

Participant observation, by its very nature, is susceptible to bias and reactivity, but it also allows perceptions unobtainable by any other means. In my case, I was returning to a community



and occupation with which I was familiar. I spent more than two years working as a foreign teacher at *hagwons* in Korea in the mid-1990s, which is what initially led me to conceive of this project. My research period from 2006-2008 was spent working first as an editor with a publishing firm in Seoul for a year, followed by a year as a professor at a rural university, near Nonsan. As I analyzed my data, interviews, and field notes after the fieldwork period, it became clear that my familiarity with life in Korea was both a significant tool in the understanding I brought to the material and affected how I had gone about collecting it and interpreting it. That is to say, having experienced the arc of adaptation from naïve “greenhorn” to veteran, my subsequent experiences, and the stories I was told of others’ experiences in Korea, were processed through this pre-existing lens. I could not return to Korea not knowing what I already knew. Thomas Dunk says of insider bias, “The solutions to the problems of perception and objectivity, in so far as they exist, are to be found in honesty, reflection, and criticism” (1991, 13). My own method of coping with bias was to be as critical as possible of my own conclusions and to be as honest as possible with my readers. As Paulette Goudge, a foreign aid worker for an NGO (non-governmental organization) in Nicaragua, puts it, “I thus include myself as being a part of what I am concerned to critique – I have been there, done that, got that T-shirt, and therefore cannot pretend that I am some kind of impartial observer who is not personally implicated” (2003, 25). The conclusions I draw herein apply as much to myself as to any of my informants.

In my research, I have been mindful of my assumptions and consulted a broad array of scholarly materials intended to challenge my point of view. In particular, I wanted research that examined racist and/or Orientalist tendencies that would enable me to critically examine the intersection of white power in the West with the experiences of this particular group in Asia.

Additionally, I have included excerpts from the journal I kept during my initial months in Korea in 1994, especially where I feel they may illuminate my own perspective on the material.

Arguably, my old journal has nothing to do with this thesis; it was not constructed during the research period and in no way relates to the group I studied. However, having experienced adaptation to life in Korea, my experience is at the root of how I perceive all that followed. My old journal chronicles my attempts to adapt, problems I encountered, and incidents that taught me about myself as much as about the culture and influenced subsequent interpretations of events. In the end, I decided this material can add to the overall understanding of the topic for my readers and I have been as forthcoming as possible as to my own experience of life in Korea and its latent influence on my interpretations of the data and narratives I gathered.

In discussing their experiences there, most foreign teachers refer to the country as either Korea or South Korea, although the official name for the country as it exists today is the Republic of Korea. It should not be confused with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North Korea, from which it has been divided since 1953. Despite historically comprising one country and one people – Korea and Koreans – the two nations have been distinct for many years now, are very different socially and politically, and the subject of their division is a sensitive one. For those who have lived and worked in the Republic of Korea, however, it is simply Korea, a nexus of abundant teaching positions for Westerners. Within this thesis, references to Korea or South Korea signify the Republic of Korea, as the official name is rarely used colloquially. There are also some references to the traditional Western nickname for Korea, “The Land of the Morning Calm,”<sup>1</sup> which evokes simpler times when subsistence living was the economic

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<sup>1</sup> The origins of the nickname are unclear, with some asserting it is what Koreans traditionally called their country (R. Harris 2004, 18), a Chinese translation of the Korean word *Asadal*, capital of Gojoseon, which was subsequently translated into English (Ahn and Kim 2013), or was an early attempt by Western visitors to back-translate the Chinese character for Korea (wikipedia). Given that Korea only opened to Western visitors in 1876 (Chung 2006,

foundation for the bulk of the population. It seems a misnomer in today's frenetic, industrial, technology-driven world where Korea comprises part of the "Asian tiger" economy<sup>2</sup> and a model for development and economic growth, but there are still places and times when the name resonates.

Similarly, I refer to the white, Western foreigners who comprise the focus of this thesis as foreign teachers, expatriates, migrants, or *waegooks*, which is the Korean word for "foreigner." Few identify themselves as itinerant or migrant teachers, even though they migrate to the peninsula primarily to work. The choice of terminology is significant and reveals aspects of their identity in Korea. In using the term "foreign teachers," they emphasize their education and professional accomplishments, while the term *waegook* highlights their outside status, both of which set them apart. Despite referring to exile from one's homeland, choosing the label "expatriate" over similar terms such as migrant or itinerant carries more classist implications. Goudge comments on her status while abroad, saying:

[T]he ownership of a privilege (in this case that of being able to travel the world more or less as freely as one wishes) must raise the question of who it is that has access to that privilege, and whether such access is accorded on the basis of membership of a particular class or group. The ability to move relatively smoothly across international borders requires material resources, notably money and a valid passport, as well as a certain level of confidence, all of which are more readily available to 'First World' citizens. In addition, such movement is rendered considerably easier by the possession of a visible sign, such as whiteness of skin colour, or, failing that, a set of expensive luggage to act as a mediating sign. (2003, 70)

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42) and Percival Lowell used the phrase in the title of his 1888 book Chosön: The Land of the Morning Calm: A Sketch of Korea, the expression is contemporaneous with the earliest English-language accounts of the country. Its usage is now so common that numerous books incorporate it in their titles, and Morning Calm is the title of the inflight magazine for Korean Air, one of two major airlines in South Korea. It should be noted that the term is not generally used by Koreans, but is understood to be a nickname that foreigners have for Korea.

<sup>2</sup> Korea's economy has experienced remarkable growth since the end of the Korean War in 1953, and was one of the "Asian tiger" economies booming in the 1990s (Rowher 2001, 41). Even when international markets suffered a dramatic recession, when "no Asian country was hit by the [Asian Financial Crisis, or AFC, of 1997] as severely as South Korea" (S.S. Kim 2004, 40), Korea managed to retain its position as one of the world's most vibrant economies. See also Thatcher (2002) regarding the AFC.

Historically, the term expatriate connotes wealth, freedom, cosmopolitanism, leisure, and even whiteness. Expatriates' separation from their country is voluntary, in contrast to deportation or exile, and is often construed as a form of vacation for those with the means to live abroad for an extended period, one famous example being Hemingway in Paris. This interpretation of expatriate identity also corresponds with foreign teachers' enthusiasm for further travel in the region, with the stamps in one's passport indicating one's embrace of a cosmopolitan life of adventure and exploration. The passport itself can be seen as a status marker, one which opens doors for white travelers around the world. Such associations, while evocative of a colonialist past, still carry positive connotations for whites abroad, including those who are, technically, migrant workers.

In contrast, migrants are often imagined as lower class or poor, laboring in agricultural concerns, possibly crossing borders illegally, moving in response to duress, and typically people of color. Migrant groups tend to be comprised of related groups of individuals and, over time, establish routes and patterns, draw other relatives and friends into their movement, and provide various forms of support to community members. There is a cohesion and sense of common history that is mostly absent from the foreign teachers' experience. Foreign teachers in Korea find their own jobs and arrive alone or, more rarely, in pairs (I've known two couples and four pairs of friends who came to Korea at or about the same time). Stays are short, on the order of one to five years, there is no plan to remain permanently, and they do not return to a job/employer once they have moved on. They are not of the leisure class themselves, given that theirs is a working sojourn, but they are drawn from the middle class and aspire to such associations. They do not establish *community* ties that persist beyond their time in Korea, although ties between individuals may endure. They lack the cohesion, community, and support

systems of migrants or immigrants. The most exact term for their work and movements is probably itinerant, a term which, as traditionally used, also carries implications of vagrancy, impermanence, and lower class status. Nevertheless, it fits, even as it, too, brings to mind teachers on the frontiers or in colonies who moved from town to town. I have known a few individuals who referred to foreign teachers bluntly as “whiteys,” a clear acknowledgement of the role race plays in our self-segregation, but most are neither that introspective nor so candid.

The choice of term is therefore loaded with meaning, as:

The simplest forms of verbal folk expression are names; they are the first level of expression of stereotypes developed as a result of inter-group relations. When we name things, we give them a life of their own; we isolate them from the rest of our experience. By *naming ourselves*, we affirm our own *identity*; we define it by *separating ourselves* from others, to whom we give names different from our own. (Paredes 1993, 31, emphasis mine)

While acknowledging the classist/racist motivations underlying the labels, for the purposes of this thesis, I use those terms foreign teachers most often choose to identify themselves: foreign teachers, expatriates, or *waegooks*.

Korea’s vistas of hazy mountains and quiet, misty mornings play into expatriate imaginings of the romantic age of exploration and adventures in exotic locales. The lovely images in the tourist guidebooks, however, are no preparation for life as a foreign teacher and Westerners with anachronistic notions of the Orient confront reality when they arrive. The very difference that seems so attractive when at home is a challenge once you are immersed in it. Most foreign teachers are employed by *hagwons*, work long hours, are expected to behave in culturally appropriate ways, keep pace with Korean colleagues, and perform successfully in the classroom. The job can be difficult, confusing, frustrating, and exhausting, but once teachers get a handle on the work and begin to form connections with others, life there can be pretty enjoyable. Social gatherings offer an outlet for venting reactions and opinions in ways that might

not be workplace appropriate, reflecting a sort of folk attitude about life in Korea through joking, critiques of culture differences, and anecdotes about work life. In the sharing of such folklore, foreign teachers generate the base of their collective identity, reinforced by personal experience narratives and a sense of shared experience. For those who adapt, life in Korea can have an addictive quality, but the process of adaptation can be difficult and not everyone succeeds.

*Hagwons* are a type of academy, supplemental to the regular educational system and operating on a for-profit basis. They provide additional instruction, particularly in subjects that comprise important segments of standardized tests. Their hours are arranged around regular school schedules and, for this reason, most *hagwon* teachers' work hours begin in the afternoon, last well into the evening, sometimes until midnight, and usually include Saturday classes. Some *hagwons* will also offer morning courses for mothers or younger children, which can result in a split schedule for teachers. Daniel Tudor describes Koreans' pursuit of education as "the national obsession" (2012, 50), which manifests in a "preoccupation with exam results and the pursuit of admission to the best universities" (2012, 51). This obsession, however, is not without reason as education can alter class and status. Parents who can afford *hagwon* classes send their children in an effort to improve their test scores, which in turn will improve their chances of attending better schools and, subsequently, higher status universities. Graduates from the best universities can rise to hold powerful positions and tend to aid those who graduated from the same institution. Success on exams has broader implications for the entire family's status and means in the long term.

Demand for supplementary English education, in conjunction with the widespread belief that learning from native speakers increases proficiency, offers *hagwon* owners financial incentive to hire foreign nationals to provide that instruction. Many employment opportunities

for foreign teachers in South Korea are in *hagwons* and those that specialize in English language instruction may hire multiple foreign teachers each year. These schools are not subject to the same laws and oversight as standard schools, and regulation of them is scant, so conditions for foreign teachers are often deplorable, both in terms of work conditions and the housing they are provided. *Hagwons* are required to provide housing for foreign teachers, but the quality of that housing is not stipulated. To save money, employers place foreign teachers in the cheapest housing they can find, which may be distant from the *hagwon*, in poorer areas of town, rundown and filthy, have maintenance problems, or be infested with vermin such as cockroaches or rats. Complaints to employers are met with hostility, dismissed as the fussiness of spoiled foreigners, laughed off, or ignored entirely, and there is no real avenue for redress. For these reasons, *hagwons* experience the highest rates of employee turnover, are often the subject of first-year narratives, and provide the background for most tales of midnight running.

A “midnight run” (sometimes described as “doing a runner”), as foreigners in Korea use the expression, occurs when foreign teachers feel they are in an untenable situation wherein their employer is treating them unjustly and/or they cannot adjust to life in Korea. They see no recourse but to break their contracts and leave the country with no advance warning to their employers, though other individuals may be aware of their impending departure. In order to avoid potential confrontations or consequences, the teacher will flee to Seoul or Busan, the two largest cities in Korea, as soon as the work day is done, take the first available flight home, and thus seemingly disappear overnight. As one runner interviewed by Richard Harris described (and justified) his midnight run,

In my own case, I ended up teaching at that *hagwon* for about one year before doing the infamous ‘midnight run’...I should mention that I wasn’t the first person to do this, and this is a common occurrence. It’s when all your options have run out and you find yourself backed into an impossible corner...

For a majority of *hagwon* directors, blatant lying and cheating are so commonplace that few teachers are surprised or shocked. When it happens, the English teacher can't speak the [Korean] language and employing the services of a lawyer will be prohibitively expensive. In many cases, the midnight run is the only option for survival. (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 253)

Stories of midnight runs often depict such stealthy escapes, conveying the anxiety of the runner and suggesting distrust of Korean acquaintances. There are various reasons for teachers to maintain secrecy prior to running, but two predominate: a) fear the employer may prevent their departure, leading to possible detainment in Korea; and b) feeling no obligation to give notice because of resentment arising from their circumstances and/or treatment. In the former, the teacher flees in fear of punishment, but the latter is itself a means of punishing the employer, both financially and through loss of face, one of few weapons in the foreign teacher's arsenal given their lack of status.

In Notes from the Other China: Adventures in Asia, a memoir of his experiences as a foreign teacher, Troy Parfitt describes doing a midnight run after resisting pressure to take on illegal teaching work, and he is clearly motivated by fear in his account of the chain of events that lead to it. After declining the teaching opportunity, he says:

That night, I caught a cold and didn't go to work the next morning. I showed up at lunch, though, only for the staff to inform me nervously that the police had been there looking for me. I had heard stories about teachers being roughed up and even tortured by the police in Korea before being deported, and this, as you might imagine, didn't appeal to me in the least. That night, I called all my Korean friends and students and told them that, unfortunately, I was leaving. The next day, I was on a plane back to Canada. (Parfitt 2008, 12)

While conditions in Korea have changed vastly since the mid-1990s when Parfitt was frightened out of the country, a crackdown on foreign teachers giving illegal private lessons was under way at the time and his fear of mistreatment was not unreasonable. Following the armistice that suspended the Korean War, conditions on the peninsula were grim. As Tudor puts it:



South Korea was born into poverty and ruin. Even at the end of the 1950s, GDP per capita was well below \$100. Life expectancy was around fifty-four years. The political situation was equally dismal: the nation was presided over by an authoritarian, corrupt regime under President Rhee. It could maintain power only through violence and did little to improve the people's standard of living. (2012, 21)

Between 1953 and the mid-1990s, “[c]orrupt, autocratic and military rulers censored the media, imprisoned and tortured political opponents, manipulated elections, and continually changed the constitution to suit themselves” (Robinson, Bender and Whyte 2004, 31).

One of the last to amend Korea's constitution to their purposes was General Park Chung-hee, who ascended to power via a coup and made changes to allow himself a third term as president (Tudor 2012, 87). Park was assassinated in 1979, after which army officer Chun Doo-hwan orchestrated his own coup and held power by declaring martial law and writing a new constitution (Tudor 2012, 88-89). Chun tried to pass power to his protégé Roh Tae-woo in the mid-1980s, but spreading opposition from students, workers, and church members whittled away at his control (Tudor 2012, 89). By the late 1980s, the Korean people were pushing for democracy, with massive demonstrations spreading across the country (Tudor 2012, 89). In 1987, Roh Tae-woo won the presidency in a fair election and, setting a new precedent, peacefully relinquished power to Kim Young-sam in 1992 (Tudor 2012, 90). This was still recent history when I arrived there in 1994 and I learned much of this from Koreans happy to discuss the positive changes in their country over the preceding years.

Parfitt's stay in Korea occurred near the end of that turbulent period, when police and other authorities wielded a great deal of comparatively unchecked power. It was not until 1997 that South Korea saw its “first ever peaceful transfer of power from the ruling to an opposition party” (Facts... 2003, 28), but even then residues from earlier periods of corruption and abuse of power persisted. This, in conjunction with the fact that foreigners (and Koreans) had fewer rights

than they have now, led to a body of narratives that emphasized prudence and preparedness. Personal experience narratives of midnight runs and deportations circulated within the foreign teacher community and provided both a cautionary tale and a prescription for how to respond in similar situations. Parfitt notes that he "had heard stories" (2008, 12), and provides his own example through sharing a narrative of his midnight run in his memoir. Though far less common than they used to be, midnight runs still occur as the conditions that precipitate them continue to exist, so examples of them are still heard among foreign teachers today, if more rarely.

Personal experience narrative as understood in this thesis refers to those stories foreign teachers tell among themselves that relate to their experience of life in Korea and, in the telling, create meaning and make sense of events. Narrating their experiences generates a sense of intimacy (Dolby-Stahl 1985, 47-48) among listeners as they empathize with the narrator as protagonist in recognizable circumstances. Their audience, knowledgeable themselves in the vagaries and complexities of life in Korea, are engaged with the text and draw "experiential meaning" (Braid 1996, 5) from a narrative as it portrays events that play out in ways that feel familiar. They are able to follow the story and interpret its meaning because they and the narrator share frames of reference and tools to think with and through the story as they process together what it means to be a foreign teacher in Korea. The teller, on the other hand, is narrating herself into being in a certain sense. Without any pre-existing personal knowledge of each other, this diverse group finds a way of being in Korea that retains their persistent (pre-Korea) identity and meshes that with the person they are who survives and thrives there. Personal experience narratives are a vital part of the negotiations, within the group and within themselves, that enable the development of personal and collective identity as *waegooks* in Korea.

Among the foreigners I knew, worked with, or interviewed, all of whom were white Westerners, comments and narratives critical of Koreans, their culture, and their treatment of foreigners were common. One woman was infuriated at the motorcycles and scooters that were always pushing their way along the crowded sidewalks in Seoul, saying, “Don’t they know what *sidewalk* means? It’s for *walking*!” (I\*T. Shawlinski 2006<sup>3</sup>). A Canadian man described having an elderly Korean woman sharply poke him in the buttocks in a bus terminal, a not-uncommon prank called *ddong-chim* (동침), usually translated as “poop needle” or “ass needle.” He dismissed her as a “crazy woman,” but still shared the story as part of his personal experience narrative repertoire. The act is usually perpetrated by children, as shown in Figure 1 (pg. 14) of a Korean statue (also titled 동침) from the blog of a foreign teacher in Korea (Findlay, 2008). Foreigners are prime targets for this prank and few appreciate its humor, with most expressing disgust, fury, or humiliation as their primary reaction to it. They may see it as a mark of the disrespect accorded foreigners, since it is normally done by children to other children, *not* by children to adults. As the blogger put it, “I had this done once to me when I first arrived and I felt violated all day. Not even multiple showers washed away that feeling” (Findlay, 2008). As shocking and upsetting as this experience is, especially the first time, it is usually not sufficient grounds in itself for making a midnight run, which is the culmination of multiple cultural- and work-related difficulties and conflict with one’s employer.

Kim Crosby described having a meltdown over her sense that everything in Korea was made of cheap plastic, nothing was built to last, saying, “The whole thing was the bloody plastic, I had a thing, I flipped around the plastic” (I\*Crosby 2007). She felt the extensive use of plastic,

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<sup>3</sup> In the in-text references, “I\*” indicates reference to an interview with an informant or information gathered through personal communication. In the interview transcriptions, words the informants stressed for emphasis are underlined, and texts from multiple participants without double-spacing between indicates more than one person speaking at the same time.



**Figure 1: A statue portraying a common prank among Korean children in South Korea. Called 동침 or “poop needle,” the prank is a source of humiliation when perpetrated on foreigners. (Photo by S. Findlay, 2008.)**

instead of more natural and/or durable materials, to make all manner of items reflected a failure to appreciate good quality or the lack of a desire to make more aesthetically pleasing objects. To some extent, her indignation may have been a reaction to what she saw as the degrading of her surroundings and loss of control over her environment. She described her home in South Africa as being filled with beautiful wooden antiques and surrounded by stately old trees, all of which implies grandeur and wealth and standing. The reality is that fine wooden furniture and antiques *are* available in Korea, but their cost is prohibitive.

Melanie Steyn found it difficult to shop because the clerks in the shops would “look at me in horror and chase me out, you know? It’s not...very good for your self-image” (I\*M. Steyn

2007). Like many foreign women, myself included, she was larger than the average Korean woman, which made clothes shopping problematic. There is no way to know what was going through the minds of the clerks who reacted to foreign clients in this manner, either, though the foreigner knows how it makes them feel. The “look [of] horror” might be because the clerks know they have nothing to offer her, do not speak English, or find foreigners intimidating, but Melanie internalized this negative reaction in a personal way. In the moment, these stories made sense to me and in retrospect I perceive that this was primarily because I was able to follow, as a *waegook*, in the way Braid has described (1996, 5), through my own understanding of the context in which the events they described took place.

These narratives reflect a sense of lost power or status in cultural interactions, one which leads the foreigner to feel stressed, frustrated, or even angry. As the creators of the narratives, however, the tellers are able to create the sequence of events, control the tone, and position Koreans as they see fit. As Lipsitz points out in his analysis of race and power in the United States, “As the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations” (1998, 1). And so, white foreigners gather together and tell tales, describing their embarrassment, confusion, and distress in myriad circumstances, critiquing the behavior of Koreans that is never quite what it should be. Xenophobia, or the fear or irrational dislike of those from other cultures, manifests in the tone and content of these discussions, varying in degree among the different participants. It is easiest to perceive among those most disaffected with life in Korea, as they criticize even the smallest deviations from their own culture, but even those who enjoy living there are not immune. In a recent discussion about ethnocentrism and xenophobia with Melanie Steyn, she said:

Obviously, there is a range of such attitudes and remarks, but I found that I, too, was not innocent of such thoughts and comments. Ethnocentrism is comfortable, after all. Oh yes, I was comfortable with my ethnocentrism most of the time; it made me feel secure. At least I was aware of it, though, and I think coming from a country of rich diversity [South Africa] did help me. White privilege is still pretty universal, and for “white” people to realise and recognise it is the first (often most difficult) step. (I\*M. Steyn 2018)

Her consciousness of the problem serves as a bulwark against it, she feels, and acknowledging the need to deal with it also gives her control of it, but Melanie did feel the problem was widespread among *waegooks*. She went on to say:

It’s hard to remember verbatim conversations, but I felt consistently through the ten years I was there that white foreigners (not Filipinos or Chinese people; not Asians from the more southern countries!) believed that they and their culture were superior. Whether you were from New Zealand or Canada, or anywhere in between, you would hear comments about “These Koreans,” often with a negative epithet added, and what foolish thing they had said, asked, required. Most of these *waegooks* totally expected agreement and were surprised if you said something about culture instead. (I\*M. Steyn 2018)

Whether conscious of it or not, these feelings underlay *waegooks*’ responses to interactions with Koreans and determined both their reactions and how they later portrayed the events in their narratives.

The content of these stories – personal, private, even humiliating – contribute to the sense of intimacy and unity within the group. It bears noting that all of the foreigners I interviewed remained in South Korea for *at least* two years, and Melanie, as she noted above, was there for ten years. All had narratives of good times in Korea when they were shown extraordinary kindness or given unexpected help. If tourists or newcomers become lost, often all they have to do is stand in one place for a bit and stare at their map or guidebook, or simply look confused, and a Korean will try to help them. Several times, while studying the maps in a Seoul subway station, I was approached by Koreans asking if I needed help, even if they spoke little English. Once a grandmother smacked her grandson on the arm and badgered him until he came to offer assistance in broken English. It may be that the negative stories better reinforce a sense of

collective identity, dependent on and “derived from experiences and expressions common to [the] group” (Oring 1994a, 212), and conveying a shared sense of injury or oppression. Positive experiences, on the other hand, seemed to have less of an impact. The quality of one’s interactions on the streets have a lot to do with whether one is having a “good Korea day” or a “bad Korea day” and there is no telling which you will have when you leave the sanctuary of your apartment.

Because foreign teachers are transitory in Korea, they are not appreciably invested in the success of their employer, nor would the school’s failure impact their future employment or economic interests. Most foreign teachers, even those who come for financial reasons, take advantage of the opportunities that living in Korea presents, as a foreign land itself and through its proximity to other countries. Teaching in Korea is a chance to learn about the country in more depth than a casual tourist, to rub elbows with the locals on a daily basis, learn their language and ways, and “absorb the culture,” as the saying goes. Foreign teachers explore the temples and palaces, become familiar with their neighborhood, markets, and shops, and learn the language, customs, and foods. When this wears thin, they use their vacation time to travel in the region, with Japan, China, Vietnam, and Thailand being very popular destinations. This is experiencing day-to-day life in Korea, among Koreans, and as they grow more accustomed to their temporary home, most *waegooks* find a great deal to love about that life. Another saying, however, is that “familiarity breeds contempt,” and the constant exposure to Korean culture lends itself to decided tastes and aversions. There is much to like about Korea, but being shoved back and forth while trying to board a bus is not one of them, nor is it pleasant to be woken early on a day off by the loudspeakers mounted on a truck below your apartment windows announcing what the driver is selling from the bed of said truck (usually fruit). Most often, *waegooks* dismiss the annoyances





Figure 2: Korean text everywhere is baffling and signage is visually overwhelming for new arrivals who lack fluency in the language, but must get by as best they can until they learn the basics. (Photo by K. Roubo 2006)

as just that, but at other times they perceive them as evidence of inferiority, inconsiderateness, or inefficiency, which, as discussed previously, can be a manifestation of xenophobia and/or an attempt to reposition oneself as superior.

Like expatriates in the Cayman Islands who felt “they could not fully invest themselves emotionally or financially in a locality in which they had no long-term security” (Amit-Talai 1997, 328), most foreign teachers in Korea remain relatively detached throughout their stay. Again, there is no intention to settle, so while they make friends with Koreans and foreigners alike, and often maintain those friendships after they leave, few form lasting attachments that



would interfere with their plans to leave. Unfortunately for the employers, this means they have an employee over whom it is difficult to exert cultural or social control because of the lack of obligations, but on whom a great deal depends. Hiring a foreign teacher requires weeks of planning and paperwork and a significant investment of resources, so employers expect to get their money's worth. This necessitates finding likeable teachers and getting the maximum course load from each, because the volume of students and classes represents return on the investment. Because the two parties' goals and needs are so often characterized by opposition, relationships between members of the two groups cannot help but be fraught with tension, a stress that may overwhelm the good intentions of either party.

This friction tends to undermine the successful operation of the workplace, creating feelings of frustration, resentment, or animosity, leading to breakdowns in communications. The employer finds it difficult to retain foreign teachers, who will always move on when a better opportunity arises, particularly if they have been poorly treated. The teachers find the demands made on them unreasonable in terms of time, energy, personal privacy, and deference to the needs of others. Because this divergence of interests is inherent in the structure of the relationship, there are consistencies in how it plays out. As Goffman notes, when "unacquainted with the individual, observers can glean clues from his conduct and appearance which allow them to apply their previous experience with individuals roughly similar to the one before them or, more important, to apply untested stereotypes" (1959, 1). In this sense, foreign teachers have a reputation before they ever set foot in Korea, one that inclines their employers to be wary and, perhaps, to employ tactics and practices that make it even more likely that their teacher might make a midnight run. Additionally, as Goffman observed:

[w]hen the individual does move into a new position in society and obtains a new part to perform, he is not likely to be told in full detail how to conduct himself, nor will the facts

of his new situation press sufficiently on him from the start to determine his conduct without his further giving thought to it. (1959, 72)

In describing occupational folklore among firefighters, Robert McCarl asserts, “As any novice worker knows, the first days on the job can be a nightmare of new terms, actions, and techniques” (1986, 71), which makes the transition to a new job hard enough. Compound this initial confusion with an entirely new culture and language, along with the preconceptions and stereotypes individuals bring with them, and the steepness of the learning curve for recently arrived foreign teachers becomes apparent. While the new situation does indeed press on the individual and demands a great deal of thought, the new cultural milieu may not provide the kind of clues easily read by newcomers and Koreans may not perceive where the confusion lies. Employers who have worked with foreigners extensively, or spent significant time abroad, are more aware of the difficulties their foreign employees face and can help with the adjustment process. Among *hagwon* owners, who are responsible for the employment of the bulk of newcomers to Korea, such compassion and experience are rare.

As globalization increasingly becomes a focus of attention across the disciplines, populations such as that of foreign teachers in Korea represent a form of community divergent from concerns such as region, origin, or location. One scholar suggests that “shifts in the organization of capital and production have displaced workers in affluent, postindustrial and post-colonial economies” resulting in “many middle-class professionals and white-collar workers in affluent countries like Canada...experiencing pressures towards mobility that were once more narrowly identified with humbler labour migrations from the southern to the northern hemisphere” (Amit-Talai 1997, 328). Foreign teachers are subject to the same inducements to movement that create other itinerant workforces. Many foreign teachers in Korea cite financial and employment concerns as motivating their working abroad and, like the expatriates in the



Figure 3: View of busy Gangnam Daero, running from Yangjae to Gangnam. (Photo by K. Roubo 2006)



Figure 4: View of my walk to work, looking back toward my street. Yangjae Subway Station lies beneath this intersection, with egress on all sides. (Photo by K. Roubo 2006)

Cayman Islands studied by Amit-Talai, they find themselves in “a situation of mobility and dislocation but without the concomitant development of a well-articulated transnational social network” (1997, 320). That is to say, unlike migrant workers or elite professionals whose “deterritorialization and mobility can be associated with a high degree of organizational integration and containment” (Amit-Talai 1997, 323-324), foreign teachers do not have access to the social networks and services available to other transnational migrants. Amit-Talai further asserts that:

[T]here are still far too few ethnographic accounts exploring the social implications of these global reconfigurations. Technological and economic shifts loom large but with little sense of how this restructuring is being apprehended and acted upon by the people moving across state lines, forming the new “flexible” workforces, signing onto the Internet. (1997, 328)

In looking at foreign teachers in Korea, their organization and socialization, and some of their movements and strategies, this study contributes to understanding how globalization is affecting “unconnected individuals migrating independently from one locality to another” (Amit-Talai 1997, 327). Foreign teachers’ lack of resources that a transnational business or network of comrades might provide, is offset by the advantages of being a white person from an affluent Western country, noted previously. Foreign teachers in Korea survive and even thrive, in de facto ad hoc folk groups that form whenever and wherever the opportunity arises.

## **1.2 The Road to Korea**

I lived in Korea for nearly five years in total (1994-1997 and 2006-2008), which has both enabled me to pursue this research and presented me with the challenge of separating the researcher from the *waegook*. I share Pauline Greenhill’s sentiments when she says of her work with immigrants in Canada, “The particular unfolding of this project clearly had a great deal to do with my own personal opinions and approaches, and my conclusions speak to a need to reconcile myself with what I’ve found as much as to how I see my place as an ethnographer”

(1994, 8). When an informant relates a narrative of initiatory experiences in Korea, it recalls past experiences for listeners who have gone through something similar and follow its meaning, myself included. I had intended to be the listener in these interviews, as I had been taught in my fieldwork courses, letting silence fill the gaps in the conversation in order to elicit more from my interviewee. The foreign teacher in me, however, had learned participatory habits in these situations years before and I found myself recalling events in my own life that paralleled the narratives my informants shared. In spite of my plans, narrative exchange carried over into my interviews, as their stories would evoke one of mine, which in turn would lead to another anecdote of theirs. Jack Santino has described a similar process in his article “Characteristics of Occupational Narratives,” with “the spotlight traded from raconteur to raconteur, each story triggering a memory and a corresponding story from someone else” (1978, 202). As an observer, Santino noted the phenomenon, but as a foreign teacher, a *waegook*, I was participating, because participation makes the *waegook*.

Including my own experiences imparts a fuller picture than would otherwise be possible, adds to the body of data, and provides some context for understanding the overall text. That such inclusions do not always show me in a complimentary light is all the more reason for including them. I approached this fieldwork following years of training as a folklorist, but my early experiences in Korea predated this training and I discovered that my previous impressions and existing beliefs colored my initial interpretations. My own experience of teaching at *hagwons* in South Korea began in the mid-1990s. Like many foreign teachers, or other post-industrial migrant workers for that matter, I found my prospects for employment after earning my bachelor’s degree were limited. While I might not normally have pursued a job opportunity in Asia, two years of unemployment gave me the impetus to take a chance and I went to South

Korea in February of 1994 to work as an English teacher. I was ignorant of the history and culture of the country and its people, and knew none of the language. As I boarded the plane for Korea, I was not even sure where I would be living and working, as that information had changed several times during the application process. My experiences in Korea were some of the most difficult, and important, of my life to date and after living there for close to three years I returned home a changed person, with a significantly altered sense of self, outlook on life, and priorities. I valued all that my experiences there had done for me, but when I left in 1997 I felt I was done with Korea and moving on.

Discussions with others in my department at Memorial University (I\*K. Harris 2002; I\*MacLean 2003) who had been English teachers in Korea led me to see that *waegooks* comprised a folk group easily overlooked due to its diversity, transience, mobility, and distance. As we exchanged narratives and considered the folkloric aspects of the group, we found ourselves saying, “Someone ought to look at this.” These discussions were instrumental in my theorizing that the performance of these personal experience narratives were sufficient to render us a folk group, if only for a time, and were sufficiently esoteric as to exclude other graduate students at the table. Moreover, we three talked about our lives in Korea on only a few occasions. In those moments, though, our shared narratives and understanding of those experiences, our acceptance of the shocking events described as plausible, and the sense of revisiting times, places, and events we had known in Korea demonstrated our separate folk group status within the cohort of our graduate class. Our parallel experiences enabled us to “follow” each other’s narratives in a way other listeners could not, and, for the duration of the conversation, we were *waegooks* again.

A couple of conversations in particular highlight how these narrative performances constitute the heart of foreign teacher folk society. Stacey MacLean, Lynne McNeill, and I were in the graduate student lounge of the Folklore Department at Memorial University and the topic of life in Korea arose. Lynne was the only one of us who had not taught in Korea and was surprised at the content of our narratives. She did not know the places we mentioned, understand the terms we used, or have any context for understanding the experiences we described. Without such tools, she could not connect with the stories. Korean place names, customs, and terms such as *won*, *waegook*, *hagwon*, and other foreign teacher vernacular was woven throughout our discussion, making it even more obscure to our non-*waegook* listener. On another occasion, Kristin Harris, Stacey MacLean, and I had a long, involved conversation about Korea in that same lounge, using foreign teacher lingo and reliving the experience of the life of a foreign teacher in Korea through sharing our narratives. Although Stacey, Kristin, and I had not known each other in Korea, had no acquaintances in common from our time there, and previously had not been aware that we had all taught there, we had no trouble following and understanding the narratives we shared. This indicates that foreign teachers' folklore is private (Dolby-Stahl 1985, 47) in that it is understood and shared by those who possess insider knowledge and creates a sense of intimacy through the esoteric folklore embedded in its language and content (Dolby-Stahl 1985, 48-49).

While I did not record those conversations, I recall Kristin's description of having to rip her university diploma from her employer's hand, crumpling it in the process, as he was refusing to return it. Neither Stacey nor I had experienced this, but both of us knew someone who had. It is not unusual to be asked to surrender documents such as passports or diplomas to your employer in South Korea, usually for the purpose of completing necessary paperwork with

Immigration authorities. However, once such items are in their possession, some will hold them hostage to keep you from leaving. Kristin said that even if she had not been able to get it from him, it would not have kept her from leaving as she would have preferred to pay for a replacement diploma than work there any longer. Stacey described her dislike of Korean foods and how she relied on packaged or fast food, which caused her to gain weight. This caused her further discomfort, as Koreans are quite critical regarding weight and appearance and do not hesitate to comment. I had my own experiences in Korea of being called fat or laughed at, by both children and adults alike, so I sympathized with her. In those moments of narrative exchange, and only on those occasions, Stacey, Kristin, and I constituted a separate folk group within the larger body of our cohort of fellow graduate students at Memorial University. In the performance of our personal experience narratives (PENs), that folk group emerged briefly and revealed our shared language and familiarity with a specific culture (and subculture) and, in the intimacy of sharing our remembered experiences, created a sense of belonging among us.

A growing number of young individuals in their early post-baccalaureate years are having life-changing experiences, yet the lives of those who choose to leave their homeland in pursuit of employment, adventure, and/or financial reward have not been seriously examined. Foreign teachers are not the dispersed members of a particular group, but an assemblage of individuals from various nations, and multiple regions within those lands, representing an array of ethnicities, histories, subcultures, etc. One scholar, in attempting to classify members of such a group, called them “traveller-settlers,” underscoring the awkwardness of positioning them in any particular category (Duruz 2006, 102). I have already discussed my own struggle with the terminology best used to describe them. They are a marginal group, neither local nor tourist, embedded in the fabric of Korean life, but without a definable place in society, and certainly no



sense of permanence. Because of my experiences of this type of lifestyle – working at two different *hagwons* in the 1990s over the course of two and a half years – and knowledge of this type of group, I chose to make a foreign teacher community the focus of this doctoral thesis.

During my sojourn in the mid-1990s, the foreign teacher industry in South Korea was expanding rapidly and today it is not difficult to find individuals who have either taught English there or in other countries in Asia, or know someone who has. Given that considerable change had occurred during my original period of residence in Korea, between 1994 and 1997, I believed that the experience of living and working there would have undergone dramatic change over the course of the following years. When conversations with those who had returned more recently indicated that this was not the case, I began to consider why not and what fieldwork in the foreign teacher community in South Korea would actually reveal.

The time foreign teachers spend overseas can be seen as liminal, with a tension that seems to increase with the length of stay. Despite the difficulties encountered, the experience can have a profound effect on participants, for good or ill. In my case, I went from simply looking for work to having a clearer understanding of my capacity to change and grow, and gaining new educational aspirations, a path which eventually took me back to Korea. Living abroad and learning deeply about another culture pushed me to confront racist, orientalist, and xenophobic tendencies in myself. Melanie Steyn described her own struggles, saying:

It was complex because culture and morality blurred. I remember assessing speeches with a Korean professor, and she simply could not bear to give a child a higher score than an adult, although the child was fluent in English after living abroad, and the adult was not nearly as good. It tormented her. I battled with my knowledge of her culture versus my outrage at her robbing the child of the place she deserved. This kind of thing would be quoted when *waegooks* were together, to let off steam, and to seek consensus on the Koreans' "stupidity."

I failed the test of tolerance myself when my class once discussed the eating of dogs. I didn't even want to listen to arguments about their culture and tried to persuade them to change their habits!

"Othering" happened in some pretty obvious ways. I remember being told the old myth that Asian women have horizontal labia, in a tone that affirmed their lower rank in evolution! (I\*M. Steyn 2018)

Perhaps because of her own family history of confronting apartheid in her native South Africa, Melanie was sensitive to the internal conflict generated by cross-cultural contact and internalized orientalist tropes. Coming to terms with a new culture, and with the ways that being immersed in that culture impinges on your habituated lifestyle, expectations, stereotypes, and prejudices is a challenge.

Contemporary cultural artifacts reflect the extent of the foreign teacher phenomenon as YouTube videos, blogs, vlogs, and published memoirs of culture shock and expatriate life abound. Films such as *Lost in Translation* (2003), *The Ramen Girl* (2008), or *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011), and television programs like Life Network's *English Teachers* (2003) in Canada, present dramatic evidence of how difficult adjusting to life abroad can be for Western expatriates. The initial immersion is overwhelming and contact with other foreigners is unpredictable. Meanwhile, "Uninitiated teachers run the risk of finding themselves working for a shark or a cowboy who doesn't care a fig about the quality of teaching or the satisfaction of the teachers, as long as pupils keep signing up and paying their fees" (Griffith 2003, 15), circumstances that often make for an unpleasant introduction to life in Korea. Griffith's apt use of the word "uninitiated" is further indication of the transformative potential of the crucial first year. The success of films, reality television programming, and personal memoirs on the subject underlines not only a general public interest in these departures from the stereotypical career path, but also how common it is becoming for Western college graduates to make such a choice.

For those who have not had the experience of teaching in Asia, one of the first questions that arises is, “How does one come to travel to halfway around the globe to teach English in a foreign land?” Despite its exotic sound, the experience is not unusual among English-speaking college graduates and getting there is quicker and simpler than one might think. Parfitt describes the scope of both the need for English and the market for teaching, saying:

English, in case you haven’t noticed, is a monster. The medium or dominant language of science, medicine, general academia, foreign language teaching, aviation, computing, business, the media, tourism, and diplomacy, it remains unchallenged as the preferred means of international communication. Although it is problematic to pinpoint with any high degree of accuracy the number of people who speak English, it’s generally acknowledged that there are something like 350 million native speakers, 350 million speakers of English as a second language, and another 100 million or so speakers of English as a foreign language, making for a grand total of approximately 800 million...

The use of English as a global trend has led to the creation of a somewhat frenetic multi-billion-dollar industry to facilitate its learning, a vast amount of which goes on in Asia. Supposedly, there are more English learners in China than there are people in the United States. (2008, 61-62)

All of this creates abundant opportunities for teaching in a wide variety of situations around the globe; it is simply a matter of finding an opening.

As Pacific Rim countries experienced economic growth and increasing affluence, there was a steady increase in the demand for English teachers as corporations in these nations strived to compete in the global market. This continues today as “[e]ven in a post September 11<sup>th</sup> world when levels of fear and distrust have been raised, the market for English remains miraculously vigorous” (Griffith 2003, 5). Furthermore, as more and more people participate in this market, more people are aware of and open to the idea of teaching abroad when they come across an opportunity. Some prospective teachers go through organizations such as the Peace Corps or the Fulbright Fellowships, while others find employment abroad via other channels. When I first went abroad in the 1990s, telling people where I worked usually entailed a long explanation, but

nowadays the response is often, "Oh, I know someone who did that." For countries such as Taiwan, Japan, China, Vietnam, and South Korea, the need for English teachers is constant as turnover rates for foreign English teachers remain high. This turnover is due in part to the stresses of the life, which can prove more than most wish to tolerate for more than relatively limited periods of time. One significant source of stress is the lack of knowledge of the land and the culture and, whether prior to departure or after arrival in Korea, foreigners scramble to fill the gap.

Kim Crosby described her early confusion in Korea, saying, "You have no way of understanding this culture...you can't trust your perceptions, you can't trust your gut feeling" (I\*Crosby 2007). Her sentiment is shared by other expatriates, as in the case of Shoba Narayan, an Indian woman studying in America who notes, "I was deprived of all the clues that I normally use to typecast people" (2003, 115). Melanie Steyn also described her response to the geography of Korea and how it seemed unwelcoming in comparison to her native South Africa, saying,

I wasn't used to mountains that were actually hills...that were flint-shaped, triangular, steep but...not high. And they seemed alien to me and...I remember writing home and saying it's as though...some ancient Korean giant has...blocked your way like, um, that scene from the Lord of the Rings [:The Fellowship of The Ring] where Gandalf says, "You will not pass!" Stay out of my country! Really. I, I experienced it as almost hostile. (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

In these initial expatriate impressions, all three seek the familiar cultural signals that would ordinarily reassure them in social interactions, but of course these have been supplanted by an entirely new context and signal set. It is this initial experience of being entirely at sea, out of place, or even unwelcome, where "everything here that happens to foreigners is stressful" (I\*Crosby 2007), that drives foreigners to connect with others. Any random encounter with another foreigner presents an opportunity for obtaining information from someone who shares and understands these natural feelings of displacement and disorientation, and whose similarity

engenders a sense of familiarity or intimacy, even when they have just met. In addition to their fellow *waegooks*, foreign teachers turn to technological and traditional sources of information.

Foreigners find easily accessible information on Korea in the numerous travel guides on the country. The selection of travel guides available today is enormous, including The Rough Guide to Korea (Paxton 2005), Insight Guide: Korea (Le Bas 2003), Frommer's South Korea (C. Lee 2010) and Lonely Planet: Korea (Robinson, Bender and Whyte 2006), to note just a few. Many are updated annually, which ensures a surplus of outdated copies in which the basic information on Korea and its culture are essentially identical. While each book contains slightly different recommendations, travel guides provide a great deal of relevant information in a conveniently condensed format. All highlight popular tourist destinations, give a synopsis of Korean history and an overview of customs and culture, provide statistics on population, GDP, industries and food production, note international events such as the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the 2004 FIFA World Cup in soccer (co-hosted with Japan), or the 2018 PyeongChang Winter Olympics, provide tips on public transportation, etc. Important historical figures are profiled, and foreign teachers soon learn who King Sejong was (in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the ill-suited Chinese script was still in use, he commissioned scholars to create an alphabet specific to the Korean language) and what Admiral Yi did (he is famous for creating the first iron-clad ships and using them to rout the Japanese along the coast during the 1592 invasion). Most cover the basics of communicating in Korean, which, due to its phonetic alphabet (thanks to King Sejong, above), is much easier to decipher than Chinese or Japanese. Many foreign teachers make their first forays into learning Korean by memorizing the alphabet and some of the basic phrases found in their travel guides. The books include descriptions of Korean foods, how to order them, and which you are likely to enjoy or may wish to avoid. There are also more specific city guides

such as Lonely Planet: Seoul (Robinson 2006) and useful learning aids like Lonely Planet's Korean Phrasebook (Kim and Dowling 1995) providing further information for their readers. The most common text is Facts About Korea, a small book produced by the Korean Ministry of Information, which is updated every few years and provided free of charge on request.

Other texts offer more detailed information on living in Korea than the average travel guide, making them of special interest to individuals who plan an extended stay. Korea – Culture Smart!: The Essential Guide to Customs and Culture (Hoare 2005), Korean Patterns (Crane 1999), and Culture Shock!: Korea (Hur and Hur 2000), for example, explain what to expect, how to interact appropriately in various social situations, and clarify behavior that seems mysterious to foreigners. Culture Shock!: Korea includes sections dealing with “The Korean Way of Seeing,” “The Life Circle,” “Interacting with Koreans,” and “Doing Business in Korea” (Hur and Hur 2000). Even more specific, if difficult to find, are texts such as American/Korean Contrasts: Patterns and Expectations in the U.S. and Korea (Oak and Martin 2004) or Korea Calling: The Essential Handbook for Teaching English and Living in Korea (Specht and Freeborne 1996). The former focuses on culture, customs and traditions, comparing specific examples from each culture and explaining some of the differences in philosophy behind them. Korea Calling is designed to meet the needs of foreign teachers in Korea, but was produced independently in a limited print run, so a used copy is rare and expensive these days. Generally speaking, travel guides and books on Korea are passed on from teacher to teacher or left behind, as are many other travel guidebooks on countries in the region, since most people have little use for them once they return home. For many foreign teachers, their earliest knowledge of Korea, its culture, its people, and its history has been drawn from one or more of these books and, combined with their own experiences and what they are told by friends, Korean students, and colleagues, this

hodgepodge of information contributes to their overall understanding of their circumstances and environment.

Dependence on touristic texts can be problematic, however. Edward Said criticizes what he calls a “textual attitude” that develops from relying on books for understanding of another culture, as “it seems a common human failing to prefer the schematic authority of a text to the disorientations of direct encounters with the human” (1994, 93). He describes two factors that favor such a reliance, the first being direct experience “at close quarters [with] something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant,” where one can either turn to previous experience for guidance or to what one may have read (1994, 93). According to Said, travel books are constructed as they are “precisely because of this human tendency to fall back on a text when the uncertainties of travel in strange parts seem to threaten one’s equanimity” (1994, 93). The appearance of success, he says, is the second factor that fosters the “textual attitude.” Acting on what one reads, and having success in those actions, inclines one to *believe* them, which in turn reinforces those behaviors (Said 1994, 93). These types of publications, says Said, are not easily dismissed (1994, 94).

Additionally, “such texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe. In time such knowledge and reality produce a tradition, or what Michel Foucault calls a discourse” (Said 1994, 94). Thus, if a foreign teacher is preconditioned by texts to construe a behavior in a particular way, it is possible that their own actions elicit the expected Korean response, or that their expectations lead them to infer meaning and react in specific ways. In addition to travel guides as texts, the narratives newcomers hear from their more experienced colleagues (which is, of course, where travel texts originate) act upon expectations in the same manner, particularly if the new arrival has done no research of their own. Their reactions and

those of Koreans will fall into predicted patterns, reinforcing their belief in and reliance on information gleaned from texts. Lastly, most of these texts are written for an audience of fellow travelers, which is reflected in their tone and perspective. These characteristics make Western texts about Asia problematic and contribute to the resilience of preconceptions regarding Korean culture that are so difficult for many foreign teachers to overcome. Some never do.

So, foreign English teachers arrive in Asia via myriad routes and work there for diverse reasons. Not all are trained educators and many have no ambition to continue in such a capacity, but “the demand for instruction at all levels by people who happen to speak English as their mother tongue is enormous and set to continue increasing for the foreseeable future” (Griffith 2003, 9). For those with limited job prospects in their home countries, teaching English abroad offers a range of enticements and incentives, including the attraction of living in Asia and further travel abroad, profitable employment, the chance to gain work experience in a foreign setting, and so on. As one teacher describes the path he took:

I was at a crossroads, not unlike many people who come to teach English in Korea. I’d previously been working and living in Canada. Work over there kind of dried up and I noticed an advertisement in a newspaper for a teaching job in Korea, and that was it. It was kind of a weird destiny, I guess. (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 248)

The epiphany or sense of destined outcome is a common motif in narratives about coming to Korea and individuals often emphasize the impulsiveness with which such choices are made, saying things like: “It was a complete spur-of-the-moment decision to come to Korea” (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 255); “it seemed like a neat idea to possibly go out to Korea” (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 263); or “it’s just I knew that this was [my chance], that’s that thing of throwing caution to the wind” (I\*Crosby 2007). My own narrative begins with such an epiphany and I recall clearly the moment when it came to me: sitting in the car with my mother, on our way to do errands, and reading the college career bulletin for my undergraduate school that had just



come in the mail. I saw the ad for jobs in Korea and said to her, "I know where I'm going to work" and several weeks later, I landed in Seoul. It is typical of many foreign teachers' stories of their journey to Korea.

One of my informants, Greta Wilson, was stunned both by the suddenness of her decision to go to Korea and the speed with which it came about, saying:

It was like, I had never even thought of anything in Asia, ever, you know. It was just like I click[ed] on this [website's] pop-up [advertisement] about Korea and it's like, boom, I'm...here in like four to six weeks! So, it's like, Ah! Okay! Yeah, my life just took...this really sudden turn... (I\*Wilson 2007)<sup>4</sup>

Despite initiating the chain of events that brought her to Korea, she is still amazed by the rapidity of the changes in her life, and perhaps by her own decision to follow through with it. Others among my informants, including Melanie Steyn, Ken Harrison, Kim Crosby, and Greta Wilson, cited losing a job or having difficulty finding work as the impetus behind choosing to work in Korea. The lack of awareness about what they are getting into is underscored when they express misgivings about whether there will be running water or a clean living environment (R. Harris 2004, 264). One *hagwon* teacher revealed, "I had no idea what I was getting into. I had no idea about Korea; I hadn't read anything about Korea; I hadn't talked to anyone about Korea; I just had absolutely no notion whatsoever" (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 256-257). In some sense, this ignorance only adds to the sense of daring in making such a choice, venturing out to the unknown in the spirit of explorers and adventurers of past ages.

Once in South Korea, many are at a loss as to how to adapt to their new homes and because of the itinerant nature of the English teacher "industry," there are few resources at their disposal to aid them in this. Informants clearly felt the lack when they discussed those early days,

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<sup>4</sup> While it is impossible to convey all the nuances of an oral conversation in written text, I have tried to add dimension to the transcriptions by underlining words and passages to indicate places where the informant has brought emphasis to his or her words through the use of intonation, rising pitch, or volume.

saying, “I didn’t know what Korea was going to be like” and “I was feeling, you know, I’m alone in the world and I’m far away from home” (I\*M. Steyn 2007) or “I had no support system really” (I\*Crosby 2007) and describe the types of experiences that heighten these feelings. The anticipation that accompanies preparation and departure for Korea fades as the newly arrived teacher is confronted with social isolation, public scrutiny, and lack of access to resources and support. While employers would like to retain teachers for longer periods of time, the fact is that it takes a certain tolerance of, or obliviousness to, social isolation to be comfortable with an extended stay. It is not uncommon for foreigners to speak of their apartments as places of refuge from the Korean world, a welcome sanctuary from the pressures of constant attention and expectations.

### **1.3 The English Teaching Enterprise in Korea**

Based on my experience, those taking positions as English teachers are usually in their mid-20s to mid-30s, educated, single, predominantly Caucasian, and drawn from English-speaking nations around the world. For many, it is their first experience of traveling or living abroad and for some it will be the beginning of years spent overseas. Prior to widespread accessibility of the Internet, teachers were generally recruited through university channels, whether through career services or through ads in campus publications or regional newspapers. Occasionally, individuals arrived through less conventional channels, perhaps after serving a religious mission, being stationed in Korea with the U.S. military, or while backpacking through the region. There are still “headhunters” in South Korea, those whose only business is finding teachers to fill vacancies in academies and diverse businesses, but more teachers and employers are turning to the Internet when it comes to finding or filling a position. Most of my informants found their positions via online advertisements or postings on websites, as Greta Wilson did.



Figure 5: Market shopping is challenging and even after years of living in Korea, many offerings remain a mystery. For example, items I recognize here are various types of *kimchi* (top), *Yeon-geun-jorim* (candied lotus root, bottom right), *bokkeum myeolchi* (tiny dried anchovies, on right, above lotus root) and *kongjaban* (black beans in soy sauce and sugar, center). (Photo by K. Roubo 2007)



Figure 6: The view towards my apartment building from the top of my street. It is confusing, even visually overwhelming, when you do not know where you are going. (Photo by K. Roubo, 2006.)

For entry-level positions at *hagwons*, it is relatively easy to line up a job and Internet access has revolutionized this fluid job market. Internet service was new and still relatively rare when I left Korea in 1997, but when I searched for a position in 2005, the Internet was the first place I looked. The easy accessibility of the Internet in Korea and the widespread use of laptops have not only changed the landscape for job hunters, they have changed life in Korea for the foreign population and, consequently, impacted the nature of the network of associations formed. When asked if someone had helped her find her teaching position in Korea, Melanie Steyn replied, “I found it for myself...I’ll tell you how? I went to Dave’s ESL, like everyone else!” (I\*M. Steyn 2007). She then laughed, because the answer was obvious to anyone who has been in Korea for any length of time. Dave’s ESL Café website (see Sperling) is well-known in the community for its job boards and information. Some foreigners look to this online resource when job hunting, brainstorming for lesson plans or looking for teaching materials, when seeking explanations of behavior and customs they find puzzling, or when their contract is nearing its end and they begin to consider moving on to another position.

In Korea, *hagwons* exist anywhere there is a community with the resources to support the expense of housing and paying a foreign national, and are numerous in densely populated, urban areas. Most foreign teachers usually begin by working long hours in *hagwons*, teaching children in the K-12 range and, depending on the location of their institute, can be completely isolated within a Korean community. *Hagwons*, similar to “cram schools” in Japan (Feiler 1991, 180), provide supplemental instruction after school. Courses such as math, science, and other foreign languages are offered, but English is seen as the key to business and employment opportunities for social, financial, or political advancement. “English is the international language of science, of air traffic control and to a very large extent of trade and export” (Griffith 2003, 9) and as such

is redolent with a sense of promise for the ambitious. Even the South Korean government has gotten on board, committing to increasing the number of foreign teachers in the public school system in order to promote English language learning, yet another boost to an already strong market for foreign educators.

As discussed previously, work schedules at *hagwons* can be erratic and subject to change, making it difficult to plan activities, especially with *waegooks* who work at other schools. It is also typical for *hagwons* to have a six-day work week and to squeeze in more classes during longer school breaks. These conditions render free time especially precious to foreign teachers and unexpected demands on their time are generally considered unreasonable impositions. This impacted my ability to find informants, I believe, as several people I met in the informant community simply had other plans and/or no wish to spend that valuable time doing interviews. In trying to find additional informants online more recently, while about eight people expressed interest and willingness to participate, only two actually did so (Holmes and Bilodeau).

Outside the public school system, there is no overarching authority and no official connection among the *hagwons*, which compete for students, though there are some franchised schools that foster a positive reputation by requiring their franchisees to maintain certain standards. These tend to be larger enterprises located in urban areas and usually employ multiple instructors, Korean and foreign, to handle the numerous classes they offer. “Newbies” (or “greenhorns”) hired by such schools stand a better chance of having employers accustomed to their needs and of working with other foreigners who can show them how to go on. While there are also employment opportunities with corporations, airlines, junior colleges and universities, and in the entertainment industry, these positions are generally filled by individuals who have

successfully made it through at least one year of teaching at the academies, “survivors” who are referred to these jobs via connections made during that year.

*Hagwons* are a leading topic of conversation within the community, but foreign teachers generally do not visit each other’s places of work. Socialization occurs outside work, further emphasizing a sense of belonging within the group and separation from Korean society. Having spoken with foreign teachers who worked in all sorts of *hagwons*, I am confident that those I worked at were typical. My first *hagwon* job, in 1994, was in a low-quality, inexpensive school and the second, from 1995-1997, was at a first-rate franchise institute. A brief comparison of the two *hagwons* gives a sense of the range of working environments that new teachers might encounter. The first school, which I will refer to as Buk-Do Hagwon, was in Jeonju and located within easy walking distance of the apartment where we were housed. Unlike that newly constructed, contemporary apartment, the school was comprised of a couple of floors in an old, rundown building. The students here were low-income, offspring of taxi drivers, shop workers, and others for whom it was the best they could afford, some of their children being the most motivated I ever taught. Made of concrete, this *hagwon* was dimly lit, dingy, and had no central heating – in the winter, the classrooms were warmed with kerosene heaters set in the center of the room, which meant a scramble for seats close to them at the start of each class. (I can still recall the smell of kerosene permeating the damp, cold school.) The only cooling in the summer was from a few ceiling fans here and there. The *hagwon* had classes in math, history, Chinese, and physics, as well as English, and class sizes were relatively large – as many as thirty students, depending on room capacity – using all available seating. There were few supplies for teaching, but this was not much of a problem for us as, for the most part, we were not teaching.

I was the only foreign teacher there when I started, but a new foreign teacher was brought in each month for the next three months, until there were four of us sharing the apartment. Each foreign teacher was assigned a particular Korean teacher with whom to “team teach” for the day. This consisted of going with them to classes, waiting while they lectured in Korean for most of the period, then standing and reading out English words, phrases, or sentences for the students to repeat. Between classes, the foreign teachers sat together and waited while the Korean teachers prepped for their next class. At first I was at a loss to understand why I was there, as a tape player and some cassettes would have easily served the same purpose and been much cheaper. I came to understand that our purpose lay in our exotic appeal as foreigners (all of our images were used in advertising to promote the school) and the misguided belief that learning English from a native speaker would promote a better grasp of the language. Any plausibility the latter might have had was completely negated by the manner in which we “taught”; again, a tape player would have served as well.

I learned early on that corporal punishment was still employed in Korea, both at school and in the home. My second journal entry on Korea, written just seven days after my arrival, documents both my thoughts on the corporal punishment I was seeing and my attempt at cultural relativism. Cultural relativism argues that conduct should be judged by the standards of the society in which it happens, rather than by the standards of an outside observer who does not understand that culture. In my journal, I observed:

Sung-jin [my employer's eldest son] got a good whack of the stick from Granny [my employer's mother] tonight. He cried for the longest time, but still kept on aggravating her. I felt bad, but it's not my place to comment. This is a whole different culture, where teachers still whack students with a stick if they want. From what I've seen on TV here, this sort of thing is still very common and accepted. Husbands slap wives, wives hit kids, kids whack each other. Rather strange for a well-mannered people. (February 11, 1994)

In telling myself that “this sort of thing is still very common and accepted,” I was reminding myself that my own culture had had similar standards in the past and attempting to ignore behavior that I saw as wrong. This created an internal conflict, however, and contributed to my feelings of stress and alienation, exacerbating the culture shock I was already experiencing. While I did not witness corporal punishment daily, it occurred often enough to upset me and make me speak to my Korean co-teacher about it. I believe the abuse happened out of our view once they realized that we foreign teachers disapproved.

The physical punishment at this school ranged in severity and, sadly, the students both accepted it and knew what it would be and when to expect it. Students who made mistakes on spelling tests or homework had to stand at their desks with their hands held out, palms up with fingers hyper-extended, and wait for the teacher to come around and strike them sharply across the fingers with a ruler or dowel. For more serious infractions, as in the case of two boys who broke ceiling fans by sticking their umbrellas into the turning blades, a bigger stick was required. They were brought to the office, lectured to by several teachers and the school owner, then made to lean with their palms on a desk while their teacher used a large dowel (perhaps two or three centimeters in diameter) to strike their buttocks. Punishment was usually at the teachers’ discretion, though in the aforementioned case, wider involvement was unavoidable as many in the school had witnessed the transgression and were talking about it. In response to the foreign teachers’ shock, dismay, and critical questions were explanations that the children were accustomed to the system and would be ungovernable without it. Further protests were met with lectures on the hazards of cultural relativity and, again and again, we were told, “You cannot understand; you are not Korean.” Towards the end of my tenure at this school, after half of our four foreign teachers had made a midnight run, the remaining colleague and I were given one



class each to teach on our own. We found that it took some time for students to adapt to our style of discipline, and Korean teachers were adamant that we needed to use a stick, but we persisted and developed methods that enabled us to maintain control of our classes.

From August 1995 to March 1997, I taught at Nam-Do Hagwon, which was dramatically different from Buk-Do. Perhaps because it was part of a franchise with a procedure for start-up, the school itself was newly remodeled, centrally located, cleaner, better organized, and more flexible in its approach. Although there were only three teachers at the start, the school rapidly expanded over the course of the next few months. I was one of those first three teachers; the other two were certified to teach English as a Second Language (ESL). They were the only ones with ESL training, but there were teachers with educational degrees and experience among those hired later. Given the general acceptance of any degree as qualification to teach in a *hagwon*, this was an unusual concentration of trained educators. Because I'd been in Korea before, I was at first a primary source of information regarding getting by and getting around in Korea for my newly arrived colleagues. In return, the ESL-trained teachers taught me to construct pedagogically sound lessons for teaching ESL. Each teacher was paired with another in a two-bedroom apartment in one of two adjacent buildings of an old urban housing project from the 1960s, which allowed for easy visiting, shopping, or commuting together. While our schedules were always changing, there was always someone at work with whom to talk, go out for coffee or lunch, discuss ideas for lectures and activities, problem-solve, or make plans with for the weekends.

Another factor contributing to a more positive atmosphere was that the owner of the institute was not just a business man intent on profit, but a former teacher who really wanted to have his own English language *hagwon*. The fact that he was an educator may account for the

number of well-qualified teachers he employed. A devout Buddhist, he was not a believer in corporal punishment and supported our efforts to maintain discipline without it. The corporate franchise produced coordinated learning materials, including textbooks for the students, teacher's guides, and supplemental materials such as audio recordings, oversized story books, and videos. Each text was designed to last for a set number of weeks, after which the student would advance to the next level/text. Teachers received two weeks' training at the corporate training center in Los Angeles, California, and then were assigned to a school on arrival in Korea. Since I had stayed with a friend in Korea while job hunting there, I was actually hired in Korea, met the director of my school, and visited it prior to going for training.

Being in on the ground floor was a significant advantage, because it allowed us to learn with the students as they progressed through all the required levels. For the three teachers employed at the school's start up, this meant that the same lesson plan could be used for future repetitions of the same classes. We were then able to develop lesson plans for subsequent levels as we worked through the series of books. For those teachers who arrived later, the situation was more complicated as no teacher was assigned to a single level; all teachers were instructing at multiple levels at the same time. The school was successful, too, so the overall student population was increasing, as were the numbers of students per class – from as few as five or six in a class in the early days to as many as twelve or fifteen, numbers that were still significantly lower than those at Buk-Do Hagwon. Teachers arriving just six months later had to master lesson plans for two or three different classes every day, adapt to the culture, manage their classrooms, and, though lesson plans were given to them, it was demanding. The use of supplemental materials such as games and TV shows increased significantly.

Each teacher was provided with a place in which to work and keep teaching materials, though as the school expanded and needed more teachers, there was a consequential reduction in the space each teacher had. We went from having a large desk in our own cubicles when there were just three of us to sharing a small, built-in desk in rows of three when the number of foreign teachers doubled. Nam-Do Hagwon was located in Gwangju, a larger city (population 1.5 million vs. Jeonju's 500,000), with a greater number of foreign teachers living there. The three teachers who were present from the start went from sharing nearly all of our free time together to seeing each other primarily at work. One of them developed friendships with several Koreans and, from the connections he made through them, spent much of his free time doing private tutoring in English, an illegal activity that would eventually get him deported. The other was active in church groups and would bring her friends from church to our gatherings or invite us to join them on their outings. As the foreign teacher cohort increased in size, more individuals sought social contact with people other than their coworkers which, again, had a lot to do with personalities and compatibility. When there is a choice, you can be choosy. This was in contrast with the Buk-Do Hagwon, where all four foreign teachers spent much of their time together for the first several months, until two of them left.

At Nam-Do Hagwon, then, there was a more complicated teaching load and schedule, which grew increasingly convoluted over time, but even with multiple assigned texts and levels, each teacher had a degree of control over his or her own classes. The company-sponsored training program intended to familiarize teachers with the materials they would use in the classroom also had the side effect of helping teachers to establish connections with others who would be at various franchises throughout Korea, as I did in becoming friends with a teacher who was assigned to a school in Seoul. Of the dozen people who trained with me in Los Angeles,

I was the only one who had already been to Korea and I was inundated with questions about what to expect. Fulfilling my responsibilities as a member of the foreign teacher/*waegook* network, I answered as best I could, shared narratives of what could go wrong, and gave an overview of how to cope with the cultural contact.

It was interesting to watch the other teachers in my training class trying to establish a rudimentary network from the small group that comprised our class, but I felt the difference in our situations. I did not establish multiple new associations in preparation for being set adrift. Again, personality played a role in which individuals I remained in touch with once we were back in Korea, but for the first time I felt no pressing need to expand my network further. I already had friends in Korea, a rudimentary command of the language, and knew how to get around. My finances now allowed for frequent contact with home, and I no longer shared the anxiety that isolation and uncertainty produce in newcomers. No two teachers from the training group were employed by the same franchise school, meaning we would be scattered all over Korea, making socializing and information sharing, in the days before Internet access was ubiquitous, either inconvenient or pointless. I remained in contact with several for a brief period, but we had little in common and it was not long before I lost touch with them. Of all the potential comrades I met during the training period, I remained friends with just the one individual and we kept in touch well after we had left Korea. Generally, I preferred instead to socialize with a couple of my colleagues at the new academy, occasionally travelling to Seoul or Daegu to visit with my old friends and buy food or clothing unavailable in Gwangju, a long journey which I felt the need to do less and less frequently. My experiences at these two *hagwons* represent a typical arc of adaptation among successful foreign teachers. I went from knowing nothing and having deplorable employers at a dreadful *hagwon* (though, as noted, working with some wonderful

students) to being employed at a reputable institute and having a clearer understanding of the culture and my place in it.

As mentioned previously, many foreign teachers cite financial circumstances as a driving force in their decision to come to Korea, whether due to job scarcity, lack of work experience, or other fiscal obligations. As Margaret Scates put it, “The money’s good. The work’s hard, um, but the money’s good...I can go to Asia and live just fine and make money and save money and do what I like to do” (I\*Scates 2007). Melanie Steyn had difficulty finding teaching work in South Africa after taking time off to help her mother move to a retirement community. Ken Harrison lost his teaching job in Canada after budget cuts led to a reduction in faculty at his school. Such considerations play a significant role in increasing their willingness to travel abroad, to gamble on a job far from all that is familiar. Greta Wilson, a Canadian, had applied for an assistant teacher position in the United Kingdom, but learned it had fallen through at the last minute. She came across the ad for a Korean school that same day. Like many others before them, they found themselves at loose ends and needing work when an opportunity to teach in Korea arose. Knowing they would earn “good money” and have opportunities to travel helps foreign teachers put up with the discomforts that living in an alien environment bring and influences their desire to return after that first year, once they have learned the ropes.

Foreign teachers arrive in South Korea knowing little of the language, placing them in a position of dependency. They must modify their foodways, as preparing the foods they are accustomed to is complicated by lack of equipment or supplies. Food provisioning itself is a challenge at first, when they do not know where the nearest street market or grocery store is. In a high-rise environment, exploring on foot is part of the process of emplacement, because without knowledge of their surroundings, they will not know what their resources are. Ovens are not part

of a traditional Korean kitchen, which means they are uncommon and thus expensive. Additionally, shipping one home at the end of a stay is impractical, making the expense harder to justify. Most foreigners adapt their foodways to the equipment at hand, learning to make do with toaster ovens, crock pots, and coffee makers. Adapting necessitates learning the language, at least enough to shop for supplies and get to and from work without problems. In the early days, employers often designate Korean employees to help foreigners, especially in doing paperwork for and making visits to the Immigration Office. There is a limit, however, to how long this help is extended and an expectation that the foreigner will learn how to manage, especially as the Korean employee is generally expected to help without falling behind in his or her other responsibilities.

Teacher training may not be a prerequisite for foreign English teachers in South Korea, but “as the profile of the English language has risen, so has the profile of the profession which teaches it, and the number of qualified and experienced English teachers has increased along with the demand” (Griffith 2003, 11). This means there are ever-increasing numbers of individuals with TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages)<sup>5</sup> degrees or certification in the English-teaching industry, a rarity when I first went to Korea. The demand for teachers, though, means that less qualified applicants can find work somewhere in Korea’s extensive ESL market. Universities bring in foreign teaching professionals to run camps or cover extra courses during the busy summer breaks, though their visas are only good for a few months. Schools with multiple teachers may make the transition easier for new coworkers, but even at

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<sup>5</sup> TESOL is an organization for those Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. They hold conventions annually and issue the journal TESOL Quarterly, comprised of research addressing the particular concerns of second-language learners and related pedagogy and research. KOTESOL is the Korean version of the organization, functioning on a smaller scale, with similar purposes and conventions. Along with TESOL, other acronyms in common use among foreign English teachers and the teaching community as a whole include: ESL, or English as a Second Language; EFL, English as a Foreign Language; and TEFL, or Teaching English as a Foreign Language. Both certification and degrees in ESL, TEFL and TESOL are offered in most English-speaking countries today.

these it is not uncommon for several (or all) of the teachers to depart *en masse* for better opportunities, as happened with the group I studied for this thesis. One of the departing teachers described the situation, saying, “They have so many new teachers, they’re completely overwhelmed. And they will be for the next year” (I\*Scates 2007). Six other teachers had left the university at the same time she did, some for better opportunities, some to travel throughout Asia until their funds ran out (at which point they might return to begin saving again) and others left Korea to return permanently to their homelands. This left both the English department and its associated on-campus *hagwon* short-handed and its remaining foreign teachers struggling to carry the work forward while training new teachers brought in to fill the gaps.

New arrivals are under pressure to adjust quickly so the school appears to move forward without a hitch. They are also expected to begin working as soon as possible after their arrival, sometimes as soon as the following day. There is little time to recover from jet lag or to acclimate oneself, which exacerbates many of the interpersonal and intercultural difficulties the newcomer experiences. Moreover, the absence of social support results in additional stress and anxiety. All of these factors provide impetus for the foreign teacher to reach out to others to get help in coping with the new environment, tapping into extant social networks and establishing ties in order to survive. There is sometimes a whiff of desperation or relief when you are the first foreigner a new teacher encounters, followed by a near-breathless introduction, exchange of contact information, and as many questions as they can get in. It is this need that promotes the rapid formation of networks and sub-groups in the foreign teacher community in South Korea, where any encounter on the street becomes significant and presents the opportunity for the formation of new connections and conduits.

In many ways, the initial experiences of foreign teachers resemble the rites of passage examined by van Gennep (1960). Whether they come to Korea alone, with a friend, or as part of a couple, foreign teachers are separated from all that is familiar, entering what van Gennep termed a “liminal” state, the first stage of a rite of passage. This sense of liminality persists, as it is nearly impossible to alter one’s status to something more permanent, leaving them subject to an enduring tension. They are subjected to a series of trials, which, while not formalized rites or rituals, are similarly challenging and uncomfortable, as expressed in the narratives foreign teachers tell about them. The commonalities among their narratives of personal experience foster a sense of intimacy and group belonging, grounded in adversity and a shared understanding of what it is to be a disempowered, white foreigner in Korea. Belonging and emplacement alleviate but do not eliminate the tension of liminality in a place where they can never assimilate. After their time in Korea, they return to their home cultures and reintegrate in society as in the final stage of a rite of passage. Having experienced all this, on reentering society they may be perceived as having achieved higher status, as world travelers and expatriates who have presumably learned something through their experiences abroad. However, while there are certain parallels with rites of passage, it is a stretch to categorize the experience as such.

Following Victor Turner, I believe that in this case “spatial separation from the familiar and habitual is an example of [a liminal state]” (1975, 196) and that foreign teachers exist “betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life” (1975, 273). This ongoing exclusion from normal social categories in Korea perpetuates the liminal state. Although Cohen unambiguously delineates the obstacles to using the rite-of-passage model (as proposed by van Gennep and later elaborated on by Turner) in studies of backpackers and tourists (Cohen 2004, 398), this does not necessarily preclude the existence of liminality in the transitory experiences



of travelers and expatriates. Neither does it alter the potential for the establishment of a sense of belonging among the individuals sharing those experiences, particularly in the case of expatriates who have the opportunity for longer-term relations with their fellow foreigners. Whether or not the depth of the connections made is equivalent to a true rite of passage, it is nevertheless the case that under the isolating conditions inherent in travel individuals will *feel* the liminality of their position and will endeavor to create bonds with their fellows.

While there is clear evidence for liminality among foreign teachers, the case for *communitas* is shakier. Turner describes *communitas* as “an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community or even communion of equal individuals” (1969, 96). He emphasizes that “it is in liminality that *communitas* emerges, if not as a spontaneous expression of sociability, at least in a cultural and normative form” (1975, 232), as it does among initiands, pilgrims, or expatriates. Amit-Talai’s research corroborates liminality among expatriates, as he says, “A number of expatriate professionals described their situation in Cayman as a state of *limbo*” (1997, 328, emphasis mine) and that “after a number of years in Cayman, some people felt distanced from and even somewhat alien in their country of origin” (1997, 328). Melanie Steyn described her sense of displacement in one of our interviews, saying:

So, yeah, I think we do a terrible thing to ourselves in a way...there are now two countries at which I am not at home. And one of them is supposed to be my own country. But I’ve tasted so much that was different ... but I miss some things about Korea [when I’m home] and I’ve been changed by the experience, so home just isn’t home? (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

She is cognizant of the price of her dislocation, and the consequences of being in *limbo* while time continues to pass at home, but weighs it against what she’s gained. At the same time, as mentioned previously, the expatriates in the Cayman Islands felt disinclined to invest much, emotionally or financially, in a place where they were not fully integrated, a sentiment shared by

many (if not most) foreign teachers in Korea. This means that a long-term stay without permanent settlement is associated with feelings of alienation both at home and abroad, a protracted state of liminality accentuating the sense of connection to anyone experiencing that same condition.

It seems likely that the drive for *communitas*, which Turner considers a fundamental human need, underlies the efforts of individuals to connect with their fellow teachers. In the everyday lives of foreign teachers in South Korea, there are incidents that affect them negatively, threaten their sense of security or identity, and/or expose their vulnerability. In the sharing of these events through personal narratives, they experience moral support and a sense of intimacy as fellow *waegooks* follow and understand the events they describe and, in turn, relate their own tales of comparable experiences and a sense of sameness results. While they have not shared in the events themselves, their parallel experiences allow them to feel a sense of belonging with their fellows that echoes the sense of *communitas* that rites of passage engender. If they share nothing else in common, they are all *waegooks*. These bonds are tenuous, and grounded as much in similarities of worldview and ethnicity as they are in similarities of experience, but they function as a sort of pseudo-*communitas* for the time that foreign teachers are together in Korea. If it is true that “[p]eople can go crazy” if they suppress their need for *communitas* (Turner 1975, 266), then it casts efforts toward group identity and belonging under these conditions in a rather different light.

Foreign teachers in South Korea, for the most part, comprise an ethnically comparable, though not homogenous, population of individuals employed in similar capacities, marked by their whiteness. Even today it is still rare for people of color to find employment as teachers there. As a community, foreign teachers do not necessarily exhibit those particular characteristics

typical of many occupational groups. However, they are linked by occupation and residence in Korea and are, in common with the office workers Dundes and Pagter described, “a folk bound together by the mutuality of the unhappy experiences in battling ‘the system,’ whether that system be the machinery of government or the maze where one works” (1975, xxi). In the case of foreign teachers, it is the cultural environment in which they find themselves that provides the unhappy experiences that lead to a sense of being in it together. Archie Green has asserted that “[b]ecause work is a pervasive cultural influence in our lives, it is intrinsically compelling, and needs no special justification for folkloric attention” (1978, 81). By such standards, a group of teachers certainly qualifies as an occupational folk group.

The group I study in this thesis is linked by a shared occupation pursued in a specific locale, but falls outside the scope of previous definitions of occupational folklore. If, as McCarl asserts, we agree that “the core of any occupational culture lies in the work techniques needed to succeed on the job” (1985, 14), then defining this primarily as an occupational folk group is problematic. Korean employers hire those with teacher training more commonly than in the past, but it is no prerequisite for employment nor is it any guarantee that the individual will be an effective teacher in the classroom. Employers are pleased when the teacher they have hired is popular and adapts well to the cultural milieu and work environment. Seldom do foreign teachers discuss pedagogy, even more rarely do they observe one another actually working, and the success of the individual generally has little effect on the *waegook* population, particularly given the high rate of turnover. They are dispersed in schools and *hagwons* throughout Korea, use a variety of teaching materials and systems, and perform in a range of work environments. While most individuals in the group work as English teachers, this is not the only occupation represented and it is not a prerequisite to membership in the community, as demonstrated by the

editorial staff at the publishing house where I worked (though all there began in South Korea as English teachers). Moreover, for many foreign teachers, the work defines neither their occupation in general, as the majority have not been trained for and do not aspire to be teachers, nor does the job (pedagogy, for example) per se seem overly relevant in group discussions.

Michael Owen Jones proposed expanding our understanding of occupational folklore to consider its implications in organizational behavior and how “members relate to the total social organization of a formal institution in which specialized activities are part of a complex pattern of interrelationships” (1991, 31). Jones states that:

[A] sense of community, collective identity, or common purpose is generated through narrating, ritualizing, or celebrating; how beliefs are communicated and what their impact on behavior and attitude is, particularly during crises; and how folklore points to areas of stress or strain in organizations, why it helps individuals cope, and what the ramifications are for organizational design and administration. (1991, 32)

Such a description seems fitting for the activities of foreign teachers, as does his assertion that “organizing is a fundamental human endeavor” (Jones 1991, 33). Clearly, in order for a gathering of foreign teachers to occur, someone must initiate it, contact others to spread the word, choose a location, date, and time, and so on, all of which constitutes organizing within the community. What this conceptualization does not account for among foreign teachers in Korea is the fact that participants are employed in separate organizational structures, may be unknown to each other, are drawn from disparate workplaces and locales, and that each coalescence in groupness, on the whole, exists independently of other such events.

Just as McCarl’s concept of technique grounded in “expertise and esoteric knowledge” (1978b, 148) being the “shaping principle of an occupation” (1978b, 149) fails to wholly encompass the nature of the foreign teacher folk group in Korea, so too does Jones’ organizational approach fall short. In order to pursue this study along the lines Jones presents, I

would have needed to seek “direct participation of a variety of members who represent different levels and functions of the organization” (1991, 37). Foreign teachers work for diverse establishments in Korea and largely occupy just one level and function within those organizations – they are foreign teachers of English as a Second Language, a subordinate rung in the faculty hierarchy.

Not only does Jones’ methodology presume that the intent of such research is proactive, constituting an effort to “fix the problem” within the organization(s), it also represents an undertaking of extraordinary scale in my case, to say the least. His approach presents a model that would be at odds with Korean work culture, with its emphasis on top-down organization and an organizational reliance on a well-defined hierarchy. Implementing Jones’ suggestions would have required the inclusion of many of my informants’ Korean colleagues, employers, and associated staff in my research, which would have demanded supplementary resources (translators, for a start). Additionally, I seriously doubt it would have much impact in “resolving problems” since it would constitute an outsider, a foreigner, appearing to critique and petition for changes within Korean organizational structures. I can only imagine the resistance to this approach. Such an endeavor is simply beyond the abilities and means of most researchers, Korean and non-Korean alike, and is one which would have vastly complicated the scope of the thesis. While I believe this thesis can foster understanding within the foreign teacher community of how their folklore facilitates adaptation and understanding of how best to operate in the culture in which they are immersed, I have no such illusions regarding its impact on Korean employers or the organizational structures of the average *hagwon*. Neither McCarl’s “shop floor approach” (1992, 187) nor Jones’ emphasis on organizations is entirely satisfactory in examining the foreign teacher community, though there are valuable aspects in each.

Firstly, to return to McCarl's definition of occupation, if we expand it to incorporate situational context – making these individuals “foreign teachers residing in Korea,” or *waegooks*, rather than just “teachers” – it makes sense as an occupational folk group. Teachers around the world share work techniques and pedagogical perspectives in common, but there is a set of skills the successful foreign teacher in Korea must possess beyond the usual education. Foreign teachers must be able to engage students and produce positive learning outcomes, *and* they must also appropriately interact with Korean colleagues, tolerate solitary life in an alien environment, avoid making intercultural gaffes, and deal with the consequences when they cannot. Life in Korea requires navigating the necessary bureaucratic processes for legal residence and employment, dealing with language deficiency on a daily basis and, to a great extent, suppressing feelings of frustration resulting from any of these. More importantly, learning appropriate workplace behavior and how to successfully interact with Koreans, without either being steamrollered or coming across as abrasive and demanding, are the most important skills a foreign teacher can possess.

It is this area that comprises the canon of work technique by which foreign teachers judge each other's proficiency, for a foreigner who cannot figure out this aspect of the game is a foreigner who will not be there for long. The sense of collective identity discussed in this thesis is rooted in the successful navigation of the *Korean* social and work milieu. It is evident in discussions of *hagwons* and their workings, in narratives of each individual's experiences *and how they handled themselves*, and it is on display any time you see a foreigner interacting with any Korean. You can get by with impromptu lessons in class, you can be popular with students or not, but if you cannot work out when to bow, what constitutes good manners, how to control your tone, mannerisms, and facial expressions – in short, if your performance does not conform

to Korean modes – you are not going to be one of the survivors. It is the mastery of the *waegook* canon that underpins foreign teachers’ collective identity: the adapted expatriate who claims ownership of insights to the culture, of insider knowledge regarding both Koreans and expatriate life in Korea, and of the ability to discern authenticity in this milieu. The successful foreign teacher navigates the classroom, understands their employer’s legal obligations, knows who pours the *soju* for whom and why, and knows where to go for the best *kalbi*. The foreigner who shouts at work is a foreigner on his or her way home.

This negotiation of individual and group identity is an important step in finding one’s way when removed from so many of the factors that have previously defined who one is and where one fits. According to social psychologist Karmela Liebkind, “The strategy of unification induces the individual to minimize existing differences between the self and the other with whom he identifies idealistically. In this way categorization is made to fit the values that individual wants to emulate” (1983, 188). Liebkind is referring to an inclination to make subtle changes in perception (or self-perception) when trying to integrate with a group or more closely associate with others, adjustments that promote feelings of identification with others in the social group. By focusing on those factors they share in common and downplaying dissimilarities, a greater sense of identification, and therefore unity and belonging, is engendered. In a sense, foreign teachers narrate themselves into being in these interactions with their fellows, delineating who they are in this new space.

For foreign teachers in Korea, connecting with the folk group may mean overlooking or minimizing differences in nationality, race, politics, religion, age, ethnicity, interests, and so on. When an individual is far from the culture, society, and circumstances that would normally structure differences between self and Other, new strategies for self-definition are required.

Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, in her essay “Studying Immigrant and Ethnic Folklore,” points out:

The experience of culture contact throws aspects of each into high relief, creating what might be called the *cultural foregrounding effect*, as one inevitably compares one’s own ways with those of others, noting similarities and differences. The issue is not the degree of cultural difference involved, objectively speaking, but the social significance attributed to any similarity or difference, however small. (1983, 43-44)

Through emphasizing commonalities with other foreigners, particularly as they contrast with the surrounding population, a sense of one’s self and one’s place is achieved, irrespective of factors such as liminality or nationality. In the isolation of their interstitial position in the Korean milieu, foreign teachers blend in groups wherein individual differences are of less importance than the worldview, experiences, customs, and other characteristics, including whiteness, that they share. Social interaction, narratives critical of Korean cultural patterns, mastery of the canon, and shared stories of trials and tribulations serve as bonds as well as buffers, facilitating friendship formation and reinforcing non-Korean identity. Some of the shared narratives also make clear that white identity and loss of agency are a central, if unacknowledged, problem for many foreign teachers.

This is not an isolated occurrence, as is clear in Goudge’s The Whiteness of Power: Racism in Third World Development and Aid when she says:

In my experience, most discussion with white Westerners who have experienced the “Third World,” whether travelling because of paid employment, or just going on holiday – or even those who have no direct experience, but have read about it – will very quickly shift into a discourse which concentrates on the position of whites, almost invariably as unfairly beleaguered and dominated by their “Third World” hosts. (2003, 26)

Such responses in Korea are backed by centuries of Orientalist attitudes, meticulously described by Edward Said in his landmark text Orientalism, where inferiority of non-whites is assumed as a given when it is not being exoticized for Western consumption. Said asserts, “In a quite constant



way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on [a] flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerners in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (1994, 7, italics in original). Identifying domination of one’s own group is easier than taking a step back to see how your own actions oppress others. Developing a broader perspective becomes even more difficult when coping with a new job and status in a new culture, with all the difficulties these entail. Given the long history of Orientalism that Said describes, it is not surprising that Westerners perceive themselves as the injured party. In the midst of homesickness for one’s own culture and environment, it is simply easier to blame the new surroundings and culture for not being as you expected it to be, for making your life difficult, or compelling you to adapt to a new environment and a position of inferiority.

Gatherings of foreign teachers engender a sense of belonging and comprise a nexus for the dissemination of vital news and data unavailable via other sources. Information on practical issues such as where to find the comfort foods of home (or approximating those from home), clothing to fit (bras, shoes, larger-sized clothing), or other such commodities is shared freely. While perhaps not as mysterious as the “moccasin telegraph” described by Barre Toelken (1995, 47), it was not unusual in the 1990s in Korea to hear of several individuals, none known to the others, meeting at a convenience store because word had gone out that there was “real cheese” in stock. In the knowing, demonstrating, and disseminating of this type of information, foreign teachers assert their expertise in the canon of work technique vis à vis life in Korea and exhibit concern for the comfort and well-being of others in their community. Many Western products are readily available these days, even in small towns, though more esoteric items still require an intensive search or shipment from home. The frequent meetings of foreigners in certain aisles of the supermarket, however, demonstrates that material goods can still exert a draw on Westerners,

and serve as loci for the ongoing creation of connections between expatriates. As one informant put it, “In my first year, I was very lonely because I was the only foreigner in my *hagwon*...so when I met people in the supermarket, we’d be very quick to exchange [phone numbers and addresses]” (I\*M. Steyn 2007), enabling future meetings and connections. The desire for belonging and community is manifest, with newcomers sharing information about themselves in the interests of forming connections in those early days when that need is felt most strongly.

Other more critical sorts of information are also transmitted via the network, either online or face-to-face. For example, South Korean law dictates that *hagwon* and public school English teachers who complete the full term of their contract are entitled to a plane ticket home and a bonus of one month’s pay. This is not information that employers are eager to share with employees, and some teachers do not learn it until they begin participating in social events with other foreigners. Rumors spread about less reputable institutions known to deport employees during the last month of their contracts in order to avoid the considerable expense incurred in providing these rewards. One poster on the Dave’s ESL Café website commented:

The problem lies in many unethical business practices existing in...Korea where people of power just invent laws themselves and pay bribes to get away with illegal operations. Many foreign teachers complained and blacklisted *hagwons*, not because they are immature young adults, but because they are being taken advantage of at the last moment in their contracts...[w]here they fulfill the contract and the school doesn’t pay the final pay, severance, and airfare while giving them a ridiculous hard way to go in their final month with false parent[al] complaints and denigration...I will not hesitate to tell [my employers] they are wrong [if they try this] and publicize on the Internet via another site and [set] up my own site so it comes up when prospective teachers run a search on the *hagwon* name. (soujourner1, 17 April 2007)

A discussion between posters on Dave’s ESL Café further demonstrates this type of information sharing. When creeface posts “I am thinking about applying to wonderland [*hagwon*] in Seoul, bad idea?”, ttompatz quickly replies, “Yes...do a search for ‘wonderland’” (16 June 2008). This brief exchange between posters is enough to serve as a warning to creeface to research the

Wonderland *hagwon* before proceeding any further, an indication of its negative reputation among at least some foreign teachers. By sharing narratives and information regarding both the law and the tactics that may be employed to circumvent it, narrators are contributing to what McCarl might term a “collective envelope of protection” (1985, 181) that is part of the group’s “covert occupational knowledge” (1985, 200). This information has little to do with performance in an occupation and everything to do with surviving in an alien environment, which is inextricably part of the foreign teacher experience.

#### **1.4 Developing Strategies for Conducting Research in Korea**

In order to develop a thorough understanding of the subculture of foreign teachers in South Korea, I wanted to pursue multiple avenues of investigation. I reviewed my journals and ephemera from my days in Korea in the 1990s, hoping they would provide valuable insights to my experience, but while these materials jogged my memories (my address book was a gold mine of lost names), at that stage I believed the data they contained was of limited use for the study I’d envisioned. I thought that letters I sent home might be revealing, but most of the recipients did not save them and those my mother gave me showed that I was writing for a very different audience than the folk group I was part of in Korea. The journal I kept in 1994 was revealing, though, detailing challenges, shocks, and failures during my first few months there. In it I found my own first-year horror stories and, in re-reading them, relived the confusion, frustration, and powerlessness of my own first culture contact with Koreans. As I adjusted, adapted, and socialized more and more with my peers during those days, these feelings diminished and my writing tapered off and then stopped. My last two entries were months apart, amusing and exuberant descriptions of fun excursions with other *waegooks* that had occurred weeks earlier, and had a completely different tone from the first four months. The demarcation of my own transition from isolated, ignorant, anxious newcomer to comfortable expatriate was

clearly laid out in those pages. I went from detailing unhappy incidents and my reactions to them, to having too much fun to bother writing about it. This brief journal of my introduction to expatriate life in Korea allowed me to revisit that time and reflect on how it compared with my informants' experiences.

My plan was to return to South Korea and connect with other foreign teachers and *waegooks* as I had during my years there previously, and to that end I began my Korean job search in the fall of 2005. Several online applications for a position as an English professor failed to bring results, so I joined an organization for English teachers, attended their conference, and applied for positions with company representatives on site. My attendance at the TESOL conference had the desired result, netting me a job in Seoul as an editor with a publishing company. After months of delay in lining up work, this constituted a very positive beginning to my fieldwork, and I began to prepare for my move to Korea. In early May of 2006, I represented the company at the International Reading Association conference in Chicago and, about three weeks after that, I was living in Seoul and settling into my new routine. I was actually surprised by the ease with which I settled into life in Korea again, recalling vocabulary and expressions without being entirely sure from where in my brain the information was being dredged, shopping and getting around without too much difficulty, and providing satisfactory performance in my editorial work. Nonetheless, despite the initial success of my fieldwork arrangements, things soon began to go awry and the choices I'd made impacted the results.

About two months after I started in Korea, when I was beginning to feel confident in my work, a wave of personnel changes altered both my position in the company hierarchy and the responsibilities assigned to me. I was tasked with initiating and overseeing multiple projects and, given the limitations of my experience in publishing, I was overwhelmed. While the company

had other experienced editors at a sister company in Seoul, the structure of the workplace hierarchy made me their top choice to replace the departing editor because I was older and more educated than any of the others and was perceived as a more appropriate choice. Despite my objections, the Confucian requirements of respect to elders, subordination of juniors, and reverence for education conspired to push me into a job that I was too inexperienced to perform. So, as I was feeling settled and confident enough in my position to start approaching some of my new acquaintances for interviews, I was put in a high-pressure situation that ate up my time and resources as I tried to cope with the new demands.

For the next eight months, I put in long days to get publications out on time, leaving me little time and even less mental energy for my fieldwork, my primary purpose in being there. Rather than detail the events of those months, I will sum it up by saying that some aspects of my work were never quite satisfactory to my employer and the pressure on me, along with my feelings of failure, was profoundly disheartening and exhausting. My research took a backseat in my endeavor to remain employed in Korea so I could conduct my fieldwork. When the opportunity arose in February of 2007 to take a position at a rural university, I leapt at the chance, even though it was a last-minute hire and would leave me almost no time to prepare before the new semester began. I left Seoul with my field notes and letters, personal experiences, and various unrecorded conversations with coworkers, but no recorded interviews. Having obtained insufficient fieldwork materials to that point, I revised my plan, hoping that the more limited hours of a university professor would allow me to gather data and conduct interviews over the following year. This would prove true, to a degree.

In order to begin my work at Geumgang University in Nonsan, I needed to make a “visa run” to another country, as work visas are not issued within Korea. After consulting some of the

foreigner websites for information (Sperling, Pusanweb) the consensus was that Fukuoka, Japan, was generally considered the cheapest, most efficient, and convenient location for a visa run with a fast turnaround. It would prove fortunate that I had already researched this as I would have little time to waste. I arrived at my new home on a Monday with classes due to begin a week later, but learned on Tuesday that the only way to get my visa in time would be if I left by train for Busan that afternoon, took the ferry from Busan to Fukuoka early Wednesday morning, dropped off my papers that afternoon, and picked them up on the next business day. As that Thursday was a national holiday in Korea, it meant the consulate would be closed and I would not be able to retrieve my passport until Friday. With the ferry back to Busan on Friday night and an overnight stay before traveling back to the university on Saturday, this left me with just Sunday to settle in and prepare for classes the following day. This sort of frantic scramble to get paperwork filed is not unusual and other foreigners I met on the ferry and at the consulate were under the same type of time pressure.

My connection with Kim Crosby, the South African woman in her late forties described previously, began in the lobby of the Busan ferry terminal on Wednesday morning, when she approached me to ask if I were making a visa run to Fukuoka. People surrounded by such uncertainty are likely to be open to communication in order to reassure themselves that they have found the right place and are on the right track. Interestingly, Goudge describes a similar incident from her time in Nicaragua, saying:

It was extraordinary how all of us ex-pats gravitated towards one another on the ferry – a completely unspoken but powerful coming together, drawn by the visual identification of shared skin color and enhanced by our recognition that even the most cash-strapped of us was distinguishable by the expensive rucksack, money belt and the ubiquitous camera. Thus we marked each other out from the rest. (2003, 39)

While we did not segregate ourselves in the manner she goes on to describe, there was a definite sense of shared purpose, position, segregation, and thus identity among the foreigners present. We were all on the same mission. Within a short time the ten or twelve foreigners present, all of whom were making a visa run, had congregated in one area, introduced themselves, shared what they knew about this particular consulate, and discussed the problems posed by the holiday. After the initial exchanges of information, the group broke into smaller units of two or three, generally based on first impressions of compatibility. On the ferry crossing, some moved from group to group, but Kim and I spent the bulk of the crossing in conversation. As the time for arrival approached, some of those who had done the run before began to seek out cab-mates for the final leg. By the time we arrived in Fukuoka, Kim and I had found two others to share a cab to the Korean consulate with us, a plan which was determined to be comparable in price and more convenient than figuring out the bus system. It is in these spaces that the value of connection and shared circumstances comes to the fore, as collective knowledge makes the experience go more smoothly for all concerned.

I would have made the acquaintance of a willing informant to work with regardless of where I made my visa run, or, if not on the run, at some point in my local excursions once I returned – an effect that Dorson called the “random and serendipitous” nature of fieldwork (1981a, 151). Nevertheless, encountering Kim was fortuitous given how dreadfully my first ten months had gone. Throughout our wait in the terminal, the three-hour ferry crossing, the taxi ride, the wait at the embassy, over meals at our hotel, and playing tourist in Fukuoka together, we swapped our stories. When I explained my purpose in Korea and the difficulties I had had, she enthusiastically asked questions, and encouraged me to conduct my fieldwork within the foreigner community at her university, offering me a place to stay and introductions to her

colleagues and friends. As Dorson points out, generally “the fieldworker will encounter a sympathetic soul who interests himself in the project and sets up interviews for the collector” (1981a, 149), which is exactly what happened. My experiences in Seoul had discouraged me and I was anxious about my prospects for completing this thesis, particularly as I had already been in Korea for ten months and felt I had little to show for it. But, in discussing with Kim Crosby my purpose in coming to Korea, her enthusiasm re-inspired me at a time when I needed it and provided a conduit to a community of English teachers in the southern town of Suncheon.

This proved fortunate, because my university had only one other Western professor and he had been in Korea for so long that he no longer knew any other foreigners nor had contact with any part of a network, relying on his colleagues and his Korean wife and her family for social interaction and support. The university is located about thirty minutes from the nearest small town and an hour from the major city of Daejeon, so finding informants locally would have been challenging. Connecting with an informant group in Daejeon would not necessarily have been easier or provided me with a more accessible research population, either. In any event, the serendipitous encounter and mutual support, which are such characteristic aspects of establishing connections in Korea, made me feel that I was on the right track, working with a community I had already connected with rather than trying to track down a different one in the nearest urban center.

I had intended to conduct interviews with an emphasis on newly arrived teachers, but the group I encountered was already well established. A couple members of the group left shortly after I met them, but Kim had already been hired and no other new hires came at that time. It was not until the end of my fieldwork in Korea that seven members of the community dispersed and replacement teachers were brought in, some of whom were newcomers. In fact, the closest I



came to working with a recent arrival was Kim, who had been in Korea about a year. As she had neither adapted well to Korean life nor fit in comfortably with her community, she was still experiencing some of the same issues that plague newcomers. So, rather than dealing with the issues of initial culture contact among new arrivals, the community I worked with was composed of successful, long-term resident teachers in South Korea. Because their initiatory experiences left a strong impression, my informants did share stories that reflected their early reactions to Korea and its culture. However, lengthy residence results in adaptation and emplacement, so these narratives incorporated mature reflection on the events described. The emphasis was less on the shock or indignation they had felt, as is often the case with new arrivals telling their horror stories, and more on how they now interpreted the cultural differences at play or on playing up those differences for laughs. The perspectives and narratives gathered with this group differed from those I might have collected among a younger cohort more recently arrived in Korea. Long-term expatriates in Korea also comprise the bulk of active participation in the foreign teacher community as it is represented on the Internet. As mentioned previously, Dave's ESL Café is the primary locus for such interaction, though more new teachers are building their own blogs and sharing videos about their experiences, particularly during the first year of residence. At several points in this thesis I discuss the impact of the Internet as it affected the community I worked with and I also cite some websites, Dave's ESL Café in particular, but my focus was never intended to be on virtual communities. While such online resources represent a fruitful area for further research, the massive amounts of data available merit a study of their own – Dave's ESL Café alone provides hundreds and hundreds of pages of discussion on a wide range of topics. In keeping with my original purpose and interests, I have kept my



**Figure 7: A view of Geumgang University's courtyard, as seen from the balcony of my room. (Photo by K. Roubo 2007)**



**Figure 8: The sunset view from Geumgang University's courtyard, looking out over the valley. (Photo by K. Roubo 2007)**

emphasis on face-to-face interactions with individuals encountered during my research period in Korea. The data I gathered present a challenge as they touch on a wide variety of folkloristic genres, and the interstitiality of the group meant that parallels in the literature were rare. With these data in mind, I chose to address those which seemed most salient, including narratives, foodways, occupational folklore, and the character of this folk group specifically. Personal experience narratives, in particular, fortify bonds within the occupational folk group at the heart of this thesis. They function as a form of social currency in most interactions and are a key factor in establishing personal and collective identity within the community. There is a sense of wandering to life in Korea, a feeling that so much happens through serendipity and chance. As Greta Wilson described it:

You know, I would say to myself, hey, you know ... my progress through this country has all been some kind of haphazard ... I mean, hey! The two of us met just by [Kelly: *starts laughing*] being in the store at the right moment and then we ended up talking, so I just, things like that happening. (I\*Wilson, 2007)

This thesis reflects that feeling, from people drawn to Korea from all over the world, to its lack of respect for disciplinary boundaries, to the way it touches on so many genres, and I have found myself researching along multiple vectors, not all of which occurred to me initially. The nature of the community I studied, its particular situation, and the connections I've made required an equally wide-ranging review of literature in Chapter 2 in order to address divergent perspectives and build a sense of the whole.

### **1.5 Working with the Informant Group**

The research period began in 2005 but, as mentioned previously, it was not until mid-2006 that I actually arrived in Korea to begin fieldwork. Following my initial contact with Kim Crosby, I made multiple trips to Suncheon over the course of the next eighteen months, not all of which resulted in obtaining interviews. Conversations, communications, and interviews with my

central group of informants took place between February of 2007 and February of 2008. Most of the formal, recorded interviews took place during a long stay in Suncheon in the summer of 2007, using a variety of equipment, followed by a series of weekend visits in an effort to obtain further interviews. My informants were often willing to meet me for lunch or an informal chat at a coffee shop, with no set times, parameters, or recording equipment, but locking in an interview appointment was a different matter. The former were desirable and necessary activities for their leisure time, while the latter had to have space made for it. In addition to these participants, I had notes from my time in Seoul, when I worked and socialized with two Britons, two Canadians, and two Americans.

The nature of life as a foreign teacher in Korea presented obstacles as, during national holidays when I had school breaks and time available for conducting interviews, so did my informants, who used these opportunities for travel or visits home. Additionally, while we all technically worked at universities, I was teaching university courses while they were teaching at a university-based *hagwon*-type institute. This meant that they worked longer hours than I did, so, even though I might be free, sometimes they were not or they were too exhausted to have any interest in an interview. My recorded interviews, therefore, often had to be squeezed in around departure or arrival times in the course of these holidays, in the evening hours, or on the weekends when I managed to get down to Suncheon. Several individuals who might otherwise have been informants for this research were so often out of town at these times that they were never available for interviews.

My informant group is a motley collection of individuals typical of any foreign teacher group, comprised of three South Africans, three Canadians, and two Americans.<sup>6</sup> Each of them did at least one recorded interview, with all but one of them doing at least two, and these

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<sup>6</sup> A list of informants and interviews is included in front of the bibliography at the end of this thesis.

interview sessions lasted approximately ninety minutes to two hours. I also had multiple conversations with each informant and went on excursions with some of them on several occasions. Frustratingly, on some of these outings conversation among the participants was rich with narratives, anecdotes, and details of their lives in Korea that I would have loved to have recorded, but we were usually riding in Melanie's car. While it was a wonderful convenience to have a vehicle available to us, it was a noisy, old rattletrap that precluded any effective recording. On other occasions, our group was a mix of informants and their friends, usually when we all went out to dinner in restaurants together, and as some of these individuals did not want to participate in my research I did not record at these times. I did write about some of the discussions and conversations in my field notes, however, and have included some information from them in this project.

Because Kim and I traveled together for several days on two occasions – the first being the trip to Fukuoka when we met and the second a trip to Beijing in September of 2007 – there were multiple conversations during those times that were not recorded. She was hesitant to commit to recorded interview sessions and, in the one long interview I did with her, she repeatedly took breaks from recording. She didn't mind talking about anything and everything during our casual conversations, but being recorded seemed to make her very uncomfortable. Despite discussions of further recorded interviews and appointments for doing them, she was always reluctant and more than once she just did not feel like it on the appointed day. I did keep a journal, however, in which I described the content and context of some of our conversations and communicated with several informants online, both during and after my fieldwork in Korea. In addition, I recently connected with two foreign teachers (one now in Canada, the other still employed in Korea) online, which has enabled me to add to my research as well as confirm that

the vernacular culture of foreign teachers remains much the same. Conversations with Nick Holmes, an American currently (2019) teaching in Korea, confirmed that the concerns of the average foreign teacher there have not changed much; they still struggle with cultural difference, complain about abusive *hagwon* practices, and share information about how to overcome daily difficulties. The discussions on Nick's Facebook feed resonate with conversations I have heard among foreign teachers since the 1990s.

Throughout my fieldwork, the performance of folklore in the form of personal experience narratives emerged as one of the most significant mechanisms for the formation of connections within the community. Such performances occur at all gatherings of foreign teachers because they are the means through which the community emerges, they reinforce a sense of belonging among community members, and they facilitate the formation of folk groups, which are emergent at any such encounter. The instability of life abroad virtually guarantees that expatriates will be in relationships of limited duration with their fellows. The people they meet and with whom they associate abroad will likely never meet family and friends back home. Those at home, while they are discussed and inform one's understanding of the individual, form a *distant* background. As with friends back home, whose eyes glaze over when one talks too long about life in Korea, focusing on the people left behind saps the life from a story because they are abstract figures who do not matter in the here and now. What matters is the present, where it is vital to find common ground, quickly, and capitalize on the intimacy cultivated through sharing similar personal experience narratives. The person you meet on the street needs to know whether you live or work nearby, whether you have information they need, and whether they can contact you as someone to socialize with in the future. A fifteen-minute conversation in a grocery store

can be enough to seed a friendship that may last for years, but, more importantly, needs to exist in the now.

### **1.6 Folklore, Transitory Community, and the *Waegook* Life**

Each of the following chapters examines the life of foreign English teachers in South Korea, focusing in turn on particular facets, though there is abundant overlap among the foci. In Chapter 2, this overlap becomes apparent in my review of the literature. Network theory was central to my thesis proposal, but my focus shifted after I conducted my fieldwork. Beginning with networking methodology and moving through the fields and genres the material touched on, it became clear to me that research from diverse disciplines was essential for a fuller understanding of the community. My investigation initially cast a wide net, but much of what I looked at bore no relation to the concerns of foreign teachers or their vernacular life. This approach, however, allowed me to home in on those parallel groups, experiences, genres, and materials that were most germane to this complex subculture in Korea. Occupational folklore, personal experience narratives, foodways, immigrant and ethnic folklore, networking, and tourism research all offered materials pertinent to my group's circumstances and vernacular culture. Chapter 2 summarizes the literature I found most relevant in analyzing and writing this thesis and clarifies my reasons for focusing on these genres and disciplines.

The intent of Chapter 3 is to present a historical context through which to understand the interactions of foreign teachers with the people of South Korea and the environment in which they find themselves. Westerners' adaptation to Korean culture plays out against a backdrop that includes a long history of invasion, domination, tradition, Confucianism, colonialism, Orientalism, exploitation, and opportunism. The history of Korean interaction with foreign entities influences contemporary interactions between Koreans and outsiders, and Orientalist traditions play a role in how contemporary individuals interpret their experiences in South Korea.

Chapter 3 explores the peninsula's history, its people's contact with others, and the resulting perceptions and stereotypes. An understanding of this background is crucial to seeing the group studied within the historical context of Korean relations with foreigners.

Chapter 4 examines what constitutes occupational folklore and its importance to this professional community. Foreign teachers share a specific occupation in a particular place and perform the same or similar tasks, yet their canon of work technique is not informed by observing the work of their peers. Without a locus, a shared work tradition, or even the ability to observe one another, what foreign teachers share as a folk group are the techniques they develop for operating in the Korean workplace and navigating life in Korea more generally. Proficiency in the local and work culture substantiates claims to competency in Korea, to *waegook* status, as demonstrated through both interacting with Koreans and narratives reflecting personal knowledge about Korea, its customs, and its culture. Rather than providing a way of evaluating the *work* teachers do, through their personal experience narratives community members are able to assess the success with which narrators interact with Koreans, how their described responses to situations reveal their attitudes about Korea, and thereby provide grounds for judging their adaptation to Korea.

Folkloristically speaking, narratives, and personal experience narratives (PENs) in particular, are the most revealing materials I collected because they constitute a kind of currency in social interactions among foreign teachers. Chapter 5 provides examples of narratives and anecdotes and discusses their importance to the community as tools for both connecting individuals and strengthening the ties that hold the precarious network together. Stories of home have scant meaning for this audience, but narratives of life experience in Korea are relatable and valuable to other *waegooks*. They also provide vital information and establish the teller's



comprehension of and skill in navigating Korean culture. This chapter also addresses racial stereotypes and subtle commentaries inferred from the narratives I collected, which provide further insight to the worldview of foreign teachers. All foreign teachers have at least a college-level education, as it is required in order to teach in Korea, and are thus usually aware that racism is considered politically incorrect and socially unacceptable. But even as their whiteness conveys privileges in South Korea, they lack agency and feel their change in status. In telling their narratives, though, they are able to position themselves as superior to Koreans, restoring via text and subtext some of their authority and importance. The tone of some narratives reflects resentment of this positioning through subtle displays of racism, more often implied than explicit, and the attitudes revealed when it surfaces in social situations and casual conversations.

Chapter 6 considers the meaning of food for foreign teachers, how they adjust to unknown foods in their new environment, the importance of familiar foods to them, and the meaning invested in the foods they share when they socialize as a group. Foods signify home and tradition (turkey at Thanksgiving), acculturation (being comfortable with eating *kimchi*<sup>7</sup> at every meal), maladaptation (through refusing local foods or restricting one's diet to familiar fast food items), or belonging (in commensality). Sharing holiday meals is a common folk custom among foreign teachers, regardless of nationality, and many go to great effort or expense at times to have the foods they associate with festive calendrical events, demonstrating the importance of the celebration and the significance of the particular food items to the event itself. Narratives are key here, as well, as individuals often include food in their stories of adapting to life in Korea, imbuing meaning that those foods will carry beyond Korea for them. They describe their first encounters with classic Korean dishes like *kimchi*, dried cuttlefish, or steamed silk worm larvae,

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<sup>7</sup> Also spelled “kimchee,” this dish “accompanies every Korean meal, including breakfast. This essential part of the Korean diet is a highly seasoned and fermented pickle of cabbage, turnip, cucumber and other seasonal vegetables” (Hyun 2002, 25). Its pungent, lingering aroma is not popular with most newcomers to Korea or Korean cuisine.

or of particularly successful holiday celebrations they have attended or created, or of the pleasure they experience in finally having a food they have been missing. Korean dishes themselves become comfort foods that foreign teachers associate with positive memories, friendships, and events from their time in Korea.

The final chapter summarizes the conclusions and interpretations presented throughout this thesis. Foreign teachers in South Korea are a transitory folk group that generates a fragile network of tenuous ties and intermittent connections throughout their residence in Korea. As *waegooks*, they represent an unassimilated, migratory minority population who must “acquire various degrees of competence in more than one cultural mode” (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1983, 43), just as any migrant must. Narratives about their experiences evoke a sense of outsider status and, in emphasizing differences from the surrounding population, reinforce feelings of belonging within the group. This atomized, diverse, and transient vernacular culture is difficult to categorize and remains a fruitful field for further exploration, most particularly with regard to early stage culture contact, local emplacement, the emergence of folk groups, belonging and collective identity, global migration, personal experience narratives, and networking. By applying research done on related folk groups and experiences of culture contact to the narratives, traditions, and vernacular culture of foreign teachers in South Korea, we can see the life-changing experience that this is for countless Western expatriates in South Korea.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **2.1 Literature Pertaining to the Project**

Research relevant to this thesis comes from diverse fields as scholarship pertaining to it must be sifted from the massive amount of data available on related, or seemingly-related, topics. For example, studies of international business and overseas employees (such as Borstorff, Harris, Field and Giles 1997 or Jameson 2007) often emphasize quantitative analysis and the success of the corporate endeavor rather than the individuals involved and are of little use ethnographically. Additionally, personnel working for corporations abroad receive a range of support and assistance from their companies in adjusting to a new environment, making their experiences quite different from those of most foreign teachers. In many ways, this is a thesis about wandering – teachers moving from one country to another, from job to job, travelling the region, touching on multiple genres and disciplines, whose characteristics as a group never quite settle in one spot. Neither tourist nor immigrant, migrant nor settler, they resist categorization as a group, even as they coalesce into a community, only to disperse. The review of literature pertinent to my investigation reflects this peripatetic quality, as I roamed from one keyword search to another and combed bibliographies for research that would shed light on my topic. As often as not, promising leads resulted in dead ends, but this chapter outlines some of the avenues of research I pursued.

Studies of missionaries and international aid workers abroad initially seemed promising, but comparing foreign teachers to such groups is problematic. Their aims, the support available to them, and the sense of purpose they bring with them by and large result in concerns far different from foreign teachers working abroad, though the experience of culture contact may provoke similar responses (Amin 1999; Goudge 2003; Maddy 2004; Muller 2005; Rudy 2004; Sachs 2000). Research done on Korean workers is available as well, but again is peripheral to the

topic, though I would love to see a study of Korean perspectives on foreign teachers. Any research in the social sciences, however, may intersect with important aspects of the life of foreign teachers in South Korea, thus I have found myself drawing on research in such diverse disciplines as sociology, anthropology, communications, Asian studies, women's studies, business, politics, literature, history, philosophy and, of course, folklore. Because of the diversity of sources used, a review of the various literatures is provided in this chapter.

In addition to this academic research and my own fieldwork, I have read numerous first-person accounts of expatriate life as I roamed the literature in search of parallels. An abundant source of detailed information are the Korea pages on the website referred to previously, Dave's ESL Café (Sterling), most of which is comprised of posts by expatriates on a broad range of topics. Other accounts include memoirs written by individuals who described personal experiences in Korea (Bird 1985; Parfitt 2008; Stephens 1990) and accounts found in archives (Blaylock 1986). Of particular interest was Richard Harris's book Faces of Korea: The Foreign Experience in the Land of the Morning Calm (2004), a collection of interviews with foreign residents from a variety of countries whose employment in Korea encompasses everything from teaching to law to acting to business.<sup>8</sup> Most useful, of course, was the section on English teachers. While the interviews contained in Harris's book appear to have been edited and are presented in a literary style, the content of the interviews resonates with my informants' and my own experiences and as such represents an additional source of personal experience narratives.

Discussions of Korea also appear in books on life and work abroad (S. Griffith 2003; Hur and Hur 2000) as well as more scholarly texts (Crane 1999; Janelli and Janelli 1982; Kendall 2002; Moon 2002). In addition to literature about Korea, I also looked at texts of expatriate life

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<sup>8</sup> Many of Harris's informants requested anonymity and he uses pseudonyms for them throughout the text. I have quoted these individuals as they are named in the book, whether actual name or pseudonym.

in other lands, including Japan (Feiler 1991; Kondo 1990; Muller 2005), China (Faison 2004; Thurin 1999), New Zealand (Masson 2004), Singapore (Duruz 2006), Vietnam (Sachs 2000), Nicaragua (Goudge 2003), the Cayman Islands (Amit-Talai 1997), and Africa (Maddy 2004 ). All of these accounts contribute to an understanding of the lives of Western expatriates, their common perspectives, and an overall sense of the experience of life in a new environment. Again and again, the authors describe experiences and their reactions to them in much the same way my informants described events in South Korea and their perspectives and interpretations of them. Their narratives are presented in sequences that other expatriates can follow and draw experiential meaning from, in Braid's terms (1996, 5), even if the events occurred in countries other than Korea. These accounts often bear the marks of liminality and efforts at *communitas* in the expatriate communities they describe. These are not included in the discussion of academic research that follows.

## **2.2 Groups and Community**

Folkloristic research, focusing as it does on people and their folkways, means nearly any study in the field relates to group, network, and community research. The connections foreign teachers establish and maintain are vital during their time in Korea, so network studies initially formed a substantial foundation for this thesis. This was a logical methodological choice when approaching a study of behavior in a social setting, especially in such a case as expatriate networks where pre-existing ties between members are rare. The rate of change in the foreign teacher population is so rapid, however, that it would require much larger data sets and statistical analysis to grasp the full scope and intensity of its movement, which diverge from folkloristic concerns. Instead, I grew more interested in what makes a diverse cluster of individuals cohere in such a way that they are perceived as a group, even at first meeting, and the influence such feelings of belonging have.

Ethnographic studies by folklorists and anthropologists connect the reader to the ethnographer and, through them, to the individuals in the social network being studied. Publications along these lines were useful in looking at my foreign teacher informants as both network and group. Folkloristic work along these lines include Linda Dégh's study of conduits and legend transmission (1975, 2001), Gary Alan Fine's work among adolescent baseball players' networks (1979), and Dorothy Noyes' research on groups and communities (1995), each of which combines exploration of the network with ethnographic study of the group concerned. In Dégh and Vázsonyi's work on legend transmission (1975), they proposed that folklore follows paths, which they termed "conduits," not at random but along lines of communication among individuals with a specific interest in their content (Dégh 2001, 418). These conduits are comprised of "communicative sequences of individuals who have similar personality characteristics and inherent frames of reference" (Dégh 2001, 418). The study of legend conduits, dependent as it is on lines of communication, interconnects with network analysis in ways that make sense for a folklorist. While the narratives foreign teachers share are not legends, they do tend to exhibit similar content and patterns, as legends do. Each individual presents a conduit in the net through which folklore and knowledge is transmitted.

William Hugh Jansen's influential essay, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" points to some of the issues involved in trying to explore the folklore of a particular group as perceived from within and/or without, such as "how it interprets itself and how it conceives others to interpret it" (1965, 50). He asserts that a group's folklore reflects not only how they perceive themselves and other groups, but also how they believe other groups perceive them. For example, on the ferry between Busan, Korea, and Fukuoka, Japan, I met and spoke with briefly with a man named Charles who made an extraordinary remark. It struck me as so unusual that I

jotted it down at the time. He said, “When they [Koreans] ask how long you’ve been in Korea, what they are really asking is whether you have been here long enough to know you’re a piece of shit.” The comment was remarkable in how it spoke to his long-term experience in South Korea and perceptions of Koreans as well as his conception of how they perceived foreigners. He deemed the question a tool for gauging foreigners’ awareness of where they fall in the social hierarchy, but I discerned a cynicism that is rare in those willing to remain in Korea (he had been there several years). It reflected his disillusionment with life in Korea, his bitterness at his inability to change his status, the kinds of feelings that often lead foreigners to leave, as well as a certain depth of knowledge about the life of the expatriate in South Korea. Charles’ remark still strikes me as sad and, in retrospect, I have to wonder whether it signaled the loss of status felt by a white, middle-aged, mid-level businessman, as he was. It is unlikely that most Koreans would see the question in the same light as he does, so his comment reveals more of his perspective on Koreans than what Koreans might think of foreigners.

In this thesis, my focus is on the in-group folklore of foreign teachers, its ability to foster group formation through performance of personal experience narratives, and how it relates to perceptions of both teachers’ position in Korean society and how they are regarded by Koreans. A study of Korean perspectives on foreign teachers would provide an interesting contrast and might be done using material gathered from newspapers, websites, and other media. A caveat to this is that if an item is published in an English-language media, it may not have been produced exclusively by or for a Korean audience and thus is more likely to reflect the perspective of native English-speaking populations. Any conclusions regarding Korean perspectives which are drawn from such materials must therefore be inferential and tentative at best, with esoteric/exoteric factors borne firmly in mind.

Another important text covering a great deal of terrain relating to groups and communities is the 1986 two-volume work Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction (1986b) and Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader (1986c), edited by Elliot Oring. The first volume, Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: An Introduction (1986b), concentrates on addressing the various genres, concepts and development of folklore theory and method, though examples from specific groups are identified in some of the essays. The second volume, Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader (1986c) comprises research on a wide variety of people, from children to workers to ethnic populations to religious communities. The approaches presented in these essays highlighted strategies and potential directions for my research. Of the essays they include, Robert McCarl's investigation of occupational folklore among firefighters (1986, 71) and Jay Mechling's study of Boy Scouts, campers, and sports teams as groups possessing children's folklore (1985, 91) were pertinent to my work. McCarl's essay led me to his larger work on firefighters, The District of Columbia Fire Fighters' Project: A Case Study in Occupational Folklife (1985) outlines in more detail the concept of a canon of work technique among foreign teachers, as I discuss further in Section 2.4.

Another valuable collection with an increased focus on the manifestation of ethnicity and group identity is Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life (1991), edited by Stephen Stern and John Allan Cicala. Its essays touch on ethnic identification and selection, foodways maintenance, and the adaptation and modification of folkways in an alternative environment. Of particular relevance to my research was Carol Silverman's contribution, "Strategies of Ethnic Adaptation: The Case of Gypsies in the United States," as it speaks to a group adapting superficially while maintaining its customs and traditions through "a system of values and a body of adaptive strategies that actually contribute to reinforcing Gypsy



identity in America” (1991, 107). Ethnicity aside, foreign teachers perform personal experience narratives as an adaptive strategy that reinforces collective identity and fosters a sense of belonging in a disparate population.

Dorothy Noyes’s article “Group” (1995, 449-478) published in the influential “keywords” issue of the Journal of American Folklore, employed social network theory to explore the boundaries of ethnic group association, raise questions of in-group and out-group status, and problematize the ways we use words like community. She conducted fieldwork at a street festival and witnessed interactions that pointed to divisions and exclusions in a setting where community and cooperation might be expected. From the beginning of this project, I have questioned the appropriateness of labeling the networks in Korea as groups or communities as they are so transient. Like Noyes, I was surprised when the group I studied, though small, still displayed serious fractures and a lack of internal support and coherence even in the face of marginal status and uncertain situating in the larger society. Noyes’s essay and others like it provide a useful perspective through which to examine my informant group and the internal and external boundaries they maintained. While network analysis was an early focus for this thesis, and informed the initial research, it really constituted a part of a broader approach to my informant group’s folklore.

Other important texts relevant to this research include those exploring groups on the border, or straddling borders, such as Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border by Américo Paredes (1993) and “And Other Neighborly Names”: Social Process and Cultural Image in Texas Folklore (1981). The essays in the latter collection, edited by Roger Abrahams and Richard Bauman, discuss the folklore of various regional groups as it pertains to politics, ethnicity, stereotyping, identity, and intergroup tensions. Foreign teachers are not immigrants,

but they *are* migrants and there are parallels between their social and cultural positioning and those of immigrants, as some of these essays make evident. There may not be a border, but cultural boundaries exist, some created and maintained through folklore and vernacular expressive culture. Rosan Jordan's essay, "Tension and Speech Play in Mexican-American Folklore" (1981, 252-265), illustrates some of the compromises that must be made in living a bicultural life and the struggle it can be to retain a sense of self while under pressure to adapt.

Texts dealing with other types of boundaries, especially those dealing with marginalized populations and outsider status bearing similarity to the group interviewed for this project, provided valuable comparisons and contrasts. One such work is Donald Braid's Scottish Traveller Tales: Lives Shaped through Stories (2004), which described how the ability to "follow" a narrative can be a marker of belonging within a group. Without a shared body of similar experiences, such as my research group had, there is a lack of contextual information that makes it difficult for outsiders to fully comprehend, or "follow," the import of a narrative about life in Korea. Philippe Bourgois's In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio (2003), and the collection of essays in Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life (Stern and Cicala 1991) illustrated means employed by minority and marginalized groups to maintain a sense of community and belonging within a larger population. In some instances, these descriptions served to highlight the ways in which foreign teachers *do not* create or nurture a cohesive sense of community, which was of interest, as well. The material in some of these, of course, overlaps with issues of ethnicity and identity, but this is only natural as such concerns are also fundamental to the definition of groups. These texts were valuable in considering foreign teachers as a peripheral group in Korea and identifying the nature of challenges they faced. Like

those on the border, their jokes and narratives revealed much about the reactions of those straddling cultures and their views regarding that situation.

Moving to an even broader perspective on groups and communities, landmark works such as Goffman's The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959), Benedict Anderson's Imagined Communities (2006) and Said's Orientalism (1994) were valuable in examining the group, and the individuals within the group, as they perform in a wider social and behavioral sense. Some were of more use than others, though all had some influence on how I handled this topic. Hobsbawn and Ranger's collection of essays, with the title The Invention of Tradition (2003), were helpful in understanding a group that was perpetually re-inventing itself if only in ruling out what kinds of traditions foreign teachers have. Their discussions of the "great tradition of the reflective few" as contrasted with "the little tradition of the largely unreflective many" (Redfield 1956; quoted in Ben-Amos 1984, 108) illuminated how the transience of the population prevented foreign teachers from developing or transmitting either type of tradition. Unlike "great traditions" such as the romanticizing of the Highland traditions of Scotland, exemplified by the kilt as "distinctive national apparatus" (Trevor-Roper 2003, 15) or the deliberate reconstruction of aspects of a near-vanished national way of life, as began in Wales in the late seventeenth century (Morgan 2003, 43-100), traditions among foreign teachers are generally fleeting at best. The traditions they bear from their homes may have little relevance in the new environment and may be understood only by others from home.

The foreign teacher population fluctuates to such an extent that even invented traditions do not last long. People form groups and gather periodically without reference to any pre-existing pattern or tradition, regardless of where they find themselves. As acquaintances are made, a group develops by accretion and venues are chosen for congregating, which may be

small private spaces or larger public places. Small subgroups within the network may develop common practices or habits, such as celebrating birthdays or holidays in a particular fashion, but these exist only so long as the subgroup itself coheres, which is generally for a period of two years or less. By the time a semi-consistent tradition develops, the bearers are already abandoning the sites of performance, rendering these ephemeral traditions obsolete. These are habitual practices within the population, rather than any sort of preserved traditions.

Anderson's Imagined Communities (2006) presents a comparable problem, as it deals with more coherent and long-term practices and participants, rendering it of marginal relevance to this project. His descriptions of the ambitions and social positions of imperial functionaries abroad, however, resonate with the narratives of foreign teachers and expatriates in that we do see the persistence among foreign teachers of centuries-old preconceptions and stereotypes. More fruitful for my purposes were Goffman's concepts and Said's historical overview of intergroup (international, intercultural, etc.) contact between Oriental and Occidental peoples. In a situation where expatriates are, by definition, external to the majority group and their characteristic behaviors and customs may be seen as improper or objectionable, Goffman's concepts of front and back areas, persona, face, and mask are crucial to understanding some aspects of foreign teacher life (1959). Indeed, with the well-known Asian concept of "face" and the importance of "saving face" and respecting figures of authority, one has to wonder whether these cultures were what inspired Goffman to explore these ideas. For Western employees, maintaining a socially acceptable persona in the workplace while under perpetual scrutiny and pressure to conform can be one of the most stressful aspects of work in Korea. Their apartments and semi-exclusive foreigner gatherings thus become important back spaces in maintaining both sanity and a sense of group solidarity. What is repressed in the Korean milieu is often freely

expressed, sometimes vehemently, within the safe haven of the *waegook* gathering. The concept of face is part of the folklore about Asians and their culture and customs that foreigners critique, yet incorporating it into their own behavior is one way foreign teachers establish bona fides with both their peers and Korean coworkers.

As I conducted my research, I was not always mindful of the fact – as Edward Said points out – that:

No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member of society. These continue to bear on what he does professionally... (1994, 10)

Reading Said's Orientalism (1994) after my return from Korea was instrumental in prompting me to examine more critically how white identity and cultural history might influence foreign teachers' assumptions, narratives and associations in the Korean milieu. More recently, Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images (Galang, 2003), an anthology of fiction and non-fiction, demonstrated that stereotypes about Asians are far from obsolete and that Said's Orientalism retains its relevance. Screaming Monkeys includes the original text of the "Chinese Exclusion Act" of 1882, which is more relevant today than it has been at any point in my lifetime as the United States' government moves toward restricting immigration of particular communities and seeks to deport those already here (Galang, 2003, 138-141). We still live in a world where racism is deeply embedded in our culture and, however progressive they strive to be, many of us still carry stereotypes and preconceptions with us as we move through the world. While none of my informants made explicit negative or racist remarks during our interviews, their words and tone still carried subtle undertones of colonialist or patriarchal attitudes. It is not unusual to hear Korea and Koreans referred to as "peasants," "backward," or "Third World" in casual conversations, which marks a sense of Western cultural superiority in foreign teacher

discourse. Orientalist/racist bias among foreign teachers is not usually as obvious as associating a preference for squatting (as opposed to sitting or standing) with the behavior of monkeys, a historically common and brutally racist stereotype of Asians. Instead, it might be seeing the food as suspect, equipment or procedures as inefficient or substandard, identifying particular attitudes or customs as provincial, questioning hygiene practices, or finding any number of things inferior.

Although Said's examination of representations of "The Orient" as a "semi-mythical construct" (1994, xviii) in the West focuses primarily on the Middle East, Islam, and Arabs, it is relevant to other parts of Asia in that similar pre-existing clichés and stereotypes in the West are applied to all Asians, as evidenced by the contributions to Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images (Galang, 2003). These readings led me to consider questions of identity and ethnicity more cautiously and methodically, and to reconsider my own cultural baggage as it influenced my fieldwork there:

For, if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of *his* actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer. (Said 1994, 11)

As obvious as this might seem in retrospect, I am chagrined to admit that the impact of such a legacy (and its cultural baggage of stereotypes and preconceptions) on my methodology, theoretical approach, or interpretation of findings had eluded me prior to conducting my fieldwork. The cross-disciplinary approach I took in my research after my return from the field led me to multiple texts, including those by Goffmann (1959) and Said (1994), which exposed

crucial aspects of culture contact between Occident and Orient that I have since endeavored to incorporate in my analysis.

### **2.3 Identity and Ethnicity**

Many of the texts discussed in the previous section also address aspects of ethnicity and identity, as group membership and community are essential to definitions and perceptions of ethnicity and identity. In Noyes's study, "Group," (1995, 449-478), group dynamics and community are inseparable from questions of ethnicity and identity within the context of a local ethnic festival. Paredes's examinations of communities on the Texas-Mexican border, "And Other Neighborly Names": Social Process and Cultural Image in Texas Folklore (1981) and Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border (1993), highlight the struggle of identifying with one group while immersed in another and the resultant stresses of adaptation. Braid's Travellers (2004) are an ethnic group immersed in but separate from the Scottish people of their homeland. Where there are groups and communities, there are questions about identity and/or ethnicity, which means much of the research on groups and communities is also relevant here, as well.

Folkloristic research on ethnicity abounds, presenting some of the same difficulties experienced in looking into group and community research. Witness the far from comprehensive 484-page publication American and Canadian Immigrant and Ethnic Folklore: An Annotated Bibliography (1982), edited by Robert A. Georges and Stephen Stern. I have chosen a relatively narrow focus, turning to work on ethnicity and identity that facilitates an understanding of the group in question: Western, educated, cosmopolitan,<sup>9</sup> expatriate whites. Questions of ethnicity and identity have ramifications when conducting research with any minority group and, when

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<sup>9</sup> I use cosmopolitan here not as an indicator of refinement, but in its more simple sense, indicating a group that is international in compass and exhibits cultural diversity.

that group is accustomed to being in the majority (or has cultural hegemony), it must be considered a core concern.

Identity has been of increasing interest to scholars in all of the social sciences, and the quantity of literature on this one aspect is massive (see for starters Bauman 2000; Berger and Del Negro 2004; DeVos 1983; Dundes 1983; Erikson 1968; Greenhill 1994; and Oring 1994a); it represents a considerable body of research to be processed. One means of delimiting the parameters of investigation, in order to present a reasonable assessment while doing a practical amount of research for this study in this one area, was to restrict myself to work pertaining most directly to folkloristic concerns. Thus, while I do mention key figures in identity research (Erikson 1968, for instance), I have focused as much as possible on work by folklorists or studies directly relating to folklore or the specific group under study.

Given that foreign teachers are essentially removed from the environments, people, places, society, and culture that have in the past served to reinforce their sense of identity, they are in a sense set adrift in an unknown sea. According to Erik H. Erikson, “The term ‘identity’ expresses such a mutual relation in that it connotes both a persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness) and a persistent sharing of some essential characteristic with others” (1980, 109). Erikson’s definition points to both internal and external influences on the individual’s identity, which is significant when you consider that most foreign teachers have left behind familiar reinforcing external influences and are relying almost entirely on internal self-identification when they arrive in South Korea. Debra Lattanzi Shutika’s Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico (2011) follows a migrant population as it moves between Mexico and Pennsylvania. She refers to the migrants’ “incorporation into the community and adaptation to life in Pennsylvania” as “emplacement and belonging” (2011, 3).



As with many of the texts I read, Shutika's research shed light on some areas of my informants' life in Korea while revealing ways in which they differ from other groups. Life in Korea, and especially the narratives they tell about it, contribute to a sense of belonging to a particular community, but it never acquires the depth and stability of that of the group Shutika describes. Her informants share a place of origin in Mexico, migrate to the same area of Pennsylvania, and worked in the same industry, factors that allow them to feel a sense of belonging in both places. For foreign teachers, mostly unknown to each other prior to arriving in Korea, there is not that sense of belonging that comes with shared origins, nor do they often achieve a sense of emplacement as they do not become an ingrained part of the Korean landscape they occupy. Instead, their sense of belonging is derived from an awareness of common status, recognition of perseverance in the face of the same challenges, and an understanding of their role as impermanent residents in Korea. Within their cohort there, experiences in the culture create foci of identity that enable the development of a collective identity as a folk group, fostered by narratives that cultivate a sense of belonging within the community for the duration of their stay.

In "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" (1965), William Hugh Jansen raises questions not only about groups as communities, but how esoteric and exoteric folklore both reflect and highlight identity. While everyone participates in multiple folk groups, a given circumstance or environment may influence outsiders to categorize individuals as being in a group, whether this constitutes part of that person's own self-identification or not. In Jansen's example, an African American sees himself as a fan of a particular baseball team and comments as such, while another fan of the same team misinterprets those comments because he focuses first on the African American's racial identification rather than on their mutual fandom. Foreign teachers make assumptions about Koreans and about what Koreans think of them, often colored

by Orientalist preconceptions, while Koreans make assumptions about foreign teachers' nationality, behavior, personality, and inclinations based on their own assumptions from their own body of folklore about foreigners. The distinction between exoteric and esoteric folklore made the use of the term "whitey" by some foreign teachers noteworthy. Clearly, it demarcates in-group membership in very specific ways and while it is rarely used, there is often a tone of sarcasm or bitterness when it is thrown into the conversation. In his book Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word, Randall Kennedy unpacks the usage and meaning of a powerful and loaded racial term. If, as Kennedy asserts, "The claim that *nigger* is the superlative racial epithet – the *most* hurtful, the *most* fearsome, the *most* dangerous, the *most* noxious – necessarily involves comparing oppressions and prioritizing victim status," (2003, 23), then the term "whitey" is also carrying a semantic load. Foreign teachers who deploy the word in conversation are asserting a separation between themselves and the surrounding Korean population in a way that is functionally similar to the use of "nigger," and making a bid for oppressed status, without having a comparable history of subjugation to back their claim.

In addition to their occupation, what foreign teachers share is a particular physical trait, as nearly all of those I met in South Korea over the years were white. Shared circumstances enhance common cultural, historical, or physical characteristics (i.e., Western, white, educated, English-speaking, middle- or working-class, expatriate/foreigner) and make it logical that they associate with the amalgamous group. The fact that whiteness is standard for foreign teachers is rarely acknowledged or discussed. In her book Ethnicity in the Mainstream, Greenhill remarks, "Entitlement allows [whites] to define all other forms of language and culture as 'other' and thus de-ethnicize themselves, at the same time as they mark their differences" (1994, 62). This entitlement carries power even in non-white cultures, as most foreign teachers recognize, even as

they are frustrated by their inability to enjoy its full benefit in Korea. Greenhill proposes that the description of minority cultures as “ethnic” is an implicit statement of the power of the mainstream white majority through defining non-whites as “other” (1994 18-21). In South Korea, the white is the minority other, as is abundantly clear walking down streets where it is easy to pick out fellow foreigners in a sea of Asian faces. But this positional exchange demands consideration of the underlying motivations for this group to associate as closely as it does, and to wonder to what extent the shift in status – from the majority position, which asserts the “norms” of language, culture and society in the home country, to a minority position – reflects a self-protective or survival response to the new status.

Those wanting to associate exclusively with others of their own nationality can find groups in metropolitan centers such as Seoul and Busan. A quick search of the Internet turns up such social groups as Association des Francophones Corée (AFC), the Australian and New Zealand Association of Korea, the British Association of Seoul, the Canadian Women’s Club, Grupo Hispanoamericano, Association Brazil-Korea, the Nordic Women’s Club, the Overseas Chinese Women’s Club, the Hendrik Hamel Netherlands Club Korea, the St. Andrews Society Seoul (for those of Scottish descent) and so on. Activities include “coffee mornings” and other social events, particularly in celebration of national holidays specific to the country in question, such as St. Patrick’s Day festivals (Ireland), St. Andrew’s Ball (Scotland), a Burns Supper (Scotland), or Thanksgiving (Canada, the United States). Most have meeting locations in the Seoul metropolitan area or provide phone numbers beginning with Seoul’s 02 area code, an indication that urban locations provide sufficient populations to maintain clubs with relatively exclusive memberships. It is also notable that these more exclusive groups are still amalgamations - Francophones come from many lands, not all those who self-identify as Irish

come from Ireland, and Canadian women come from a vast geographical area with a spectrum of regional characteristics. For the most part, however, expatriates are satisfied to socialize with a mixed group rather than seek out exclusive groups.

Foreign teachers have little to no agency within their institutions, their legal rights are limited as is their ability to learn what they are, their general unfamiliarity with the Korean language creates difficulties on a daily basis, and their needs may be misunderstood or disregarded altogether. Being regarded as ethnically homogenous by Koreans – precisely as Asians are in white majority countries – undermines their sense of identity and ignores the differences among and rifts within the community, engendering feelings of frustration and futility. At the same time, the fact that they are all in that same situation can reinforce collective identity within the mixed group. The foreign teacher community in South Korea provides the opportunity to study majority whites in an unfamiliar minority status, and the way that they respond to the diminution of their access to power structures.

## **2.4 Occupational Folklore**

There is no escaping the occupational dynamics of a group whose primary descriptor – foreign teacher – encapsulates what they have in common. Additionally, both parts of the label are important as they describe the two areas that comprise the main work of being a foreign teacher, which is to say, both living in Korea and teaching make up the occupation of this community. It was my research into occupational folklore that led me to the conclusion that both the job and the life were important in researching this occupational folk group. In Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire, Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter (1975) argued that office workers constitute a folk group and that the definition of folklore needed reexamination and expansion to include those objects of material culture that exhibited all the factors commonly used to define folklore except the criterion of orality. The

variation, repetition, and informal transmission of tangible items such as photocopies of hand-drawn cartoons qualified them as folk materials worthy of being studied. Their work demonstrated that occupational folklore and folklife were not restricted to rural, agricultural or poor peoples, but were typical of people sharing situational space and time in virtually any place of employment. I had expected Dundes and Pagter's research to be applicable to the foreign teacher community, as their jobs are white-collar, professional work in a business environment. While foreign teachers do constitute a folk group, they generate and transmit little in the way of folk material culture, share space with Korean colleagues without having much input in office cultures or business decisions, and are as marginalized in their work culture as they are in Korean society. Interestingly, even though foreign teachers work in this type of setting described in Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded (1975), they are not well-incorporated in the social structures of their schools and often remain outsiders, possibly due to cultural or language barriers, or because they will so soon be gone. They share situational space and time, but not in the sense that Dundes and Pagter delineate – they share space in that they reside and are immersed in the same country and culture for bounded, overlapping periods of time. Their workplaces may be distant from each other, but they must come to grips with the same problems while they are in Korea and this contributes to a shared point of view and sense of belonging to the same community. Once they leave, of course, that time ends, the community is fragmented, and most of them will never see or hear from each other again.

A.E. Green's 1978 essay "Only Kidding: Joking Among Coal Miners," originally presented at the Annual Conference of the British Sociological Association, addresses humor among coal miners and the oppositional power it has in the work environment. Green's miners use caustic humor both to express their resentment of workplace practices and conditions and as

an expression of the group's solidarity. Foreign teachers' narratives and joking asides often have similarly scathing overtones, which are not often understood by those who do not share their experiences or perspectives. More than one reader of this thesis has asked what my informants would think of it, because the narratives herein seem harsh. They, like me, accept the tales as par for the course and relatively unremarkable, as we have all heard numerous similar tales presented in a like manner. Like the New Yorkers in Eleanor Wachs Crime-Victim Stories: New York City's Urban Folklore (1988), they are "telling stories about significant events in their daily lives" (xi) and "[the] audience accepts these stories without question because they reinforce something that they already know: being streetwise or street smart is essential when living in New York" (7). Foreign teachers' narratives manifest a similar philosophy in that it behooves *waegooks* to understand the surrounding culture, to be wary as they participate in it, even as their stories reveal their suspicion and distrust. Friends and relatives, on hearing such stories, will often ask why the teller would return to Korea, as so many of us do. In a similar vein, Cornelia Cody's "'Only in New York': The New York City Personal Experience Narrative" (2005) explores how the stories New Yorkers tell to and of themselves reflect their knowledge of place, even the unpleasant bits. Cody asserts:

If tellers of New York personal narrative foreground the negative, they do so humorously. They have to, in order to reconcile the dangers, threats, and inconveniences of the city with the fact that they have chosen to live here. Finding the humor in everyday travails also transforms narrators from victims to survivors. 'Yes,' they imply, 'I was scared, hassled, annoyed, or threatened ... but I lived to tell the tale. (2005, 220)

Like the stories of the New Yorkers that Wachs and Cody studied, foreign teachers' narratives reflect their awareness of what it means to be a *waegook*, along with a certain pride in having conquered the challenges of life in Korea, even as they spotlight the very things that make life there so exasperating. As part of their esoteric occupational folklore, these narratives prepare

listeners for situations they may not have encountered and provide “mechanisms by which the group can psychologically handle the unexpected” (Wachs, 1988, xii).

Similar to A.E. Green’s essay, Santino’s exploration of narrative, work, and hierarchical structure in “Characteristics of Occupational Narratives” is concerned with “being on the wrong end of a status hierarchy lead[ing] to some very real resentment” (Santino 1978, 211). As with the miners, engineers, and trainmen, foreign teachers and their Korean employers have “a relationship of interdependence” with “an explicit hierarchy of responsibility and status” (Santino 1978, 211). Society in Korea is hierarchical in nature, due to Confucian influences described more fully in Chapter 3, so any relationship foreigners have with Koreans is also hierarchical (whether the foreigner understands this or not) and thus exhibits subordinate and superordinate characteristics. This contributes to intercultural difficulties in the workplace, and the differences between Western and Korean workplace culture mean that pranks by Westerners on Korean supervisors or employers scarcely ever occur on the job. This carries over into everyday life in Korea, as well, which also constitutes part of the work of being a foreign teacher, with equally little recourse for venting frustrations. Foreign teachers are thus denied an outlet for the stresses they are subject to and are more likely to “seek vicarious release for their resentment of subordination in narrative” (Santino 1978, 211). Doing a midnight run is indicative of individuals having reached the threshold of their tolerance and, when regarded as a rejection of subordination, is the ultimate prank in its finality as it denies the superordinate the opportunity to respond or reassert authority.

As mentioned earlier, Robert McCarl’s The District of Columbia Fire Fighters’ Project: A Case Study in Occupational Folklife (1985) was pivotal in my examination of foreign teacher’s work culture, though it presented a conundrum at first. Without a locus or shared

traditions, scattered as they are across the country, it was difficult to see how McCarl's canon of work technique applied to foreign teachers. McCarl's notion of a "canon of work technique" is a set of skills:

perceived as being central because in their daily performance and the verbal evaluations of [their] performance, they comprise a focused body of informally held standards that reveal in their detail and specificity what the workers themselves see as most crucial to the successful execution of [their] tasks. (McCarl 1985, 28)

Such canons are particularly crucial in dangerous occupations such as police work or firefighting, as McCarl studied, or heavily industrialized occupations like foundry work, logging, or oil drilling. Foreign teachers have little opportunity to observe each other working or to share information to improve teaching success, but they do observe one another's interactions with Koreans and hear in their narratives how such interactions are presented. By framing the idea of a canon of work technique in a new context I was able to see that it manifested at the intersection of work and Korean culture and that its standards were linked to the job, but not necessarily to the *work*. Successful navigation of Korean culture and expatriate life were the canon by which individuals were measured. Deviation from the canon or failure to meet the necessary standards could very well result in loss of life in the heavy industries McCarl discussed, but is rarely a concern in white-collar settings. In the contextually-adapted canon of work technique I have proposed for foreign teachers, however, failure to thrive in Korean culture results in departure, which essentially renders that individual "dead" to the community. Dearly departed, if you will.

For my purposes, especially valuable sources relating to occupational folklore include Gary Alan Fine's "Justifying Work: Occupational Rhetorics as Resources in Restaurant Kitchens" (1996), particularly in regards to identity in the workplace, Jack Santino's "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives" (1978), and Martin Laba's "Urban Folklore: A Behavioral Approach" (1979). In discussing "work as a bulwark of identity" (1996, 90-91; after



Snow and Anderson 1987), Fine's examination of restaurant employees led me to consider to what extent this is true of foreign teachers. In particular, if "[t]hrough occupational rhetoric, workers justify their work and explain to themselves and their public why what they do is admirable and/or necessary, a form of impression management" (Fine 1996, 90), what does this mean for a group that often complains of how little impact they are able to have at work? "Arguing that the choice of an occupational rhetoric solves identity problems for the worker" (1996, 92), Fine provides a means of unpacking the implications of foreign teachers' rhetoric about their work. Even jaded foreign teachers are able to emphasize those positive effects they are able to achieve, despite the conditions in which they are working. Like the cooks Fine describes, foreign teachers "use a range of occupational rhetorics as resources to provide a sense of self-worth" (1996, 111), often touting success with their classes or positive connections with their students, despite the obstacles to effective teaching they encounter. Their ability to persevere and survive in the work and culture despite feeling unappreciated or expendable becomes laudable. In conjunction with the canon of work technique I propose, it would be expected that narratives of interactions would comprise a portion of foreign teachers' occupational rhetoric of admirable or necessary behavior, and they do. Like Wachs' crime victim narratives (1988, 12), their stories are testimonials to their resilience and ability to survive, and even thrive, in difficult circumstances.

Robert P. Kearney's book The Warrior Worker: The History and Challenges of South Korea's Economic Miracle (1991) and Roger Janelli and Dawnhee Yim's essay "Gender Construction in the Offices of a South Korean Conglomerate" (2002) were helpful in clarifying some of the power structures in the Korean workplace. Hierarchical relationships in Korea are ubiquitous, so understanding them comprises an essential part of Westerners' adaptation to the

culture and analyses of them are conspicuous in the folklore of the group. Because the folkloric material that I collected within this particular occupational niche consists almost entirely of personal experience narratives, material on that subject was as important in understanding the working world of foreign teachers in Korea as other research on occupational folklore. Thomas Dunk's book It's a Working Man's Town: Male Working-Class Culture (1991) provided additional insight to occupational narratives and what they reveal about the narrators, their perception of their status in the work environment and the local community, and the attitudes and perspectives they may serve to perpetuate. In the case of the men Dunk studied, the group's folklore incorporated sexist and racist subtexts, while the foreign teachers I studied (or have known) often manifested orientalist, sexist, and racist attitudes through their narratives. All of these materials enriched my understanding of foreign teachers' occupational culture and narratives and, most especially, enabled me to discern that the work of the community takes place not only in the schools, but also in everyday encounters with all manner of Koreans.

## **2.5 Foodways**

When not at work, gatherings of foreign teachers in Korea commonly include the consumption of food and beverages and, in fact, are often constructed around such consumption. Whether meeting in pairs or as a group, in a coffee shop, over a beer at a local bar, in a restaurant for a meal, hanging out at a street vendor's cart, or, more rarely, in the comfort of someone's home, we eat and drink. Foodways scholarship provides the tools for analyzing these events, decoding their significance, and decoding the meaning of the group's folk customs.

One scholar whose work has greatly influenced foodways scholarship is Claude Lévi-Strauss, who took linguistic concepts and structuralist theories and methodologies and applied them to the question of food and culture. While not expressly a study of foodways, the first volume of his Mythologies, titled The Raw and the Cooked (1983), dealt with food preparation

stages and culture and is often cited in foodways research. For Lévi-Strauss, "the cooking of a society is a language into which it unconsciously translates its structure – or else resigns itself, still unconsciously, to revealing its contradictions" (1997, 35). In a country where the national dish is *kimchi*, described in most texts as “fermented vegetables” but so often described by foreigners in Korea as “rotten vegetables,” foodways matter. The food triangle Lévi-Strauss delineated classifies foods "within a triangular semantic field whose three points correspond respectively to the categories of the raw, the cooked and the rotted" (1997, 29). The semantics of food are present in the procurement and consumption choices individuals make while abroad.

Mary Douglas drew attention to the covert implications of food choice and avoidance in her work Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (1970). Douglas explored food as a code and asserted "the messages it encodes will be found in the social relations being expressed," and that "message is about different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across the boundaries" (1970, 249). She analyzed the allusions to dietary law in the Bible, particularly in Leviticus, and proposed a schema for the underlying factors that proscribed foods shared. Douglas describes her approach to this research saying, "I am going to argue that our ideas of dirt also express symbolic systems and that the difference between pollution behavior in one part of the world and another is only a matter of detail" (1970, 47). In later essays, such as "Deciphering a Meal" (1997, 36-54), Douglas elaborated on the ways in which food is coded and can be evaluated for meaning and this is important for a group whose activities are marked by food consumption. If meals are coded, the potential meaning in any given food-sharing event could be explored as a decipherable message within the group, which means the inclusion of comestibles at *waegook* gatherings merits examination. Nick Holmes, an informant currently residing in Korea, recently mentioned on

Facebook that he is no longer included when his employer and fellow Korean teachers go out for company dinners, a reflection of the turmoil and oppositional relationships he describes in his workplace (Holmes 2019). The choice, or rejection, of commensality reflects the boundaries drawn between those who participate and those who fall outside the margins. Both Douglas's and Lévi-Strauss's work on how food may be invested with semantic meaning inspired me to question foreign teachers' interactions with food: in public, in private, in their everyday life, and at special seasons and celebrations.

The contributors to Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell's Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performance of Group Identity (1984) were primarily concerned with how food events intersected with questions of identity and belonging. The essays it contains, food-related case studies by scholars across the disciplines, emphasize ethnicity and identity as expressed through food, and are concerned with coding and the messages about self that commensal activities are conveying. While food had often been seen as relating to ethnicity, being analyzed as part of individual identity, whether ethnic, regional, or constructed, expands our understanding of its role in folk culture. All of this has bearing on food procurement, sharing, and consumption choices foreigners make while living abroad and what particular foods represent to them. A hamburger on any given day at home does not speak to identity in the way that a hamburger in South Korea, thousands of miles from home, means after months without one. Comfort Food: Meanings and Memories, edited by Michael Owen Jones and Lucy M. Long (2017), contains essays that look at what additional meanings that hamburger may carry for its consumer. If the "taste of food conjures images of the past or particular people; its aromas remind one of places; its texture can take one back to a previous experience" (Jones and Long, 2017, 9), then eating a hamburger constitutes a means of transporting oneself via the senses. For

a homesick individual, the comfort derived from a familiar food is a buffer against the here and now, just as, once they return home, a meal of Korean foods is a means of revisiting their time there.

The essays in "We Gather Together": Food and Festival in American Life (1991), edited by Theodore Humphrey, Sue Samuelson and Lin T. Humphrey, explore the role and meaning of food in celebratory contexts. Whether on a particular holiday, as with Sharon Sherman's "The Passover Seder: Ritual Dynamics, Foodways, and Family Folklore" (1991, 27), or a festival, as in Jim Griffith's "We Always Call It 'Tucson Eat Yourself': The Role of Food at a Constructed Festival" (1991, 219), or a casual, cyclical gathering such as Lin T. Humphrey's "'Soup Night': Community Creation through Foodways" (1991, 53), food carries meaning for those who partake. Such research exposes potential meanings encoded in food when foreign teachers meet at coffee shops before work, or at restaurants on the weekend, or come together to create a holiday meal evocative of home. While gatherings as a group generally include food and drink, more private events and the food choices involved include additional layers of meaning.

The interconnectedness of ethnicity, foodways, culture, and identity make foodways an integral part of a larger picture and several essays in Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life (1991), edited by Stephen Stern and John Allan Cicala, draw connections that are relevant to commensality among foreign teachers. "Pasties in Michigan's Upper Peninsula: Foodways, Interethnic Relations, and Regionalism" (1991, 3-20) by Yvonne R. Lockwood and William G. Lockwood and "'I Gave Him a Cake': An Interpretation of Two Italian-American Weddings" (1991, 44-54) by Janet S. Theophano both focus on the connections between food and social life within particular groups. Since foreign teachers make an effort to

recreate familiar foodways, food as evocation of home, tradition, and family is especially significant – for some, the foodways in Korea are enough to make them return home.

Culinary Tourism (2004), edited by Lucy Long, is an excellent collection of essays exploring the intersection of place, foodways, and tourism from a variety of perspectives. In many ways, *waegooks* approach Korean food experiences in the same way as tourists, with an emphasis on authenticity, what Long describes as "a hallmark of touristic experiences, culinary included" (2004, xii). Their long-term residence often makes them feel entitled to claim particular expertise in recognizing authenticity in the Korean foods they consume, another mark of their *waegook* status in Korea. Another text with a similar focus is Food Tourism Around the World (Hall, Sharples, Mitchell, Macionis, and Cambourne, 2003), but its emphasis on marketing puts it rather outside the scope of this study.

Expatriate living, by definition, is travel abroad and the eating experiences of tourists share much in common with those of expatriates, as seen in many of the publications relating to tourism studies. Holly Everett raises questions about tourist expectations and the realities of local food consumption in "Vernacular Health Moralities and Culinary Tourism in Newfoundland and Labrador" (2009). Tourists assume an authenticity in their consumption of native foods, regardless of whether they are eating something that in any way resembles local food procurement or consumption. Whether you are passing through or staying for a while, consuming *kimchi*, dried squid, or any of the many other unfamiliar foods of Korea will provide the untutored palate of tourist or expatriate with a comparable experience. Indeed, consuming local foods reinforces a sense of identity as a traveler/expatriate/adventurer and becomes a part of the performance of that identity when one consumes these foods after returning home. Like many who return from Korea, I introduced my family and friends to various Korean foods, some

because they were delicious and some for the shock factor. Because foodways are such an integral part of foreign teachers' lives in Korea, both as a topic of discussion, a locus and focus for meeting, and a matter of daily concern, foodways among foreign teachers are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

## **2.6 Performance**

The fundamentality of performance and of folk narrative to the foreign teacher folk groups only became clear in the latter stages of writing this thesis, though I had included performance in my research as it overlapped with the materials of the previous sections of this chapter. I came to realize that performance is integral to the experience of expatriate life in Korea, as there is little that occurs that does not have some sense of being performed. Simply leaving one's home and walking down the street draws enough attention to make one feel on display, moving to a front area, as Goffman might describe it (1959), as there is an inescapable awareness of being watched and having an audience. Every day, foreign teachers must behave in accordance with Korean culture and customs to the best of their ability, and their performance is evaluated by both foreigners and Koreans. One colleague from my first year in Korea told me how annoying it was that I changed my tone and pitch when speaking with Koreans, perhaps seeing it as overly submissive. I had not noticed my altered speech until he pointed it out, but was very conscious of it thereafter, especially when in mixed Korean/foreign company. Similarly, one informant spoke of not needing to "[go] into a Korean role" with her doctor, because he was married to a Russian woman and did not expect it (I\*M. Steyn 2007). Her comment indicated that she customarily changed her behavior so as to fit in and was aware of performing when interacting with Koreans. These particular aspects of performance relate to the occupational aspects of being a foreign teacher in Korea, dealing as they do with surviving in and adapting to this new way of life. Thus, the positioning of performance at the end of the

literature review is a reflection of the evolution of my own ideas and research throughout working on this thesis rather than an indication of its relevance to the subject.

In addition to performance vis à vis Korean customs and expectations, there is the performance of narratives, particularly personal experience narratives, that are so essential to socialization and networking with other teachers. Bauman's Verbal Art As Performance (1984) is a foundational work in understanding narrative performance, and inspired or influenced much of the research on narrative cited in this section. Of more personal stories, Dolby-Stahl maintains that sharing personal experience narratives creates a sense of intimacy in their performance, bringing teller and audience closer (1985). These subjective accounts of life events in Korea can break the ice among new acquaintances, inform and entertain the group, communicate individual perspectives on life in Korea, and reveal the teller's problem-solving abilities under duress. Choices of tone and emphasis, gestures, and facial expressions clue audiences in as to how the narrator intends their story to be interpreted. They also help to establish the teller's knowledge of Korean culture and level of experience relative to other listeners; do they know when to bow, how and with whom to exhibit deference, or who is supposed to pour drinks for whom at Korean social gatherings?

When neophyte foreign teachers tell their initiatory horror stories, they frequently exhibit a tone, pacing, and vocabulary that signals shock and outrage, a style intended to provoke a similar reaction from their audience. Narrators include innumerable details in building their narrative, repeat fragments they perceive as most important, and emphasize how they have been wronged. An experienced expatriate might make the story humorous, skip over details, or provide a coda in Labov and Waletzky's terms (1997), to show what they have since learned about why incidents happened. Rather than being shocked by initiatory horror stories, they are



more likely to be nonchalant or even amused, perhaps disappointing the storyteller, but modeling *waegook* canon. Such a response implies a sense of distance, a longer perspective, and the development of a fuller understanding of Korean culture and the foreign teacher's place within it.

Always important is William Hugh Jansen's "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" (1965), wherein "A group's image of itself and its images of other groups are reflected in its folklore repertoire" (43). Esoteric factors in the folklore strengthen group members' sense of belonging from within, while exoteric factors serve to emphasize difference from another group, but are often rooted in fear, resentment, or suspicion. The applications for this thesis are clear, as so much information within the foreign teacher community is transmitted informally, whether face-to-face or via other media. The content of such transmissions is imbued with folklore reflecting beliefs about the foreign teacher community, Korean attitudes toward it, Orientalist notions, and other ideas that reinforce the sense of in-group belonging. Much of this is manifest in the personal experience narratives that foreign teachers perform when they socialize.

Dégh's essay "Folk Narrative," also in Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, echoes Dorson's sentiments, saying that the study of folk narrative had been centered on the folktale for 100 years, but in the wake of World War II, needed to be more inclusive of other forms (1972, 59). Additionally, in her discussion of legend she says, "the legend is extremely variable, reacting sensitively to local and immediate needs that modify and reformulate both the narratives and the messages they communicate" (1972, 73). Her description of legend-telling is evocative of foreign teacher narratives in South Korea, particularly the initiatory horror stories, where the details may differ, but the form, the message, and the context are all familiar. Dégh and Vázsonyi's "The Hypothesis of Multi-Conduit Transmission in Folklore" (1975) intersected with network theory to inform my initial approach to studying the foreign teacher community. Most

personal experience narratives do not circulate in the way that legends do, but in their content and performance, they have much in common.

Foreign teachers' narratives are often performed in a group setting and Barbara Allen's "Personal Experience Narratives: Use and Meaning in Interaction" in Folk Groups and Folklore Genres: A Reader (1986), analyzes the forms, use, and interpretation of PENs. She points out that, "Personal experience narratives tend to occur in clusters or rounds" (237) where one person's PEN inspires someone else to relate a PEN that shares similarities in theme or subject within that conversational context. Santino describes this as a "story swapping event" in "Characteristics of Occupational Narratives" (1978). Both descriptions are analogous with foreign teachers' performance of their personal experience narratives. It is a rare gathering of foreign teachers where such rounds do not occur, with one story (particularly on the Korean experience) leading to another and another, while listeners anxiously wait their turn to chime in and hope the topic does not drift to the point where their own stories no longer fit. Eagerness to fit their narrative into the appropriate slot means that interruptions and overlap are part of the dynamic of the performance, as well.

Other works touching on performance of personal experience narratives that informed my exploration of the material I collected include Richard Bauman's "Verbal Art as Performance" (1984) and "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore" (2000), as well as Sandra K. Dolby-Stahl's "A Literary Folkloristic Methodology for the Study of Meaning in Personal Narrative" (1985). Bauman's "Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore" (2000), in particular, helped in understanding how their personal experience narratives provided foreign teachers with a means of setting themselves apart, both from Koreans and from anyone who had not undertaken the *waegook* lifestyle. From Donald Braid's "Personal Narrative and Experiential

Meaning” (1996) I drew the concept of listeners’ ability to understand the framing and “follow” the flow of a narrative. Such considerations may be, in part, why PENs of life in Korea are more often shared with others who have been there than with friends and family, because without the understanding of what that life entails and the contextualized understanding of what they describe, they fail to convey sufficient meaning to be interesting. In our discussion of trying to tell our stories about life in Korea to friends and family back home in South Africa, Melanie Steyn speculated on why we would lose our audience when we talk too long about it:

**Kelly:** And so how do you translate that experience [of life in South Korea for other people]? You really can’t.

**Melanie:** And you know what I find is that people have really limited interest in it and you come across as a person who is bragging about having been abroad and you aren’t, you’re trying to share an experience but, because they cannot conceive of the real experience, (Kelly: Mm-hm.) they, they very quickly lose interest. Yeah.

**Kelly:** You’ve just explained something for me, because you were talking before about parts of you get walled up [while living in Korea]. (Melanie: Mm. Mm.) Well, when you go home from this experience, this is what gets walled up.

**Melanie:** Yes! Exactly.

**Kelly:** And this is why, when you meet someone else who has done this (Melanie: Mm.) that wall comes down immediately.

**Melanie:** That is a good connection.

**Kelly:** But [when you have that conversation with former foreign teachers] ... People around you will watch in amazement as you joke about *kimchi* and what (Melanie: Yes.) Koreans did on this occasion (Melanie: Yes.) and what you did. And it really explains a lot because you have all of that in common and it is important.

**Melanie:** It is important, I mean, it was an experience all on your own when you bravely went off (Kelly: Yeah.) and yeah, and it matters to you. Of course it does. (I\*M. Steyn 2007).

Listeners outside of Korea do not usually have the framing that would allow them to follow the meaning as a knowledgeable audience would. But among *waegooks*, performance of your

narratives is an expected part of your interactions and that sense of intimacy, of belonging to a community, is quickly established.

Also mentioned in previous sections is Paredes's work on performance in a multi-cultural context in his studies of border communities, Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border (1993). Paredes explores esoteric and exoteric folklore along the border and analyzes how culture contact and conflict manifest in the songs and stories of those who occupy the boundaries between. Rosan Jordan's "Tension and Speech Play in Mexican-American Folklore" (1981) pursues similar avenues of research and questions what is lost when trying to fit in with another culture and the ways that struggle emerges in performance. Both are concerned with questions of performance, audience, and self-presentation in a bi-cultural setting. That foreign teachers are performing in different ways for multiple audiences, and are drawn from multiple cultures, makes these works of interest in discussing their place on the Korean scene.

## **2.7 Summary of Literature Selection**

While the literature delineated in this chapter encompasses broad terrain, it facilitates a cohesive and thorough examination of my group of informants. The networking materials aid in evaluating how foreign teachers coalesce and disperse in the small, emergent groups that enable these expatriates to survive without the support systems of family and friends that they have left behind at home. The research on groups and communities clarifies how foreign teachers are creating social connections in a vacuum, arriving knowing no one and forming bonds with total strangers, some of whom will become central to their lives in South Korea. Similarly, upon arriving in Korea they become part of a marginalized group where their identity and ethnicity are in sharp contrast with the more homogenous majority population. For some, this will be their first experience of being a minority and research on similar experiences among other groups helps to make sense of their reactions. For the individuals themselves, it is the performance of

personal experience narratives that helps them to make sense of their new lives abroad, to understand their role and position in society, and define their identities for and among their fellows. Additionally, because it is an occupation that draws these individuals to South Korea, folklore studies along these lines make sense of similar material in this thesis. Surprisingly, though, the nature of what constitutes an occupation is altered by the expatriate context and leads to an expanded understanding of its definition. Foodways are at the heart of lives of foreign teachers in Korea, whether it is their adaptation to new foods, their search for familiar tastes and ingredients, or their narratives of their experiences with Koreans and food. Many of the most lively gatherings of foreign teachers take place in conjunction with the sharing of food and are rich terrain for both this study and further research in the future. Lastly, performance is a thread that runs through all of this work, as in Korea it seems that eyes are always watching and evaluating how successfully a foreigner has integrated with that environment. On that stage, words, gestures, and expressions are part and parcel of navigating society and how well one performs determines how successful they will be in that environment.

## **Chapter 3: Korea, Foreign Influence, and Intercultural Transmission**

### **3.1 Korean Contact with the West**

According to the Facts About Korea guide (2003), produced by the Korean Overseas Information Service, “Koreans are one ethnic family and speak one language. Sharing distinct physical characteristics, they are believed to be descendants of several Mongol tribes that migrated onto the Korean Peninsula from Central Asia” (13). In that brief passage lies a key to understanding how Koreans see themselves and how they interact with outsiders. The guide goes on to say, “Such homogeneity has enabled Koreans to be relatively free from ethnic problems and to maintain a firm solidarity with one another” (13). This text, written for a Korean government publication intended to introduce foreigners to their history and culture, is an idealization of the Korean people. According to the guide, they conceive of themselves as one people, throughout recorded history, their ethnicity enduring and undiluted, occupying the same land, and standing together to face threats, especially against outsiders. While there are limits to how accurate such generalizations can be, there is abundant evidence that Korea has benefitted from such popular conceptualizations, as they have been utilized to motivate Koreans to unite and sacrifice for the greater good. Because “Korean society traditionally emphasizes the group over the individual” (Tudor, 2012, 64), in part due to Confucianist influences discussed later in this chapter, Koreans are often willing to make sacrifices in order to improve conditions for their family, classmates, company, military cohort, and/or country. It is one factor in their remarkable economic growth in the wake of brutal invasion, occupation, and war; it is also part of why so many are troubled by the division of the peninsula into North and South Korea.

When Koreans speak of their history, they trace it back at least as far as the Old Chosŏn dynasty, beginning around the fourth century B.C., though evidence of occupation in the peninsula goes back even farther (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 2-4, 13-16). That long history has been

anything but peaceful, however, and there is a centuries-long tradition of Korean distrust of and resistance to outside influences. Although the first European in Korea is believed to have been a priest who arrived in 1594, “few Westerners entered Korea before the country was open[ed] to the outside world in 1876” (Chung 2006, 42). After the mid-1800s, “Korea embarked on a policy that earned it the title of the Hermit Kingdom. Interaction with Western nations was forbidden, and Westerners who attempted to ignore the policy suffered the consequences” (Kearney 1991, 68).<sup>10</sup> Korean perception of their position in the region is reflected in the proverb that refers to them as “a shrimp between whales” (Le Bas 2003, 27), surrounded by more powerful political entities, historically Japan and China and more recently Russia and the United States (Kenneth B. Lee 1997, 184). As one observer put it, in trying to explain Koreans’ apparent dislike of foreigners, “They may have 5000 years of history, but they’ve spent the vast majority of that time being poor, powerless, and subjugated, having been invaded a whopping 800 times...The predictable outcome of all this...is that outsiders are routinely accorded suspicion” (Parfitt 2008, 6). When exploring a topic relating to foreigners on Korean soil, it is valuable to have some grasp of the origins of Korean attitudes toward visitors. Mutual misunderstandings, rooted in cultural and ideological frameworks, permeate their history of contact with outsiders.

Disappointingly, though not surprisingly, historical accounts of Westerners’ initial reactions to the native peoples and cultures of Asian lands are remarkably congruent with accounts being written to this day by foreigners in such diverse countries as China, Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. The stereotypes and tropes examined by Said in Orientalism (1994) still flourish and have roots throughout the region. The early efforts of Western explorers to “open”

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<sup>10</sup> Titles of early accounts of Korea from the period, such as A Forbidden Land: Voyages to the Corea (Oppert 1832) and The Hermit Nation (Griffis 1880), reflect its isolationist policy and the origins of the nickname. Griffis remarks, “Corea cannot long remain a hermit nation” (1880, 10), but he implies the term was general to nations in the region when he refers to Korea as “the last of the hermit nations” (1880, x), in conjunction with Japan and China.

these countries to trade and/or exploration, and the resistance of indigenous populations, echo in attitudes towards foreigners in Korea today. An examination of the history of foreign presence in South Korea, therefore, is enlightening in terms of understanding both the attitudes of Koreans toward foreigners in their land as well as the mind-set foreigners bring with them to Korea, colored as it may be by the vestiges of colonial stereotypes.

Isabella Bird visited Korea in 1894 and 1897, publishing an account of her travels, Korea and Her Neighbors (1985), in the wake of her second visit. In her book, written little more than a decade after the “Hermit Kingdom” first was opened to foreigners, Bird declared that Koreans had “the Oriental vices of suspicion, cunning, and untruthfulness, and trust between man and man is unknown” (1985, 13-14). Bird was a 63-year-old widow at the time of her second visit to Korea, but had already earned a reputation as an intrepid traveler, publishing a series of books documenting her travels and travails. These included, among others, The Englishwoman in America (1856), The Hawaiian Archipelago (1882), Journeys in Persia and Kurdistan (1891), A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains (1893), and Korea and Her Neighbors (1897). Hers was one of the first detailed books on Korea, and colonialist and orientalist themes are present throughout, Bird's perspective being typical of Western visitors to Asia at the time. In it, she provided an eyewitness account during a pivotal moment in Korea’s history, as dramatic shifts with long-term consequences for the country occurred. In the introduction to the original text, Pat Barr writes:

In the period of Isabella’s visits between 1894 and ’97 China’s long-held suzerainty of the country ended and drastic social and political reforms were precipitately imposed by the Japanese – the first stage in their ambitious plans for the domination of Asia ... Other major powers also became aware at this time of the country’s strategic importance as a buffer state, an unenviable role that has brought it much suffering and conflict ever since. (Bird, 1985, 2)



The political machinations of the Japanese, Russians, and Chinese in their struggle to use Korea for their own ends rendered it more interesting to Bird. She declared, “My first journey produced the impression that Korea is the most uninteresting country I ever travelled in, but during and since the war its political perturbations, rapid changes, and possible destinies, have given me an intense interest in it” (Bird, 1985, 5), going on to say that Korea asserts “a strong grip on all who reside in it sufficiently long to overcome the feeling of distaste which at first it undoubtedly inspires” (Bird, 1985, 5). It is difficult to see this assessment as complimentary, since she seemed to take more interest in why Korea might be fought over than in the people and culture in and of themselves.

In publishing her accounts, Bird was helping to promulgate images of other lands that would color the perceptions of those who followed her, whether into the wilds of the Rockies or the Far East. A century later, in her 1999 book Victorian Travelers and the Opening of China, Susan Schoenbauer Thurin notes that:

[According] to [Edward] Said, the Orient is not so much...a discrete place, but also an entity over which the West can exert power. The orientalist ‘makes the Orient speak’ rather than listens to it. By ‘representing it or speaking in its behalf’ the orientalist, by which Said means the Westerner, projects the Orient as weak or decadent, a topos of the exotic, cruel, and barbarous, or whatever is considered to be non-Western. (18)

Bird, and other travelers and explorers like her, influenced how the average Westerner might envision Asian lands and peoples through their publications. Her impressions of Busan (called “Fusan” in her account) provide an example of the tone she sets in the book, saying:

A miserable place I thought it, and later experience showed that it was neither more nor less miserable than the general run of Korean towns. Its narrow dirty streets consist of low hovels built of mud-smear'd wattle without windows, straw roofs, and deep eaves, a black smoke hole in every wall 2 feet from the ground, and outside most are irregular ditches containing solid and liquid refuse. Mangy dogs and bleary-eyed children, half or wholly naked, and scaly with dirt, roll in the deep dust or slime, or pant and blink in the sun, apparently unaffected by the stench which abound. But market day hid much that is repulsive. Along the whole length of the narrow, dusty, crooked street, the wares were

laid out on mats on the ground, a man or an old woman, bundled up in dirty white cotton, guarding each. And the sound of bargaining rose high, and much breath was spent on beating down prices, which did not amount originally to the tenth part of a farthing. The goods gave an impression of poor buyers and small trade. (Bird, 1985, 27).

Despite asserting that market days put a better face on things, her depiction continues with the disapproving litany of shortcomings, leaving the reader with the impression that even at its best, Korea disappointed her. Such narratives impacted not only the casual reader, but potentially influenced policy and international relations, as well.

Throughout eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial expansion, the West held the military and economic advantage and thus dominance in portraying the nature of Asian cultures, Orientalizing and promulgating stereotypes. What the West knew of China was from Western sources in Asia. Works by missionaries, adventurers, and envoys who reached the Far East, including Bird's Korea and Her Neighbors, disseminated beliefs and assumptions to Westerners who might never see the lands described, but whose conception of them were shaped by Orientalist thought. Edward Said identifies two important factors in these relations, saying:

Since the middle of the eighteenth century there [were] two principal elements in the relation between East and West. One was growing systematic knowledge in Europe about the Orient, knowledge reinforced by the colonial encounter as well as by the widespread interest in the alien and unusual ...

The other...was that Europe was always in a position of strength, not to say domination...the essential relationship, on political, cultural, and even religious grounds, was seen – in the West, which is what concerns us here – to be one between a strong and a weak partner. (1994, 39-40)

Said explains that the imbalance in power relations permitted development of a set of tropes and vocabulary, which “are to the actual Orient as stylized costumes are to characters in a play” and that “we need not look for correspondence between the language used to depict the Orient and the Orient itself, not so much because the language is inaccurate but because it is not even trying to be accurate” (1994, 71). In her essay “Salvaging the Savage,” Choy describes how Filipinos

were exhibited in the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, just a few years after Bird's adventures in Korea. Choy writes, "Colonial travel literature and photography were not the only modes of corporeal colonization of Filipinos. Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century World's Fairs exhibited Filipino bodies at multiple fairs through the United States" (2003, 40). "In these historical contexts," she says, "the words and the images of savage, monkey, and dogeater are inextricably linked to racism, resistance and violence" (Choy, 2003, 39) towards Filipinos in the United States. Growing from the earliest days of intercultural contact, the tropes and vocabulary of Orientalism produced, and continue to produce, negative stereotypes in the West, which in turn affect interactions between Asians – whether Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, or others – and foreigners. It is no coincidence that the residue of such tropes and stereotypes may be discerned in the discourse of foreign teachers, as well as in the cultural products of Western nations, including literature, film, media, and popular culture.

The direction of Western attention with regard to Asia over the past two centuries often depended on the colonial and trade interests of the country in question. For example, France, Spain, Portugal and Britain, respectively, focused on economic ventures in Vietnam, the Philippines, Macau, and Hong Kong (Patten 1998; SarDesai 2003; Thurin 1999). But Korea repelled advances from Britain, France, and the United States in an effort to remain isolated and uncontaminated by the encroaching West (Eckert et al. 1990; Ki-baik Lee 1984). The country is often regarded (in the region as well as in the West) as an adjunct to its larger, more powerful neighbors, and thus the actions and policies of other nations have tended to overshadow Korea. As one scholar puts it, "What remains unchanged and unchangeable is the geographical location of the Korean peninsula, tightly enveloped by the three big neighboring powers" which has meant it "has long been a highly contested strategic crossroads, the site of great power rivalry

and sanguinary wars” (S. Kim 2004, 5). The three “big neighboring powers” Kim refers to here are China, Japan, and Russia, each of which has aspired to take control of the Korean peninsula. After a series of international incidents in the late 1800s, engineered largely by the Japanese, the “Hermit Nation” began to establish relations with nations other than imperial China. These events would lead to Korea’s assertion of independence from China, which, ironically, would deprive her of her main source of protection from Japanese colonial aspirations (Bird 1985, 19; Ki-baik Lee 1984, 288-290; Rees 2001, 16).

Historically, Korea’s relationships with her powerful neighbors were often marked by invasion and subjugation in whole or in part by more powerful nations (Eckert et al. 1990; Latourette 1963; Kenneth B. Lee 1997; Ki-baik Lee 1984; Parfitt 2008), but Korean culture, language, food, and traditions remain distinct from both Japanese and Chinese. Koreans are proud that they “struggled successfully for millennia to maintain their cultural and political identity despite the influence of neighboring China and the more recent aggressive inclinations of the Japanese” (Facts About Korea 2003, 11-12). Western literature on Korea shows that this small country has been exploited, politically or economically, a pawn in international relations since she first opened to the West in 1893, seemingly looking on as foreign powers determined her fate (Bird 1985; S.S. Kim 2004; Kenneth B. Lee 1997, 184). Regardless of who manipulated or controlled events on the Korean peninsula at any given time, Korea:

has been grossly underrated and misunderstood by many Western scholars...[and] major Korean historical accomplishments and contributions were often mistakenly attributed to either China or Japan. Many history books of East Asia, written by Westerners, often omit the Korean civilization entirely. This major part of East Asian history, that of Korea, has frequently been ignored. (Kenneth B. Lee 1997, xviii)

As a result, Korea is less well-known than its regional neighbors, “a place less traveled on the existing academic map” (Park 2000, 270) and traveller-explorer accounts remain influential because of it.

### **3.2 Pre-Twentieth Century International Influences on Korea**

The repeated invasions over the centuries have devastated the peninsula and much of cultural and historical import was lost or damaged; for example, today many of Korea’s most famous historic buildings are reproductions of earlier structures on the same sites, repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the losses incurred during earlier conflict and warfare, much was lost, suppressed, or left undone during the period in which Japan annexed Korea for a period of several decades. This occupation was beginning when Bird visited in 1898, as she reported pockets of Japanese occupation and their local influence, but the annexation did not become official until 1910 and it lasted until the end of World War II (Bird 1985; Eckert et al. 1990). During that time, official Japanese policy was to attempt to eradicate Korea’s native language and culture in order to more fully incorporate Koreans into the Japanese Empire (Cary et al. 1995; Eckert et al. 1990; Hur and Hur 2000; Ki-baik Lee 1984). In pursuit of this goal, “an intensive campaign was undertaken to wipe out all traces of the Koreans’ national identity” (Cary et al. 1995, 8) and Koreans were prohibited from studying their own nation and history. Thus while scholars elsewhere were advancing research on their history and culture, and theories and methodologies were evolving and changing, Korean history was being obscured, use of the Korean language was prohibited, and “the Japanese troops burned and destroyed so many

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<sup>11</sup> Multiple incursions by the Mongols during the thirteenth century left swaths of destruction and the Mongol invasion of 1254 was particularly harsh, when “many irreplaceable cultural treasures were lost, outstanding among them the nine-story wooden pagoda at Hwangnyong-sa in Kyōngju and the woodblocks for the Tripitaka...in Taegu” (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 149). Also significant was the damage done by the Japanese in 1592 when “[the] loss of cultural treasures in fires set by the Japanese troops was also substantial, including the wooden structures at Pulguk-sa in Kyōngju and Kyōngbuk Palace, while the volumes stored in three of the four History Archives (*Sago*) were reduced to ashes” (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 214).

books...that it is difficult to find source materials in Korea, even today” (Kenneth B. Lee 1997, 110). It is possible to frame Korea’s geopolitical and historical position in northeast Asian history, but such a construction must remain incomplete due to the damage to Korea’s historical record.

Given its size, proximity, interconnectedness with its smaller neighbor over the centuries, noted previously, Chinese cultural influence on pre-twentieth century Korea is critical to understanding Korea as she is today. “Although the Japanese invaded Korea several times during the Yi dynasty [1392-1910], the greatest influence on Korea through its dynastic period was the generally benign one exerted by China” (Stephens 1990, 40). Korean historian Ki-baik Lee notes, “Beginning with the Yen invasion of around 300 B.C., there...occurred a continuous penetration of Chinese political, military, and economic power into the region” (1984, 16). Lee is speaking of one of the early kingdoms on the peninsula, the Old Chosŏn, but regardless of which kingdoms existed on the Korean peninsula, centuries of military conflict were left behind in favor of accommodation. This would come to represent normative relations with China in the wake of Korea’s consolidation of the peninsula under the dominion of Koryŏ, the kingdom that supplied the name by which Korea is known in the West to this day. “Thus Koryŏ became a ‘son-in-law nation’ to [the Chinese] Yüan [dynasty]” (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 156).

Ki-baik Lee indicates the level of Korean willingness to adopt Chinese ways, saying “none of the Three Kingdoms showed any hesitation in adopting whatever elements of Chinese culture might be needful for its own development,” (1984, 45) including Chinese legal institutions, Buddhist and Confucianist ideologies, as well as the Chinese written language (1984, 45-46). Yet Lee also speaks of “[holding] China in check” (1984, 38), “contending for supremacy on the field of battle with China” (1984, 40), boldly launching attacks on and facing

attacks from China (1984, 45), and “adopting a policy of friendly relations with the more distant Chinese states and military confrontation with those closer to its borders” (1984, 46). It is an exaggeration to call Korea a former Chinese colony when Korea attempted to reverse the dynamic of the relationship at times, but Chinese hegemony in Asia was virtually inescapable and the peninsular nation consented to a state of vassalage under Chinese auspices.

One reason for reviewing Sino-Korean history is to examine the level of cultural interchange between the two nations. Without overstating China’s influence on Korea, addressing it is necessary because of changes it wrought in Korean society that persist to this day, some of which are stressors that lead to *waegook* responses like midnight runs. Of all of China’s legacies to Korean culture, it is Confucianism which “has had more influence on Korean life than any other religion or philosophy” (Peterson 2000, 137) and, as early as the fourth century, Korean states “laid great stress on inculcating the Confucian ethos as a means of maintaining their aristocratic social orders” (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 58). The pervasiveness of Confucianism in Korean culture, because of how its authoritarian aspects conflict with Western democratic ideals, frustrates and annoys foreign teachers.

It was during the Chinese Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 221) that the emperors chose “Confucian scholars over all other schools for service to the state,” (Michael 1986, 73) a move which would have far-reaching effects, eroding some of the status distinctions of formerly feudal societies and empowering the educated, as education was “assumed to raise man to a higher moral status” (Michael 1986, 47). From this ancient decision and the social evolution that resulted comes the renowned steadfast family solidarity, reverence for education, loyalty to the state, and willingness to sacrifice for the greater good that comprise some of the more positive aspects of orientalist conceptions of Asia. But the change was not without its drawbacks. “With

the adoption of Neo-Confucianism as a state creed, class distinction between the upper and lower classes was strictly enforced, and intermarriage between the upper and lower classes was forbidden, although upper-class men could have concubines and/or mistresses from the lower class” (Koo and Nahm 1997, 61). So, the assimilation of Confucian philosophy by Korean society reinforced the oppression of women and the poor, as Confucianism emphasized the importance of submitting to higher authority and maintaining a well-defined hierarchy. It would take time for the influences of Confucianism and other facets of Chinese culture to spread throughout Korea, but spread it did and, in time, was thoroughly integrated with local culture.

In China, Confucian philosophy “was introduced along with the earliest specimens of Chinese written materials around the beginning of the Christian era” (Facts... 2003, 165), and “provid[ed] the primary foundation for China’s social and political order” (Michael 1986, 47) and, by extension, had far-reaching impact on Korean culture, particularly on social hierarchical constructs. Later, neo-Confucianism, “essentially a philosophy of rule by cultivated scholars” (Moon 2002, 91) with an emphasis on “the mutual relationship of ruler and subject... [as an] intolerant doctrine, quick to reject all other teachings” (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 166) would further calcify social structures in Korea. While some scholars correctly assert that the influence of Confucian ethics can be overemphasized (Janelli and Janelli 1982, 178), a common Orientalist overreach, its effects must be addressed in some degree in any research on Korean society because “the deep penetration of Confucianism in South Korea, to a greater or lesser degree, influences every member of society” (Park and Liao 2000, 571). Foreigners, too, must learn to work and live within its strictures.

Confucian ideology is based on a hierarchy of relationships and a set of principles designed to govern the nature of all relationships, “emphasizing status distinctions (in



accordance with class, gender, and age) and the stability of social order based on harmonious interdependence among unequal members of society” (Soh 1993, 8). Confucius outlined five types of relationships and attitudes: loyalty between ruler and subject, filial piety between father and son, distinction in position between husband and wife, respect between elder and younger, and trust between friends (Hur and Hur 2000, 25). Only between friends can there be any equality of status; in all other relationships, one party is superior in status to the other, who owes deference to the higher-ranking individual. The importance of harmonious relationships also meant that while a subject owed loyalty to his king, the king should take seriously his responsibility for protecting the people over whom he was sovereign, as should the superior party in each of the vertical relationships outlined. “The importance of these relationships, their complexity, and their accompanying requirements, expectations, and obligations cannot be underestimated” (Oak and Martin 2004, 25). This hierarchy is a centuries-old tradition in Korea and is resistant to change, not least because the very language reinforces the distinctions in status with every verbal exchange. “The Korean language with its several levels of honorifics not only reflects but also helps to reinforce the inequalities in social status based on gender, age, and social positions” (Soh 1993, 73) thereby serving to maintain Confucian relational organization. “So, specific words or word endings are used ...depending on the speaker’s and the receiver’s status and relationship” (Oak and Martin 2004, 24), rendering the language uncommonly difficult to master. Egalitarian influences from the West have had some impact among younger speakers and informal speech patterns are regarded as indicative of intimacy and close relations, with some grown children now using informal patterns with their parents (Tudor, 2012, 48-49). On formal occasions or in business relations, however, hierarchical distinctions are still appropriate and significant.

With the extraordinary level of interest in China among elite Koreans beginning in the eleventh century, it was inevitable that various aspects of Chinese civilization would become integrated with Korea's own laws, culture, and traditions. Korea's proximity and relations with China ensured that they more than others in the region were consistently influenced by Chinese culture and learning. Chinese literature came to symbolize erudition and taste, and "learning in Chinese literature, poetry in particular, developed apace, gradually becoming an essential ingredient in the education of aristocratic youth" (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 134). Korean legal institutions developed parallel to those of China, and selection of civil officials came to be based on China's system of promotion according to merit, another consequence of Confucian philosophy. While theoretically a meritocracy, the upper classes had near-exclusive control of access to the education necessary to pass the tests, thereby restricting who could become a civil official. The civil selection process and the specific forms of education and preparation for it can still be seen in the education system today, including the rise of *hagwons*, as will be discussed more fully in later chapters. In this sense, the *hagwon* may be seen as a sign of democratic egalitarianism, though the advantages of wealth will always tilt the scales.

It is no small thing that for centuries the Korean language had no writing system of its own but, despite vastly different grammar structures, was instead transcribed in Chinese characters. "There was...a system used in reading Chinese texts whereby Korean grammatical elements, written in fixed patterns with Chinese characters, were inserted appropriately in the text" (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 57). The reverse is true today as Chinese characters encapsulating a body of ideas are inserted within Korean text in publications as convenient shortcuts and students are expected to learn about two thousand characters. But the Chinese, exacting as they might be when it came to their control of their vassal states, were not as interested in taking economic

advantage of them as Western explorers would later prove to be. Western colonizers came intent on stripping wealth and resources in order to enrich their distant homelands, whatever the detriment to the colonized. Such an approach had little benefit for the Chinese, whose moderated, long-term exploitation of their neighbors had proven profitable for many centuries. Korea and China's situation was mutually advantageous, as were the exchanges of wealth, knowledge, and human and cultural resources, which proceeded relatively smoothly up until the twentieth century. "The tributary system, which China enforced for long periods of time until the end of the [nineteenth] century, assured the imperial power of its dominant position, while offering some economic benefits and military protection to the vassals" (SarDesai 2003, 16). By the end of the nineteenth century, with the loss of the Sino-Japanese war and the resultant transfer of Taiwan/Formosa to the Japanese, and increasing political turmoil within its own borders, China no longer had the wherewithal to exert its influence on or extend its protection to its vassal states. Increasingly, it would be the West that would influence and try to manipulate Korea for its purposes.

The historical depth of the relationship between China and Korea and the difference in their size and regional influence makes it easy for foreigners to mistake commonalities between Korean culture and earlier Chinese culture as a deficiency in native Korean culture. This perspective developed early among foreign visitors, as is apparent when Isabella Bird says, "Chinese influence in government, law, education, etiquette, social relations, and morals is predominant. In all these respects Korea is but a feeble reflection of her powerful neighbor" (1985, 22). While researching ancestor worship in Korea nearly one hundred years after Bird's visit, Roger and Dawn Yi Janelli discovered such opinions still persisted and addressed their effects on their research, saying, "The influence of Chinese neo-Confucianism on Korean

ancestor worship has been overemphasized... During the early Yi dynasty, Korean intellectuals modified neo-Confucianism ritual procedures to make them more congruent with native traditions” (1982, 178), an adaptation that was overlooked by previous scholars or misconstrued as capitulation to Chinese practices. China’s influence, while notable in many philosophical and social constructs in Korean culture, was not to be the last of foreign cultures to wield influence there. Nevertheless, many aspects of Korean culture have remained remarkably constant regardless of pressures or impact from beyond the borders.

### **3.3 The Rise of Japanese and Western Influence**

Japan’s relations with Korea, also spanning centuries, contrast sharply with China’s in that they are notable for aggression rather than cooperation and attitudes regarding the Japanese today can still reveal a residue of resentment and/or hostility (Hur and Hur 2000, 211; Le Bas 2003, 197, 244). Prior to the end of the nineteenth century, Japan’s impact on Korean culture was less profound than China’s, though some “economic and cultural interchange also took place with Japan” (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 73). Over the centuries, in addition to general raiding along the coast and intermittent attempts at establishing trade, Japan periodically amassed the resources and determination for an attempt at expanding its influence to the mainland, as in 1592, for example (Hur and Hur 2000; Ki-baik Lee 1984). The rough seas and rugged mountains along Korea’s east coast provided a measure of protection, but any Japanese expansionist designs on the mainland required first conquering Korea en route to China.

According to Ki-baik Lee, “From early in the nineteenth century, Western nations displayed ever greater interest in establishing contact with Korea for trade and other purposes” (1984, 262). Like Japan and China, however, Korea was “adamantly opposed to Western demands for diplomatic and trade relations” (Facts... 2003, 24) and an isolationist policy was adopted in response to Western attempts to establish such relations. In the mid-1800s, ships from

assorted Western nations would occasionally arrive along the coast of Korea and send delegations or requests for permission to trade, but all such requests were denied (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 262-263). “The repeated appearances of these strange vessels could only be regarded as still another menace by a dynasty already troubled by a variety of internal ills” (Ki-baik Lee 1984, 263). Because of its larger size, economic base, and the imperial influence it had in the region, China was the focus of much of the effort to establish trade relations favorable to Western interests.

Negotiations between China and foreign powers were fraught with misconception and mutual misunderstanding from the start. As Thurin points out, “The Chinese bureaucracy regarded foreign trade as a privilege bestowed on others by the emperor. Numerous regulations controlled both the foreigners themselves and their trade with China. Access to the mainland by foreigners was severely limited” (1999, 7) and China’s control made it hard for Westerners to simply operate in whatever manner they wished. Other Asian countries, including Korea and Japan, took a similar approach and attempted to block access to their ports and people. In addition to the frustration this caused Western representatives, there was “fierce competition among the Europeans and Americans desiring to trade with China” (Thurin 1999, 8). The results of these efforts were mixed, “for although the Chinese adopted some Western technology and learning, they remained unmoved by, and perhaps unaware of, the political, economic, and social changes emerging from the age of exploration in Europe” (Thurin 1999, 5). This ignorance was soon to pass, however, as China was forced to accept its involvement in the ever-shrinking compass of the world.

Korea’s ability to exclude foreigners was not destined to endure much longer, either, as “From 1832 foreign merchant ships and naval vessels appeared in Korean waters with increasing

frequency” (Koo and Nahm 1997, 73). As a less influential and comparatively powerless nation, the transition would be that much more painful. Early in the twentieth century, Japan’s ascendancy in the region commenced with military victories over Russia and China, forcing concessions from both (S.S. Kim 2004; Ki-baik Lee 1984). Whereas China had traditionally protected Korea, they could no longer do so and Korea was left exposed with few resources at hand to fend off imperial Japan. The Japanese were able to infiltrate Korea’s power structure, influencing and manipulating its government into ever-weaker status while at the same time subverting or eliminating any effectual opposition, internal or external (Bird 1985; S.S. Kim 2004; Koo and Nahm 1997; Ki-baik Lee 1984). By the time the Japanese annexed Korea in 1910, they already had effective control of it and were able to leverage their way to full domination with little opposition, certainly not from anyone beyond its borders.

The Korean people were assimilated into imperial Japan and spent the next forty years struggling, at every level, both individually and as a people, to regain their autonomy and win back their independence, language and culture, control of their land, of their government, and of their personal lives. That they did struggle is witnessed by the assessment of one post-World War II observer who ironically commented on Japanese attitudes towards their Korean subjects as follows:

I shall try to describe by paraphrasing their own words. Although they had ruled Korea kindly, albeit firmly, for over a generation, though they had established fine public schools to educate the ignorant Koreans to be fit subjects of the [Japanese] emperor, though they had proclaimed the racial identity of the Koreans and Japanese, and though they had done all these good things unselfishly and in the best interests of the Koreans, who were simply incapable of helping themselves, yet the obstinate peninsula people persisted in retaining their characteristic traits, in keeping their family names, in speaking and writing their own language and subversively acting like Koreans. (Cary et al. 1995, 32)

Despite the best efforts of Korean freedom fighters, independence would have to wait until 1945 when Japan, as part of Axis forces in World War II, was defeated and forced to surrender control of the countries they had subjugated – Korea, Taiwan (Formosa), New Guinea, etc. – and return to the confines of their island nation. Western interest in Korea increased in the wake of World War II as the geopolitical importance of Asia was made clear to the Western world and South Korea became the stage on which it played out in microcosm, being “occupied by American forces virtually continuously since the end of World War II” (C. Johnson 2000, 24).

The post-World War II political situation in northeast Asia is complicated and is explored in much better detail elsewhere (for example, Cary et al. 1995; Haas 2000; Higgins 1951; Millet 2002; Oberdorfer 1997). To summarize, no sooner were Koreans free of Japanese rule than they faced having foreigners once again determine their fate as the Asian epicenter of the power struggle amid East and West, capitalism and communism, Russia/China and USA/UN powers. This culminated in the Korean War, which, after three years of conflict (on top of the damage already done by the Japanese) left the country in tatters, split in half, each controlled to a greater or lesser extent by foreign powers. The American military presence in South Korea from the mid-1950s to the present day has had profound consequences for the people and culture and the influence of the West is discernible. Beyond their borders, popular culture has expanded our awareness of Japan and Korea through a multitude of books and movies, many of which, unfortunately, continued to disseminate the Orientalist image of Asians.

This brings us, roughly, to the mid-twentieth century and it is from this time that the presence of foreign English teachers, and foreigners of all types, escalated in South Korea. Beginning with lessons from missionaries and military personnel, the English language teaching enterprise in Korea developed rapidly and has continued to experience growth over the past

several decades, and many other countries in Asia have experienced the same type of English education expansion (S. Griffith 2003). The group of foreign teachers that I researched represents a tiny fraction of the many people, groups, communities, and countries participating in the English language instruction market. In some ways, the group I interacted with was unusual, but at the same time, many of the experiences we discussed and described in our conversations over coffee or during interviews are entirely typical.

### **3.4 Networking in Contemporary Korea**

No longer the Hermit Kingdom, today it is possible to find pockets of foreigners throughout South Korea, as I did in conducting my research. Suncheon lies in the province of Jeollanam-do, in the southwestern region of the peninsula and is situated about half an hour's drive from the southern coast. In English, it is variously spelled Sooncheon, Sunchon, or Suncheon, depending on the method of transliteration used. With a population of approximately 250,000 (Suncheon...2008), it is one of the smaller cities in Korea, and most Koreans actually consider it a town, not a city. This area of the country is rural and agricultural, situated far from the densely populated capital and the tense northern border, and it is often referred to as the "Rice Bowl of Korea" (Le Bas 2003, 247).

Sunchon National University, where most of my informants taught, is one of the older universities in Korea and "was founded in 1935 as 'Sunchon Public Agricultural School'" (Suncheon...2008).<sup>12</sup> The university employs a large number of foreign nationals in its English Language Center and houses them on campus. The building where foreign English professors live is comprised of tiny bachelor (or studio) apartments with each teacher or couple housed separately. The apartments all face onto narrow halls and there is no common area where they

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<sup>12</sup> While the city has updated its spelling to meet the government's new transliteration preferences and requirements, Sunchon National University has opted to retain the original English spelling of its name. When referring to the university, I will use the "Sunchon" spelling and in all other places use the official "Suncheon" spelling.



could congregate. Located at the end of a street on the very margins of the university grounds, the building is relatively quiet and isolated and backs onto a steep hill. It stands at a right angle to a student dormitory, to which it is physically connected, but with no passage between the two above the first floor. It is an unusual arrangement, as most universities either provide a housing stipend or accommodation for teachers off campus, much as *hagwons* do. Despite their condensed living arrangements, the teachers did not socialize frequently as a community. In all of my time there, they had just one party, for a teacher who was leaving, and a few small



**Figure 9: View of the foreign teachers' housing at Sunchon University. (Photo by K. Roubo 2007)**

gatherings (three to four people) in one woman's apartment. Instead, they had friends outside the group, kept to themselves, or associated with just one or two others. This avoidance of socialization could have been a result of their long-term residence, personal preferences, interpersonal conflicts within the group, or some combination of these. From my observations over the years, and given how little outside socializing I did with my cohort in Seoul, I suspect long-term residence, and what I call "dispersal fatigue" – the constant loss of friends during one's time in Korea – were significant factors.

Prior to visiting Sunchon University, I had not seen this type of housing arrangement. I had a room in the women's dormitory at Geumgang University, but others who worked at universities usually had an apartment off campus or were given a stipend to subsidize renting one. That Sunchon University has housing dedicated to its foreign teachers is likely an indicator of how long it has been invested in its English-language programs. Because they had positions for university-level instructors as well as an on-campus *hagwon* and summer English-language camps, housing their foreign teachers on campus became a matter of convenience. This concentration of foreigners in one location affords opportunities to make connections and forge a sense of community and mutual support, but it does not guarantee it and the nature of the enterprise and its participants work to undermine it. One informant described a strong sense of community among the teachers in residence when she first arrived, but that it had not lasted. The incessant personnel turnover in these institutes, even in a space where foreigners are clustered together, renders even the tightest-knit group temporary at best. The group I studied was fractured, even as they lived in close proximity, with only a handful spending much time together and even those relationships were marked by conflict. By the end of my research period,

most of them were scattering and an entirely new group of seven teachers was being brought in, none of whom knew anyone there.

The teachers' apartments I saw at Sunchon University were similar to my apartment in Seoul in 2006, having all the necessary amenities and little more. There is a tiny bathroom and a small living space containing a bed, a desk and chair, a bureau or wardrobe, and any furniture that residents have acquired. There is a kitchenette against one wall that includes a sink, a two-burner gas range, and a small refrigerator, and each apartment has a ceiling fan, an air conditioner, and a small balcony accessible via sliding glass doors. The accommodations are neither new nor spacious nor luxurious, but suffice for an individual on his or her own. Furniture and appliances are expensive in Korea (even a small coffee maker will cost about \$50), so it is rare for foreign teachers to accumulate much beyond the basics. For a limited stay, there is little lacking that would be worth the expense.

Among the teachers of the community I researched, décor consisted primarily of photos or pictures, small paintings, ceramics, and perhaps some decorative items picked up during travels, all of which were exceptionally portable in nature. Melanie Steyn, the second teacher I met in the group, had a watercolor painting picked up in Malaysia, a painting of cherry blossoms that had been a gift from a student, photos of friends and family, and assorted knickknacks. Her collection of souvenirs was an indicator of how long she had been in Korea, as she had accumulated these items over a period of several years. Further evidence of this foreign teacher's endurance in Korea was the fact that she owned a car, a rarity among foreigners, particularly in light of the widespread, inexpensive, and efficient public transportation system. Koreans often give gifts to professors and teachers they like and respect, especially when either the student or the teacher is moving on, so it is not unusual for foreign teachers to acquire ceramics, masks, or

other items of traditional Korean style in this manner. In this way, over the years, I received wooden masks, a wooden lamp stand, a wind chime, a business card case with traditional mother-of-pearl inlay, and so on. There is an awareness at all times of one's impermanence in Korea and the difficulty and expense of shipping things home, which discourage most people from acquiring non-essential items.

Kim Crosby's apartment was in stark contrast to Melanie's, displaying just a few photos of her son, a bookcase of books, and a few textile items she had gathered during her travels (a couple of wall hangings and silk she had had made into pillowcases). She had been in Korea for just over a year, was profoundly unhappy, and was already planning to leave, but was unaware of how little decorating she had done until I questioned her about it. By the next visit, she had done a bit more, but the addition of a few prints taped to the walls did not add any sense of permanence to her abode. The minimalist decoration of the space originates in the transitory nature of the living situation, the expense of acquiring furniture that would be any significant improvement over what was provided, and the difficulty and expense of transporting items. Thus, textiles and paper goods such as wall hangings, paintings on paper, and clothing were seen as sensible options, while furniture and expensive appliances like ovens and dishwashers make little sense unless one plans to settle (semi-)permanently.

Even though foreign teachers make good salaries in Korea, sending money home or taking advantage of the opportunity for travel throughout Asia is usually more tempting than accumulating Korean goods. Many of the items teachers chose to display were not purchased in Korea, but picked up during further travel abroad, another mark of cosmopolitanism and expatriate status. However much my informants admired the traditional Korean furniture and decoration featured so prominently in homes, tea houses, and restaurants, none of them had any

plans to acquire such items for themselves. Yet we all had spent significant sums to travel to places like China, Japan, Vietnam, Guam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, and so on.

The group of teachers resident at Sunchon University at the time was large by foreign teacher standards, and anything but cohesive. I met all of the residents of the foreigners' dormitory who were part of Sunchon University's English program at the time (approximately a dozen individuals) at some point or another, if only in passing. I also participated in informal conversations with many of them, but my recorded interviews were primarily conducted with a few of the more central members of this group. The community included a couple from New Zealand in their 60s, whom I met once and never saw again; I was told they spent their free time almost exclusively together. I was introduced to two men in their late 20s, Devin and Daniel, and met them several times on their way out to party with friends, but they had no interest in participating in interviews. I also met Marianne, a teacher in her 50s, and attended her farewell party that same evening, as she was leaving for a position in another city a day or two after that. The last member of the group who did not participate in interviews was Lily, a woman in her 20s who expressed a willingness to do an interview, but either bowed out or didn't show up for multiple appointments. The remainder of the group all agreed to participate and met with me on multiple occasions.

Kim Crosby, my first informant, was in her late 40s at the time we met, a vivacious former actress from South Africa who was enthusiastic about the project, but uncomfortable with being recorded. Because I met her first and she led me in turn to her community group, she was my conduit to the core of the group. In Bruce Jackson's essay "The Perfect Informant" (1996), he shares his experience with a talented raconteur who was eager to share his stories of the Vietnam War and have them recorded. Jackson eventually learns that despite the vivid,

enthraling tales of adventure, his informant is not what he claims to be and his stories are not his own. Although Kim, was certainly not playing a part – she actually had experienced and could provide her own narratives on those topics I hoped to discuss with her – neither was she the ideal person to facilitate my introduction to her social network.

Like many “perfect informants” (Jackson 1996, 211), Kim was enthusiastic, excited about my project and invested in helping me in my search for participants. I met her as we were both on our way to Japan to obtain new work visas (she for her new job at Suncheon University and I for my new job at Geumgang University), so she was relatively new to her group. From our first conversation in the ferry terminal, she was interested in what I was doing, thoughtful in her comments, and fervent in urging me to come to Suncheon to pursue my research. Our discussions over the three days we spent touring Fukuoka and working on getting new visas were animated, thought-provoking, and motivating for me, and I was excited to have found such an easy means of connecting with a network to research. She offered me a place to stay, and spread the word of my visit and its purpose in advance of my arrival. It is highly unlikely that I would have done my research within this community had I not met Kim. In leaping on this opportunity for connection, however, I committed to working with, and was introduced to the group by, someone who was not well integrated with the others and who was often at odds with one or another of them.

Of all of my informants, ironically, I spent the most time with her conversing on all manner of things Korean and foreign-teacher related – and got the least on tape. Like many foreigners, Kim had come to Korea because things were not going well at home in South Africa. After experiencing a succession of career disappointments, and setbacks in her efforts to change careers, a series of coincidental encounters acquainted her with the opportunities available in

Korea and, eventually, led to her taking a job there. After arriving in Korea, Kim experienced difficulties adjusting to the culture, perhaps to a greater degree than is usual. She remained unhappy with her life in Korea and never fully adjusted to living there, finally deciding that being at home with friends and family was more important to her than continuing to struggle in Korea. She left at the end of her contract with Sunchon University and returned to South Africa shortly before I left Korea myself.

Melanie Steyn was the first person at Sunchon University that Kim introduced me to and she proved to be a valuable contact, as well. Melanie had been in Korea for five years, having arrived in 2002 when she experienced difficulty finding a teaching job in South Africa. Since one of her sons was already living in Korea, she had a connection to the place and he urged her to take a job there, which she did. As she was in her late fifties or early sixties, Melanie was a sort of matriarchal figure in the Suncheon group and seemed to enjoy that role. In many ways she functioned as a gatekeeper in the group, and certainly would have been regarded as such by the Korean establishment due to her age and experience, though to what extent this standing was appreciated is unclear. In his influential book The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference (2000), Malcolm Gladwell conceptualizes a Maven as an influential and knowledgeable person who is a kind of informational repository, knowing much about the region they live in and the people who occupy it, and sharing that information with those who come to her. Gladwell says, “To be a Maven is to be a teacher. But it is also, even more emphatically, to be a student. Mavens are really information brokers, sharing and trading what they know” (Gladwell 2000, 69). It is tempting to describe Melanie in this way, as her apartment was the social epicenter of the apartment building, and was where gatherings were likely to occur. It was there that I met both Margaret Scates and Lily when they all got together for a cup of tea.

Introductions to Melanie's son, Kurt, took place at a restaurant where a group of about eight, including Melanie, Kim, and Lily, met for dinner. Kurt, in his late 30s at the time and not employed at the university with the others, lived in a rural town nearby. My interview with Kurt was in conjunction with my last interview with Melanie, as she was moving into a new apartment at the end of her contract. In the limited environs of the university, perhaps Melanie served the function of a Maven, giving advice to those who asked, but developing local knowledge to the point where you become a resource for those around you takes time. The reality is that foreign teachers stay in place long enough to develop familiarity only with portions of the towns they live in and, perhaps, particular areas of Seoul or larger cities they visit often.

Lastly, I met Ken Harrison at a pre-arranged location on campus and we proceeded from there to a restaurant, where we had our first interview. I visited with Kim, Margaret, and Melanie – and once with a teacher named Marianne – in their apartments, but was never invited to any of the others. This is neither surprising nor unusual, as foreign teachers' apartments tend to be quite small and represent a place of sanctuary for them, and they are preserved as such. Among my cohort in Seoul, I saw just two of my colleagues living spaces (one of them only once) and invited just one to mine. Socializing is generally done in public spaces, which makes the lack of a communal area even more significant.

One of the great difficulties in working with the Suncheon group is that while I liked the people I met there and enjoyed their company, it made me somewhat uneasy to feel subtle pressures to avoid certain individuals who were at odds with others in the group. Kim herself referred to the group as “a viper's nest” at one point, and more than one in the group would complain about others when they were not around. My sense was that there was a sort of competition in progress for group leadership and that there had been some internal power play



that no one ever clarified for me. Certainly Melanie seemed to be at the forefront of the group's social events, while Margaret was rarely invited and usually declined to attend when she was.

My notes one Sunday when I went out to lunch with Kim and Melanie describe a typical dynamic between them and elaborate on my feelings about the group at that time:

Kim and Melanie played nice, circling and verbally pecking at each other, but it was interesting anyway. Honestly, it feels like I've fallen in with the worst bunch of foreigners to interview. The internal politics among the teachers at this uni, particularly a central handful of women, are absolutely horrid. There seems to be an ongoing struggle for social power in this group, with a definite sense of points being scored by making others look bad. Loyalties shift and one can go from in-group to outcast in the course of a month, depending on who's teaching which classes or groups, who's working with whom, and who's managed to kiss ass, demonstrate superiority (through teaching or adroit social maneuvering), or make nice with the right Koreans ... It begins to appear that having had an interview with me is the latest status marker, perhaps because it validates the informant and gives value to what they know about Korea. (Author notes, 12 August 2007)

Bruce Jackson described the difficulty of forming relationships in order to conduct fieldwork, saying of his "perfect informant":

I didn't want him to know what was pretty much the truth: without the war information [in his stories] and the devices [they both enjoyed discussing], we didn't have much to talk about and we sure wouldn't have been pals. (Every fieldwork relationship has that measure of using one another to it, I think, and the important thing is making sure that it's at least reasonably bilateral). (1996, 214)

Interestingly, there are mercenary elements to most relationships between foreign teachers, as the impetus for meeting new people is often not simply to get to know them, but to get to know what they know and potentially find someone with whom to socialize. In this, similar experiences provide a narrative jumping-off point and, as it is in everyone's interests to share information, stories facilitate connection with others. As Roger Abrahams has pointed out, "groups, even of the most ad-hoc variety, exist because they draw upon a common fund of expressive and instrumental features of culture which are, in fact, the major evidences of this sense of groupness" (1978, 26). Abrahams himself acknowledges the circularity of this reasoning, but it

must be noted that any commonality in stressful circumstances engenders a sense of shared status, or “groupness.” Our jobs, residency in Korea, and stories were our culture and we drew upon it in socializing, reinforcing our groupness, even as the event of sharing created new circumstances (and narratives) that further reinforced that sense of belonging. In any event, in this group, who was positioned where socially was likely to shift between one visit and the next, so I felt the need for some caution every time I returned. The in-group tensions were simply a part of the overall, ongoing situation and I adapted to work within that dynamic.

I interviewed individuals regardless of where they stood in the group’s political sphere, and few commented on the behavior of others during interview sessions, though absent parties were often the subject of speculation during more casual conversations. In retrospect, I believe the interpersonal tensions within the group indicated a higher degree of security in the culture and their place of employment than most first-year teachers enjoy, which left them with less need for the social solidarity I had seen among diverse foreign teacher groups in the past. The relative stability of the population, with foreign teachers remaining there for two to five years, may have permitted old conflicts and resentments to color the social environment the group maintained, leading to the shifting web of associations and avoidances.

The last two individuals with whom I did multiple interviews were both decidedly outside the compass of the core of the group. Ken was a Canadian who had been in Korea for several years and who had invested his time in forming lasting friendships among the Koreans he met. While this makes social sense in many ways, as Koreans are far less likely to leave than foreigners and thus afforded him a more stable network of contacts, it did place him somewhat outside the general social scene of this group of foreign teachers. He seemed to neither mind nor notice any isolation from the foreigner community, however, and associated amicably with all

the others while never forming close ties with any of them. He said he had come to Korea after budget cuts in his native British Columbia had cost him his job as a high school teacher. Somewhat embittered by the politics at home, and having a friend already living in Korea, he decided to take a job there. His connections, education, and experience as a teacher enabled him to line up a choice position, and he later moved on to take a job with Sunchon University, where he had been for five years when I met him. Unlike the others, he arranged to meet me for interviews in a local coffee shop. This gave me the impression that he preferred to separate himself from the rest of the group, keeping his personal space clear of foreigner influences entirely.

Margaret Scates, mentioned previously, was another group member who seemed to occupy her own orbit and maintained a sense of distance from the others. She was an American who had come to Korea after several years of teaching in similar institutions in Japan. Unlike the others, she had not been dealing with difficulties in employment when she chose to go abroad, though she did express a certain degree of boredom with the job she had had previously. After several years in the more rigid environment of Japanese academies, she decided to cross the straits and try working in Korea to see how she liked it. She got a job with Sunchon University and had been there for a couple of years at the time I met her. While she was a bit of an outsider to the rest of the group, she had friends in other locations in Korea, she kept in touch with friends and family in the United States via the Internet, and she seemed to enjoy her time alone. Her general attitude regarding her exclusion from group activities was to shrug and dismiss it as a non-issue. Her situation in this regard was not that different from my own, as I had no one with whom to associate at my university, particularly after hours, and I spent a great deal of time communicating online, watching TV, or in other solitary activities. We had both originally come

to Asia at about the same time and age, so we were able to reminisce and tell horror stories about the old days during our interviews.

These four individuals – Kim, Melanie, Ken, and Margaret – were my primary connections in the Sunchon University community and through them I was able to gather a great deal of information. Among other subjects, we discussed what brought them to Korea, their views of Korea and its people, relationships within the group and beyond, preferred events and activities (together or separately), their foodways, and how they thought they fit into Korean society. Another informant, met at random and completely unconnected to the Suncheon group, provides a counterpoint to the contributions the Sunchon University group made at that time. An outlier to this group was Greta Wilson, a woman in her 20s whom I met in a tiny stationery shop during one of my visits to Nonsan, the nearest town to Geumgang University. She was in her second year in Korea and her first-year horror stories comprised a significant portion of our interviews together, narratives that served as a contrast to those I had collected among the old hands down in Suncheon. Greta still had that combination of naïve optimism and righteous indignation that distinguishes narratives of one's first experiences in Korea. She had worked at a *hagwon*, but was now participating in a program that put foreign teachers in regular school classrooms. Our interviews were conducted at her small apartment in Nonsan and, when I left, it was to her that I gave my crock pot and other Western cooking implements.

While outside the group I'd been working with for months, as a contact made in the normal course of things in Korea, Greta was an appropriate informant and a valuable resource, particularly as she allowed me to revisit the experiencing of Korea as it happens for "newbies." Her narrative of how she came to Korea provides a rich example of the type of deplorable experiences newcomers may endure and her indignation in relating the incident, nearly two years

after the fact, is plainly conveyed by her tone and descriptions. By the time I met her in December of 2007, however, I had just over two months left in Korea and she had plans to return to Canada for a considerable portion of the winter holiday, so despite her proximity to my location we were only able to meet for dinner or coffee a couple of times and schedule two interviews. To maximize the time we had, these interviews were fairly long and my notes on our communications supplement these, making Greta's an important contribution to the overall project.

In addition to the foreign teachers I met during my research in Korea – my coworkers in Seoul, the group at Sunchon University, and Greta – I also conducted interviews with two individuals I connected with online: Kat Bilodeau and Nick Holmes. Kat had recently returned from Korea when I first interviewed her in 2017 and Nick still resides there today (2019) and plans to stay on for several more years. My conversations, interactions, and interviews with this collection of individuals comprise the informant group on which I focused my research for this thesis. It is regrettable that I was not able to include interviews with those I knew in Seoul as part of this project as well, but there were extenuating circumstances that prevented this.

Additionally, though I did not conduct formal interviews, I took field notes and conducted informal interviews throughout my time in Seoul, thus enabling me to later make comparisons both with my previous experiences in Korea as well as with the group in Suncheon. Given the length of time I spent with my informant group, the extent of our communications in person and online, and the various occasions we had for informal encounters, this ethnographic research provides unique insight into a representative sample of the foreign teacher network as it exists today.

## Chapter 4: Occupational Folklore in a Diffuse Cohort

### 4.1 The Work of Being Foreign English Teachers

This research began as an examination of networks within a foreign teacher community but, while networking remained important to my approach, at the core of this thesis is the dynamic occupational folk group whose distinctive character was manifested in an interwoven array of folklore forms. In Crime-Victim Stories: New York City's Urban Folklore, Wachs describes crime victimization as being “a great leveler” (1988, xviii) in that anyone who experiences it shares the same ground, emotionally and mentally, and becomes part of a bounded group. Immersion in Korean culture for the newly arrived *waegook* is an effective leveler, as well, because it requires learning about and adapting to a new context while starting from a blank slate, as well as establishing an identity within that frame. While group members are fully aware that this is a transitory community, it is also the most immediately accessible and provides a welcome sense of belonging in stressful circumstances. One traveler asserted “[t]here is nothing like being lost at sea in a fog to put things into their proper perspective, to tell you where you are, or perhaps where you are not, to bring about an awareness of the tenuousness of everything in the terror of a separation from all that is familiar or friendly to people” (Dimock 1999, 168).

In “Differential Identity and the Social Base of Folklore,” Bauman points out that identity features such as “ethnicity, religion, region, occupation, age, and kinship affiliation” (2000, 45) have served to categorize different folk groups, but he then illustrates how folklore can permeate such boundaries. In arguing against too narrow a focus in our definition of a group's parameters and folklore, Bauman urges consideration of context and group composition, saying:

A true understanding of the social base of folklore must be based upon investigations which focus upon those social identities which are relevant to the performance of folklore within the context of particular situations and events, for it is only here that we will find the true locus of the interrelationship between the folklore and its bearers. (2000, 48-49)

Aside from occupation, the identity features Bauman lists have scant relevance in the context of life as a foreign teacher where previous folk group affiliations are neutralized by the new environment. Foreign teachers become part of a diverse group of people of miscellaneous types and origins – there is no homogeneity, no pre-existing association. What is clear in looking at their narratives and the relevant social identities they draw upon is that foreign teachers’ emergent folk groups and folklore are grounded in their comparable occupations, parallel experiences, and analogous circumstances in Korea. These shared factors provide sufficient common ground for the development of a shared identity, in this space, within this context, and encourage foreign teachers to engage in performances of personal narratives that reinforce their shared frames of reference. This disorganized process of ad hoc in situ folk group formation, however messy and unstable, establishes that sense of groupness and belonging necessary for individuals to feel they have a place, if not a home, in the encircling culture.

The label “foreign teachers” can be confusing for those outside the community – foreign to where and whom, are we teaching foreigners, teaching to *be* foreign, foreign to teaching, or something else? But the esoteric terminology neatly encapsulates what binds the group together: (1) shared, unalterable outsider status, and (2) the work that they are there to do. Both Koreans and Westerners use the term “foreign teachers,” marking the boundary between the two groups and establishing who is the outsider and who is not, though the categorization is generally regarded as innocuous. In a world of Korean teachers, it creates a clear subset with particular qualities – *waegook*, temporary employee, possibly naïve or ignorant, subject to somewhat different rules and expectations. Another familiar term used in the community that acquires additional layers of meaning is the word “home.” Most foreign teachers use it to refer to their place of origin (whether they mean their home nation, region, or place of residence); it is the

place they belonged to before arriving in Korea and their ultimate destination when they leave. This usage of home attests to the transitory nature of the community, as implicit in the acknowledgement that Korea is *not* home is the understanding that their belonging within the foreign teacher group is also impermanent. Shutika noted a similar sentiment among the Mexican migrants she studied, saying, “‘Home’ in this instance is not the place where they currently live but where they once lived full time. This is true of Mexicans who have arrived ... recently and those who have lived there for years” (2011, 75). Of their abode in Korea, foreign teachers normally speak of returning to their apartment, the university where they work, or to the city in which they reside. While unacknowledged, it is probably the clearest marker of their migrant status in that there is no sense that they intend to attach any kind of permanence to their status in Korea. The rootlessness of the community and the impossibility of actually purchasing property and settling in Korea mean that the place they occupy there is not and cannot become “home” in the same way as the place they have left.

The personal experience narratives shared as part of the vernacular culture of this foreign teacher folk group are rooted in their occupational folklife and reveal that teaching in and of itself does not comprise the full job description. Adaptation to life in Korea is a primary measure of success in this occupation and that collective struggle fosters a sense of belonging within the *waegook* community. As outlined in the introductory chapter, no specific training in English education is expected of foreign English teachers at the introductory level, merely the successful completion of a baccalaureate degree in any discipline. Even before they arrive, whether they know it or not, foreigners are establishing occupational competence among Koreans simply by having an agreeable appearance. As this makes them marketable to students and parents, applicants are required to submit a recent photo with their other paperwork. This is also an



effective method of weeding out mature or, more commonly, non-white applicants, as I learned in the 1990s from a man who was fired, despite popularity among his students, after being told that he was not a “good teacher.” He suspected, however, it was due to his Middle Eastern heritage and the color of his skin, because he had been accused of deceiving his prospective employers by sending a photo in which he appeared lighter-skinned. Even though this teacher had successfully performed the job he was hired to do, and had been there for several months, his dark skin was enough to render him unacceptable to his employers and led them to terminate his contract. Although the discrimination made him angry, he had no choice but to go home, and no one in his audience was aware of any legal course of action that might have been open to him. Like the crime victims Wachs interviewed, foreign teachers believe they have “few if any rights, or even any sound recourse to compensation and restitution” (1988, xiii), so “relating [their narratives] invokes a common outcry of moral outrage” (1988, 15) in their audience at what has befallen their fellows. Feelings of frustration and anger are intensified by the recognition that what can happen to one could happen to any of them, thus powerlessness and lack of agency are common themes in foreign teachers’ narratives and reflect an essential part of their worldview.

As noted previously, whatever solidarity exists in the foreign teacher community constitutes an effort to form McCarl’s “collective envelope of protection” (1985, 181) similar to the “covert occupational knowledge” (McCarl 1985, 200) shared among coworkers. Unlike the firefighters studied by Robert McCarl, however, foreign teachers usually feel little identification with their place of work. According to McCarl, “From the time a man or woman first sets foot in a fire house, until they leave, they identify and are identified with that particular station” (1985, 38). There, they are mentored by veterans, often by a particular veteran officer who “can literally shape a rookie’s perception and understanding of the work by creating an environment in which

the whole company assists in the educational process” (1985, 46). Some foreign teachers may be fortunate enough to have such an environment, as did teachers at Sunchon University when its learning center hired primarily from abroad. Settling into and feeling a part of a community comprise what Shutika refers to as “emplacement and belonging” (2011, 3) and constitute vital elements of successful migration. Although the impermanence of the community means that this sense of being a part of a place is never as fully developed as it is among Shutika’s informants, acquiring even a limited sense of emplacement and belonging makes a marked difference in the experience of living abroad alone. The fact is, however transitory their presence in Korea, foreign teachers feel the need to belong and find this with other foreigners.

In one of our interviews, Margaret described how different it was to come from Japan, where she had lived in large cities and was left to her own devices, to find a group of people around her willing to help her when she arrived in Korea:

**Kelly:** So, you’re moving from a, a small environment [in Suncheon] to a, a big city [Daegu], a thing that seems new to you. So is this, you know, the biggest, like, urban center you’ve worked in since you came to Asia, or were some of the Japanese ones bigger?

[*pause*]

**Margaret:** [*softly, pitched high*] I don’t ... I don’t know. [Kelly: *laughs*] But the difference is that I went to Fukuoka, and ... which is a big city (Kelly: Mm-hm.) but that’s where I went to and then from there to Sapporo, which is basically, ah, just a tiny bit smaller. Um, so I never had the comfort of, of [a] small ... [*pause*] sheltered bubble. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) M-th, that was my bubble. You know?

**Kelly:** Big bubble. [*chuckles*]

**Margaret:** Yeah, but it was ... I had no reference, other reference. Here, I feel like I, I have this reference of this much more intimate community that I’m, that I’m now leaving and, and I’m taking with me there this expectation that the other people in the dormitory will just take care of you and show you where, things are and that, um, that you’ll just sort of all get together for lunch you know, because you’re the onl-, it’s the only game in town? (Kelly: Mm-hm.) S-sort of thing? (Kelly: Mm-hm.) And I, and then I remember, it’s not. It’s not at all.

**Kelly:** So, it could be a little more difficult.

**Margaret:** It could be y-, y-...

**Kelly:** To connect.

**Margaret:** Because [*claps hands softly*] you, here [*at Sunchon University*], I mean, this is, these twelve people are the only people who work at Sunchon National University. Um, when I first came here, my first go-round here, almost everybody had come from the States or from Canada or from wherever. Here, now, more people are hired from within Korea so they have connections beyond, ah, that they didn't form here. But when I first came, everyone had, their connections started here. And then they branched out, but their, their base was here. (Kelly: Right.) I think in that [*other*] university, your base might be your department. You're, especially at the LC, [*Sunchon University's Language Center*], but you're very quickly gonna, ah, they're gonna have connections I, and I may or may not be a part of that. Like I mean, the, my first day here, it was like, let's [*claps*] go to the store. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) You know? I'll take you here, I'll show you campus, I'll, you know, I'll take you around. I mean, you just had that.

**Kelly:** If you're lucky, I mean, the odds are [*drawn out*] fairly good that there're gonna be at least one or two other people who are outgoing and (Margaret: [*softly*] Yeah.) open enough, (Margaret: [*softly*] Yeah.) in, you know, in, in that number of seventy (Margaret: [*softly*] Yeah.) or fifty or whatever, uh, that someone (Margaret: I'm sure.) will, will reach out. But ...

**Margaret:** I'm just, it just makes me nervous, because, it's like

**Kelly:** But who is it gonna be?

**Margaret:** Yeah. Euh-uh. [*makes anxious noises, laughs*] Euh-uh.

**Kelly:** Because sometimes it's the fringe-dwellers who reach out first, so...

**Margaret:** And also, you know, there, there's an expectation of me. I'm not new to Korea. They don't have an expectation that they have to take care of me.

**Kelly:** Yah.

**Margaret:** So, if I had come from the States, if I were new, they would probably be much, I would feel much more support. (Kelly: Right.) Not that, I mean, I haven't really given it a chance. I wasn't really there that long, but ... You know.

**Kelly:** That's true, that, like, incoming people are kind of nurtured (Margaret: Of course!) for, for a time.

**Margaret:** Because they don't, they don't know how to do anything. And, th-, I mean, here I drag up in my car and think, oh, you know, nobody's showing me where HomePlus [*a Korean department store chain*] is, well, you know, I look like I know how to deal with things. [*both laugh*] Why would you tell somebody who clearly, you know? So, I, I'm just nervous. To me, it's, it's just me being really nervous, going, I'm leaving my little comfort zone.

**Kelly:** I totally get that.

**Margaret:** And I'm going to a, a much bigger place, physically, and the job is, although less hours, blahblahblah, it's still bigger. It's, it's the big time. It's the ... [Kelly: It's a step up.] And, um, you know, it's like, whoa. What am I doing? (Kelly: [*softly*] Mm-hm.) So, I'm excited about it. But I'm also ... really ... nervous.

**Kelly:** Because you can find HomePlus, but it really would be nice to have someone show you the first time.

**Margaret:** Yeah. I think what I need to, what I really need to do is just get out of my car and onto my bike or on foot and go. (I\*Scates 2007)

This excerpt from our interview illustrates that there is a distinction between belonging and emplacement, the terms Shutika used to describe incorporation into a new community (2011, 3). At the time of this interview, Margaret had already visited the university in Daegu, met some of her future colleagues, and started moving into her apartment, but she was by no means settled or comfortable there yet. Margaret contrasts her experiences in Japan with how she was received and made to feel welcome in Suncheon, then expresses anxiety about what kind of support she will have at her new job in Daegu. She has been a member of a small folk group, an “intimate community,” to which she *belongs*, where she knows and is known by everyone and feels she has resources to draw upon. When she reminds herself that she's not “the only game in town,” she is indicating that there is no guarantee of a similar welcome and sense of support at her new job in a new city, where she does not yet belong. Her musing about what sort of folk group she will be joining also suggests the importance being part of the Suncheon network has had for her, even though she often kept to herself, and reflects both her sense of belonging, and wistfulness at leaving that comfort behind.

Margaret's initial reception at Sunchon University suggests the kind of mentoring relationships McCarl described, although it is not the job of teaching for which training is provided. Instead, she is taught the essentials of living in Suncheon, instruction intended to help with her emplacement and ease the learning curve in her new environs, i.e., the work of living in

Korea. On her arrival in Suncheon, more experienced, emplaced foreign teachers took her shopping for what she needed, showed what resources were available, and answered questions about her new environment. Her nervousness regarding the move to Daegu is about beginning again to acquire the essential information required to live in a place, but this time without any assistance. Now, in Daegu, she needs to learn again where the nearest market or department store is, how the buses and/or subway run, where foreign goods are available, and where to file government documents. As Margaret points out, she has been in Korea long enough that her coworkers will expect her to be able to make her way without needing help, which is the heart of emplacement – she knows Korea, the place. This makes clear the distinction between emplacement and belonging, since it is possible to know a place well and be able to navigate it without necessarily forming those connections that will make you feel you belong there. Whether she will achieve a sense of belonging when she transitions to her new community remains to be seen, an unknown that gives her pause as she contemplates her future there.

Hers are the concerns that are common to every foreign teacher working in Korea, regardless of where they are working, whether solo or part of a department, and it is here that the canon of work technique of foreign teachers finds its roots. Although they may not share the same workplace in their day-to-day lives, foreign teachers are working as educators in like institutions within the same cultural milieu, with all of its differences from Western traditions, educational systems, pedagogy, and philosophy. Shutika remarks that new destinations for migrants “do not provide the long-standing social and political support networks that are common in the borderlands” (2011, 7) where a history of their presence engenders structures to aid them. For foreign teachers in Korea, any destination qualifies as a “new destination,” because there are no established footholds for them there. The fact that only a few work at any given

institution does not preclude the exchange of occupational folklore as, “[narratives] which are a [sic] comments about the work and the job, are usually told during non-work periods. When workers come together for more or less purely social reasons – after work in a bar, or at a meeting of a club, for example – they engage in the more expressive verbal aspects of their work culture” (Santino 1978, 201-202). To learn the canon and acquire the support they need, greenhorn foreign teachers must turn to each other for information, and this vital exchange usually occurs in their free time outside the workplace.

In an average day at a *hagwon*, there is minimal break time between classes because these institutions are businesses and each class represents income. Teachers must prepare ahead of time (or fly by the seat of their pants) as there will be little opportunity for discussion or developing lesson plans once their workday begins. In fact, because foreign teachers are surrounded by Koreans at work, many of whom know some English, it is not unusual for coworkers to wait until they are only with other foreigners to share occupational lore and cultural observations. As is discussed in Chapter Five, some of the content of their narratives would not be well-received by a comprehending Korean audience and is best saved for another setting. Oftentimes, as with McCarl’s firefighters, “Management ... is viewed as the enemy” (1985, 200), because some employers disregard teachers’ needs or health. Additionally, Korean coworkers may also be distrusted, since they can be a source of conflict or antagonism through reporting to superiors or by making the job more difficult for their foreign colleagues.

Similar to other occupational groups, when foreign teachers often “engage in the more expressive verbal aspects of their work culture” outside the workplace, “the spotlight is traded from raconteur to raconteur, each story triggering a memory and a corresponding story from someone else” (Santino 1978, 201-202). While the narratives of foreign teachers are explored

more fully in Chapter Five, the importance of narrative exchange within this particular occupational folk group cannot be overemphasized. The stories they hear from their fellows inform their understanding of Korean culture, their place in it, their social status, and instruct them in effective strategies for dealing with the situations they are likely to encounter. The expressive verbal exchange among foreign teachers focusses in large part on interactional social factors specific to Korea and/or teaching, revealing a very particular type of canon of work technique. As Santino points out, “Every industry and every job will have its own set of challenges, duties, skills, working conditions, and its own social milieu, and all of these will affect the narratives of that job” (1978, 205). In the case of foreign teachers, however, that job encompasses nearly all of their day-to-day lives and the narratives they tell reflect that reality.

The informal knowledge transmitted via conduits within the network constitutes a canon of work technique, in McCarl’s terms, in that it provides information that is essential to successful negotiation of this occupational environment. The canon includes such work-related data as how to recognize when you have an unscrupulous boss and what that might mean for you and what classifications of visas (E-2 vs. E-3, or *hagwon* teacher vs. university professor) provide advantages to foreign workers. It informs on the risks and rewards of illegal private teaching work, and what methods authorities employ in trying to identify those participating in illegal activities. The canon’s lore includes specific terminology, some of it drawn from Korean (such as *waegook* and *hagwon*), to signify particular circumstances and common sites of cultural misunderstanding. Whether about a stranger on the street who wants to practice their English or the employer who requires a teacher to work hours beyond what their contract dictates, foreign teachers’ occupational narratives are often about how their outsider status leaves them vulnerable in an environment where it is easy to take advantage of them. Regarding the work itself, foreign

teachers exchange tips and ideas, often in the form of anecdotes, to convey viable solutions for classroom management, issues of cross-cultural contact, and uniquely Korean challenges that commonly crop up in *hagwons* especially. These include dealing with racial slurs or profanity, which the children repeating them may not entirely understand, the presence of corporal punishment at some institutes, and learning to maintain control in the classroom without it, especially among children who have come to expect it.<sup>13</sup>

Other information in circulation within the network can be as varied as where to find clothing or an English-speaking doctor or dentist, how to communicate appropriately in a culture sensitive to status and respect, what the real purpose of motels in Korea are where Koreans are concerned, and what strategies foreigners can use for dealing with the physical abuse of Korean women in public. In the 1990s, when Western merchandise was difficult to find, foreign friends took me to tiny shops on side streets in Seoul to find where they sold items (deodorant, spices, cheeses, hygiene supplies, etc.) that had wandered from U.S. military bases into the hands of enterprising Koreans. Some of these items are uncommon in South Korea, making the information on how to find them doubly valuable. Another friend shared her L.L. Bean mail-order catalog with me and we placed an order for clothing together so that we could split the cost of international shipping. As Wachs says of crime victim narratives, “Explicit statements reinforce the advice implicit in the stories. Experience stands behind each piece of advice” (1988, 62) and thus these narratives provide both a warning and a guideline for how to navigate New York City’s streets. Foreign teachers’ stories are often personal experience narratives and thereby provide the same sort of first-hand knowledge and implicit advice. Accurate information is a vital resource abroad and local contacts can supply it.

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<sup>13</sup> My experiences and observations, along with discussions with other foreign teachers, lead me to believe that while corporal punishment was still present in some institutions during the research period, it was far less prevalent than it was in the 1990s. It was banned in most of the country in 2011, though it still occurs (Lee, H. 2016).



The forms of vernacular knowledge circulating among foreign teachers may not constitute occupational folklore in another context, but living in Korea is part of the job and success in that arena is as important as success in the classroom. Culture-contact issues are addressed in guidebooks, but strategies for coping with those not encountered by tourists constitute a body of lore that passes through conduits that are inaccessible to non-*waegooks*. Anecdotes or personal experience narratives arise in the wake of particularly disconcerting events and these are shared with others, usually at the earliest opportunity, as they seek to vent some of their frustration, bewilderment, and/or anger at what has occurred. In many cases, as with the trainmen Jack Santino interviewed, foreign teachers “seek vicarious release for their resentment of subordination in narrative” (1978, 211). Santino describes the despondency in some narratives he collected, saying of their mood, “There is an element of fatalism in the trainmen’s stories” (1978, 211), which echoes the sense of having no rights or recourse that Wachs described among her informants (1988, xiii), as well. Foreign teachers’ narratives, and those of expatriates in Korea in general, often have a similar tone, expressing their recognition that they lack influence in their workplace and are part of a system they cannot change. David, an Australian human resources manager working in Korea, observed that:

maybe Koreans are just a little bit paranoid about whatever you’re going to do because they just assume the worst, that you’re going to try and disrespect the current way of business – see it as outdated and Eastern – and implement a Western model as a way for the company to move forward. Regardless of the changes you’re suggesting, even if they have merit and are changes that every country and organization [must] go through, it could be [rejected because] that’s not the way we do things in Korea. Maybe if it was coming from a Korean national it wouldn’t have been seen that way. (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 98)

For many foreign teachers, their interactions with Korean superiors are frustrating because what is being demanded of them seems to make no sense, which in turn makes it feel like an arbitrary assertion of their hierarchical dominance.

Nick Holmes, a *hagwon* teacher who has been in Korea for several years, detailed in a Facebook post an incident at his school that illustrates foreign teachers' lack of agency in the workplace, saying:

So, as things are, I don't normally get home until 11:15-ish [*in the evening*] because I finish my job at 10 and subway wait times and such mean I don't actually reach my door until that time. So it's a long commute. I generally leave work by 10:05 (5 minutes AFTER my contract hours)

The other day, my HT [*head teacher*] tells me that I need to wait until all the Korean teachers come back up from taking the students to the shuttle bus (during which time I legit just stand around). I informed my HT about how long it takes me to get home and that my contract says from 1-10p.m. He said he would talk to the director and get back to me.

Yesterday, he talks to the director and then talks to me and tells me that it's actually the owner's decision. So I tell him that I want to talk to the owner about it because, again, my contract hours [*are clear*], and because I waited around longer than I normally do, I missed my normal subway and got home even later. He starts spouting off some bs [*bullshit*] about caring for the students' safety and making sure they get on their bus. And maybe I should wait around for about 10 minutes AFTER 10. (They also want me here at 12:50 every day, instead of 1). I inform him that I'm not okay with that. That means that I'm spending an extra 20 minutes here without getting paid for it. I remind him of the contract hours (again!) and tell him that it's not ok. He says he'll try to talk to the owner, but it's going to be an argument and I should understand the situation that this is putting him in (literally doing his fucking job). So I volunteer to talk to the owner with him there to translate so that whatever arguing happens is directed at me.

Today, my HT and I get into a minor argument because all the Korean teachers have to stay and don't I care about the companionship and the students? I tell him I just sit up here. My contract hours are 1-10. It takes me a long time to get home (literally the same stuff every time). So he tells me I will have to talk to the owner, blah blah blah. I also told him that if you want someone to be here from 12:50 - 10:10, it should be in the contract.

I fully realize how ridiculous I am being here. It's not that much extra time. But this is also literally the only thing I have any control over right now at this job. So I'm doing it. Because I'm just so.fucking.done. (I\*Holmes 2018)

Nick's post reveals the extent to which his employer feels entitled to micromanage his employees, something that his Korean coworkers are prepared (or resigned) to accept, but which offends his sense of fairness. Despite the head teacher assigning responsibility for the demand to their mutual employer, the fact that the head teacher refuses to participate in a three-way

discussion about it implies that the mandate actually originates with him. Such a ploy is not uncommon, as middle managers at *hagwons* are often friends of the owners, not teachers themselves, and try to exert authority they do not have, annoying both Korean and foreign teachers. Nick shows he is aware that what he is protesting is a minor inconvenience, but the lack of any real reason for staying those extra minutes makes the demand seem petty and pointless. There is no mistaking his frustration at the situation when he says, “But this is also literally the only thing I have any control over right now at this job.” Like Santino’s train engineers, foreign teachers’ “job duties place them in a subordinate position. The dealing with status and authority super-ordinates by subordinates is a major theme in occupational narrative” (1978, 209) and, in this case as in the stories Santino collected, the subordinate uses the implements and strategies available to them to push back against that authority.

For those who have not done it, the exchange described above might seem ludicrous, but there really is very little on the job that is within the foreign teacher’s control and they often turn to the terms of the contract to reinforce their arguments. Responses to Nick’s post indicated sympathy and understanding from other foreign teachers of the position he was in, a reflection of the community’s solidarity in the face of the surrounding culture. One friend commented, “In the land where everyone understands everyone's situation (except yours), I would have done the exact same thing,” while another reassured him, saying, “Not ridiculous at all. Your contract is your contract. If they wanted a different time, it should be in the contract. Stand your ground” (I\*Holmes 2018). The first comment, in particular, provides a touchstone for those in the community, as it is very common for Koreans to say, “You must understand our situation,” when trying to elicit agreement or conformity from their foreign employees. For whatever reason, this phrase is used for everything from changing your hours, to withholding pay, to terminating your

contract prematurely. To the foreign teacher, it quickly comes to ring hollow, especially when they feel that little effort is made to understand them in return.

Subordination within the work hierarchy and outsider status in the culture more generally create frustrations that can be difficult to vent in this tightly restrained society. For foreign teachers working in this environment, even those who are tolerant of difference, finding others who can sympathize with their difficulties, understand their experiences and share notes on how to cope can make the difference between staying or going home. Eleanor Wachs, in collecting her crime victim stories among New Yorkers, observed that the stories fall “within the realm of believable daily experience” (1988, 15) for listeners and that “[the] central and recurring themes are the ability to think quickly on one’s feet, take control of a dangerous situation, discover one’s vulnerability – even mortality, and accept victimization as part of urban life” (1988, 15). There is an essential wariness to the attributes she describes, one that resonates with the foreign teacher experience even if it is not an exact parallel. There is no imminent threat to life, but there is a sense that life as a foreign teacher carries with it the risk of victimization, and with that an awareness of vulnerability. The canon of work technique transmitted among foreign teachers prepares them for situations that might arise and, where it cannot give them tools to prevent difficulties, provides them with validation and support in the face of them. The more you compare notes and narratives, the more you realize that yours is a shared experience, and the easier it becomes to shrug off inconveniences and endure difficulties.

#### **4.2 Foreign English Teachers at Work**

When I was first considering this project, it seemed to me that the occupation, the *actual work*, was of little import among members of the foreign teacher community as the focus of our discussions was so often about social issues with Koreans, the basic needs of everyday life, and frustration with cultural differences. McCarl’s emphasis on the canon of work technique as a

defining characteristic further confounded me. According to McCarl, the “techniques required to execute a job are based on experience and association with other workers” (1985, 28) and “over time, the critical appraisal of form comprises a canon of shared criteria used to judge all performances in the occupation” (1985, 28). Yet discussions about the classroom rarely addressed methodology or pedagogy; in light of what McCarl portrayed, did this constitute an occupational folk group? All of my informants were employed as teachers and each took pride in doing his or her best to be effective teachers. However, the occupational success of the group does not depend on individuals’ contributions as part of a team effort, so the classroom proficiency of individual teachers has little impact on how they are received by the group. Self-presentation within that group as a knowledgeable insider, proficient in cross-cultural contact in work and in everyday interactions matters more. It was forgivable to deliver haphazard lessons, or use videos or games in class as that might be poor praxis, but it did not impact your colleagues. Consistently arriving late or hungover, indulging in displays of temper or disrespect, complaining loudly and often, or ignoring Korean standards of etiquette and appearance, however, cannot be easily overlooked. These create tensions between Korean management and foreign teachers, leading to disruptions or even confrontations that create a negative atmosphere and affect the entire workplace. Korean employers may expect foreign teachers exert peer pressure on fellow teachers who fail to conform, which, although it might work among the Korean teachers, tends to further increase tensions and the potential for conflict in the workplace as *waegooks* do not feel responsible for the behavior of others.

The canon foreign teachers share includes methods for doing the job as well as techniques for navigating a foreign culture and there is plenty of overlap between the two.

Margaret Scates described her transition from Japan to Korea, and how her previous experience of being a foreign English teacher smoothed her transition. She explained:

The culture shock was there? But the preparation was in how to deal with it. I had tools. I had been through it before. I had tools, and that, um, most recently watching [Kim Crosby] in her first year, I realized how valuable it was to have come here with those tools in place. And I, I, so the culture shock was the same, which is what I thought wouldn't happen. [*shrugs*] Been there done that. But that's not true. I, yeh, you still get the culture shock.

Um, I just knew better how to deal with it. I, ah, I knew that it would go away, I knew that I had to put my own beliefs aside and let things sort of settle before I, I made judgements. Um, it's, it was all learned in, those are things I learned in Japan, so I just was able to bring myself down a bit [when dealing with the new culture] and go, okay, now, it's okay [*laughs*] Now, now, don't freak out. (I\*Scates 2007)

Just understanding that you are experiencing culture shock, that you have worked through it before and can do it again, provides advantages in mastering new facets that the Korean milieu contributes to the canon. Learning and achieving competency at work also means learning to interpret office politics in a Korean business environment, and the lore shared among foreign teachers makes this possible. Nickerson points out that “all occupations share a common body of occupational lore. For example, most occupations share stories about ‘fucked up’ paychecks and ‘lousy bosses’” (1974, 121) and foreign teachers are no exception. Many of the interview excerpts included in Chapter Five reflect how indispensable it is for foreign teachers to master the workings of Korean culture in the office. Without this understanding, it is easy to make a serious faux pas, one that can cost you your job. Here, we see how the foreign teacher's narrative content intersects with McCarl's canon of work technique, because “One of the main ways in which fire fighters try to protect themselves ... is by passing on information about specific accidents in the form of stories” (1985, 153), and the information passed in foreign teacher narratives *is* intended to protect individuals in the community. Personal experience narratives are shared among foreign teachers, like McCarl's firefighters, and:

each person adds his or her personal experience to the collective pool of knowledge. This is primarily a group dialogue in which a mood or topic is set and the individual provides an account that carries the mood and discussion while it also adds a personal comment. On this level, occupational dialogue helps define the perimeter of occupational knowledge. (1985, 139)

For their occupation, it makes sense that foreign teachers define the parameters of their occupational knowledge to include the culture in which they are emplaced as it frames and contextualizes their experience even as it affects their ability to perform their job. Failure to account for it will result in failure to thrive as a foreign teacher in Korea.

In Korea, the “fucked up” paycheck Nickerson mentions may be no mistake (as one might infer if defining “fucking up” as an unintentional oversight), but a deliberate attempt to defraud the employee, knowing he or she is virtually powerless to do anything about it. When employers withhold foreign teachers’ earnings, they pressure them to be patient, implore them to sympathize with financial problems the academy is (supposedly) experiencing, and forgive the delay. This is where the phrase “you must understand” is often deployed by Korean employers, in an effort to both evoke sympathy and imply that the situation is complicated in ways the foreign teacher does not see. “Newbies” are ignorant of laws and customs in Korea and are naïve enough to take their employers’ friendly demeanor at face value. They are usually doing their level best to adapt to and respect the host culture, so they suppress normal reactions of suspicion and indignation. For these reasons, dishonest employers can sometimes string them along for months before the new teachers realize that these “lousy bosses” have no intention of dealing honestly with them or honoring the terms of their contracts. Eventually, there is no mistaking the pattern that emerges as the foreign teacher gradually realizes where they stand.

Becoming a foreign English teacher in South Korea is simple: a baccalaureate degree, a passport, and a clean criminal background open the door. Although reputable schools give

preference to applicants with degrees in education or TESOL, most *hagwons* will accept degrees in any field so long as the requisite condition of native speaking is satisfied. Applications still require the inclusion of photos of the applicant and, while essential for the paperwork for visas and resident alien identification cards, they are also part of the candidate screening process. Daniel Tudor sums it up when he says, “When applying for a job in Korea, it is customary to affix a passport-type photo to the application form. Needless to say, this practice can turn recruitment into something of a beauty contest, particularly where female applicants are concerned” (2012, 107). The ethnic and generational composition of the community makes glaringly obvious that these photos allow potential employers to assess applicants’ age, relative attractiveness, and racial backgrounds. Once a position is offered, pressure is exerted to bring the teacher to Korea as swiftly as possible. Unless the applicant delays the process in some fashion, the average time from application to arrival in Korea is six to eight weeks. This time is a whirlwind of communications and paperwork, express-mailed forms and passports, visits to embassies, hasty travel plans, and all the frantic sorting, packing, storing, and organizing involved in preparing for a long-term absence. The day of departure is usually upon you before you have fully grasped what it is you are setting off to do.

On arrival in Korea, often after being en route for a day or more, foreign teachers are pressed to begin working as soon as possible, with necessary trips to the Immigration Office and other bureaus worked in around the teaching schedule. There is little or no training for the classroom, though the teacher may receive help from other teachers, or materials left behind by previous employees. The teacher has to adapt to whatever students and courses they are assigned and each quickly develops his or her own coping strategies. Over time, of course, the teacher will develop materials and lessons, amass tools to handle unexpected challenges (e.g., videos to show



when covering another teacher's class), and develop an appropriate classroom persona that meets the expectations of the school and its clients. It is within this maelstrom, where foreign teachers feel overwhelmed and often isolated, that the seeds of the occupational folk group lie as these experiences set them apart and create common ground with their fellows.

According to Gary Alan Fine, in the workplace, in striving to "do whatever is necessary within their ability to achieve the ends of the organization" (1996, 92-93), employees adjust their identities to the needs of students, fellow teachers, and employers. Failure to do so results in increasingly strained workplace relations, because, as Fine asserts, "fitting into an organization and occupation depends on identity as well as instrumental competence" (1996, 90). Success in the world of *hagwons* depends on identifying oneself as a competent teacher and engaging students to such a degree that not only is student retention high, but other students are drawn to the school by word of mouth. In essence, if a teacher is dull and boring, it matters little what pedagogy they use, what level of education and experience they have, or what they look like: students will not be interested, numbers will drop, and bosses will not be pleased. Foreign teachers comprise part of the front (Goffman 1959) that Korean employers wish to present for their businesses. Regardless of how the foreign teacher feels about the job, the culture, the society, etc., failure to perform to the expectations of the employer generally results in a short stay. Successful foreign teachers must sell themselves, and identify themselves, as educators. They must accept that their image will be used for the purposes of shaping the company's front, and must perform as an entertaining and engaging personality in the classroom. Newly arrived English teachers often struggle to interpret the behavior of those around them in an attempt to ascertain what is expected and how they should proceed.

Kim Crosby described her initial confusion with the new culture, and her struggle to come to terms with it, saying:

**Kim:** What I found very hard, in terms of people, was that politeness, which I just perceived as a dishonesty. My whole life has been to get to a more honest space in my interactions with other people, in myself, in work, everywhere, in the writing. Here it's all concealed. There's this wall of politeness. And you know, em, a lot of stuff must be happening behind this.

**Kelly:** That you can't see.

**Kim:** You can't, and, you, because you have no way of understanding this culture, you, you, your perceptions, you can't trust your perceptions, you can't trust your gut feeling, because what are you, on a subliminal level, what are you reading? (Kelly: It's a blank page.) It's a blank page, and you can't make assumptions. At home, okay, I think a lot of our lives [are] spent in making assumptions, which is not a good thing, but a lot of those assumptions come from some real gut feeling or some real subliminal knowledge that you've picked up, that you can actually make some assumptions. You should test those assumptions, sure, but, but here you can't make any assumptions. And yet you, keep on picking up subliminal stuff, but you have no idea of [how to] interpret, no way of interpreting those assumptions to make any meaning of, of your life, (I\*Crosby 2007)

In line with Goffman's description of the presentation of self, what Kim is reading are those non-verbal expressions, "ungovernable aspects of...expressive behavior" that serve as "a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable aspects" (1959, 7). Koreans are hard to read for foreigners because they make a concerted effort to control their reactions and expressions, which is often interpreted as a blank expression. This expressionlessness is often exaggerated in Western descriptions of Asian cultures, but the reality is that Koreans' non-verbal markers are more subtle, but decipherable nonetheless. This also comprises an important part of the canon that foreign teachers must adapt to and master, as we see when Nick Holmes describes an incident where he had to save face, saying:

When you're out to lunch with coworkers and the owner. And someone mentions the owner's daughter (who is a major fucking problem in classes). And you let out this sigh of annoyance/frustration because you forgot for a second who you're sitting with. So you have to backpedal and explain why you did that. (I\*Holmes 2018)

In this incident, we see Nick's consciousness of his slip-up, his awareness of the implications for his status with his employers, and his strategies for addressing the problem his uncontrolled exhibition of his feelings has introduced. His Korean colleagues may share his feelings, but they will be much more circumspect in how, when, and where they express them. Nick acknowledges as much when he remarks, "I need to figure out how to disguise my facial reactions/expressions. They're getting me in trouble" (I\*Holmes 2018). As mentioned previously, Nick is no longer invited to join his colleagues for lunches and dinners and his failure to camouflage his feelings may have been a contributing factor in this change. For foreigners who consider such outings an unwelcome obligation, such an outcome may come as a relief, but if this outcome is unintentional, it is problematic. The sooner foreign teachers become aware of how carefully their body language and expressions are observed, the quicker they can adjust accordingly and use that to their advantage. Just as uncontrolled expression of feelings can cause problems, as Nick's comments well illustrate, so can they communicate to your advantage if you learn to moderate your responses to Korean expectations.

Unlike Nick, Kim Crosby was not able to perceive how her own expressions and behavior were being interpreted at her workplace and this led her into difficulties. In my interview with Kim, she describes the atmosphere at her work where a colleague had been criticizing her to their employer and Kim resolved to clear things up. It is probable in this instance that Kim was accurately interpreting her situation – her "co-teacher was fucking [her] over and that she was talking nonsense to the...*hagwon* owner" (I\*Crosby 2007) – but because she was trying to take cultural differences into account, she lacked confidence in her assessment. She believed what her "gut" was telling her, but the risk of misreading and concerns about insensitivity led her to constrain her temper and make allowances for different cultural

expectations. Her subsequent effort to solve the problem, however, followed a very Western model and impacted her position at that school.

Kim, an outspoken and determined individual, resolved to bypass the hierarchy and meet with her boss to address the problem, where she bluntly presented her case. She does not mention what result this had on her associations with her co-teacher or other employees, but expresses satisfaction and validation when she depicts her boss's reaction to her portrayal of her classroom activities. Kim confidently describes their conversation, saying, "I said, now listen, this is what I do. And she was completely, she said, how can you do this already? Because this is what we want teachers to do, but yet they can't do it" (I\*Crosby 2007). She illustrated her own occupational competency and tried to undermine her Korean counterpart's efforts to discredit her in the workplace, ostensibly easing tensions between herself and her boss. However, the brusque directness of her manner could not have won her any fans in a culture that shuns confrontations and where group solidarity and maintenance of the hierarchy are paramount. Daniel Tudor, a journalist with years of experience in Korea, touches on some of the pitfalls of being too forthright, saying:

The importance of showing good face cannot be overstated, as Korean businesspeople care deeply about their reputations ... Knowing that reputation is of such importance, one should think very hard before criticizing a Korean ... in front of their colleagues. One should have a private conversation first and even then resort to open criticism only as the nuclear option when other avenues have been exhausted. Harsh words, when aired out in the open, will have a major impact on the relationship. (2012, 189)

In circumventing her co-worker's office politics and going straight to the boss, it is likely Kim further damaged her work relationships. Her employer, in seeming to admire Kim's teaching methodology, may have reacted in the only way she felt was possible in the circumstances in order to reduce tensions and retain both employees, however temporarily.

Since her co-teacher had been the one who initially reported Kim to their employer, it is likely that *someone* lost face in this series of events, and while it is impossible to be certain whose status was most affected, it is possible to make some inferences. The Korean teacher, simply by being cognizant of the culture, fluent in the language and customs, and more likely to be a long-term asset to the school, had the upper hand throughout. That she felt comfortable enough to critique Kim's shortcomings with their mutual employer speaks to a degree of security within the system and the improbability that her own job was threatened by her actions. In light of the fact that Kim was later deprived of her severance bonus through the machinations of her employer at the end of her contract, I believe that her effort really only bought her some short-lived peace of mind.

To Kim's way of thinking, she had cleared the air with her boss and refuted her co-worker's claims that her teaching was ineffective or inappropriate, thereby giving her back a sense of control of her environment and validation of her efforts and work ethic. By taking this direct approach, she was countering what she saw as "backstabbing" and felt she had bested her colleague in an elaborate game of office politics. These tactics do not take into account Koreans' aversion to direct confrontation and, while comprising effective problem resolution in a Western business, they marked her out as more assertive than most Korean women. In effect, Kim's methods actually worked against her, even though she enjoyed the appearance of success. Her boss, knowing the end of Kim's contract was near, focused on smoothing things over and engendered a false sense of security, while biding her time until Kim left. Kim thus succeeds in demonstrating her competency as a teacher, but does not display mastery of the canon, as she does not work within culturally appropriate parameters.

While it may appear that I am essentializing Koreans and their behavior in this analysis, this is not the case, as evidenced by the frequent accounts of similar scenarios in foreign teacher narrative exchanges. The manner in which these events played out is a matter of cultural norms and expectations in conflict, rather than personalities per se, and much of it has to do with Kim's failure to understand the Korean workplace. "In Korea, behaviour is determined largely by a person's age and position in society. To understand how Koreans think and behave at particular stages in their lives, it is necessary to know how they view their responsibilities and experiences at different ages" (Hur and Hur 2000, 57). This is, in essence, a summation of the role that Confucianism plays in dictating behavior among Koreans. At the time of the events Kim describes, she was a well-educated professional in her late 40s, competent and capable of discussing work problems with her boss, as she saw it. Her employer may or may not have been older, but her position as head or manager of the business obviously places her above Kim in any workplace hierarchy. This means that although Kim is due respect, there is a limit to how far she can go.

As Hur and Hur point out, "As a non-Korean, you will be able to question some of your boss's practices, but if you do this too often he may hold it against you. If you head a company or office in Korea, you may have trouble getting feedback" (2000, 88) because "it is difficult for a Korean to criticise or go against what his senior thinks or wants" (Hur and Hur 2000, 170). Thus, respect for superiors is fundamental to the Korean workplace and if something needs to be addressed, it is often done obliquely or at the last possible moment in the working day, so that if a superior is upset or disappointed, they will have time to assimilate the bad news outside the workplace. A "yes" or a seemingly positive reaction from a Korean may not indicate agreement and although you are unlikely to hear the word "no," you may find yourself being put off

repeatedly, which is considered a diplomatic way of refusing or disagreeing. It pays to learn to discern the meaning of flickers of expression that accompany the words that are said.

Westerners expecting that superiors would want to know of problems so that they can be addressed are startled to learn this is not necessarily the case. Kim's blunt, direct discussion of her situation, in my experience, put her in the position of being at odds not just with her coworker, but with the staff as a whole for having disrupted the atmosphere of the workplace because "personal connections are usually more important than ability" (Hur and Hur 2000, 176). In Nick Holmes's conflict with his head teacher, he is accused of not prioritizing teamwork with his colleagues, which can be a sore point when you are fully aware that you are seen as an outsider. Exoteric ignorance can be an advantage at times, as Daniel Tudor explains:

One important caveat about the "rules" of doing business as a foreigner in Korea is that there are occasions when one can get away with breaking them ... If one is not Korean, one will not be expected to know every intricacy governing Korean social relations. Furthermore, there will be rare occasions on which it is actually beneficial to commit a social sin. (2012 190).

Tudor goes on to cite an instance where a foreigner gains a reputation as an amusing character when he inadvertently uses a casual form of address with his superiors, a gaffe that would be appalling for a Korean but that, in his case, draws laughter. In Korea, getting along with your comrades and having an amenable attitude is just as important as your ability to do the job. A reputation for playing the fool is useful, as it earns you a reputation for being good natured and creates a margin for error. It is less forgivable when your blunders impact the functioning of a business.

In our conversations and interviews (I first heard the story on the ferry to Fukuoka), Kim Crosby described the build up to this work conflict as taking ten months to develop and stated in one interview that she was at that *hagwon* for just over ten months, leaving with about six weeks

remaining on her contract. Despite negotiating an amicable release from her contract by procuring a replacement teacher for her final weeks, her employer “just cut [her] out of the whole thing!” and didn't pay her as they had agreed, which Kim realized only after teaching her final class at the school. Kim's forthrightness had flown in the face of cultural expectations of women's behavior in Korea, where deference and subtle maneuvering are the norm. This is not to say that Kim was wrong, but her position in Korea meant that she did not have the requisite agency or rank for her maneuver to succeed and her actions imply she did not take this into account or was not aware of the dynamic. Her employer penalized Kim for her failure to complete her contract (and her blunt speaking) by disregarding their verbal agreement, knowing quite well that Kim had no effective recourse. This is a foreign teacher's cautionary tale (Santino 1978, 202-204), a warning of what can go wrong for the unwary and an object lesson derived from personal experience. In the recording of the interview, you can hear my indrawn breath when she states she went straight to the boss; from that point, I did not expect the story to end well. For many *hagwon* owners, cutting teachers loose early is simply financial good sense, because from their point of view, they have gained what they could from this individual. Since the contract was not completed, they are not legally bound to provide the additional compensation promised in it. Kim's efforts to find her own replacement, ironically, only further rewarded her employer's maneuvers.

Outside the workplace, among other foreigners, teachers identify themselves in part by the institution where they work, or by the area or town they live in. It is often the first question asked on making a new acquaintance because it establishes their relative geographical locations, and thus what potential for social contact exists. It also suggests where they are in the foreign teacher food chain – that is, how long have they been in Korea and what is the status of the job



they now hold? I found that foreign teachers, myself included, tended to echo Korean hierarchical constructions of work-related respect, with urban university professors near the top and new *hagwon* instructors at the bottom. This was not the only factor in evaluating relative rank, as level of education and experience can affect perceptions, as do length of residence in Korea and even the extent of travel to surrounding countries. Each is a marker of how familiar you are with the region, how successful at navigating the culture and its systems, and how adapted to expatriate life in general. In effect, knowing a *waegook*'s resumé establishes what degree of authority a person has when expressing opinions on the educational system and the culture, or relating narratives of personal experience as examples of appropriate response to various situations. All of this is information and identity formation that develops over time spent teaching and living in Korea, which requires first an understanding of what it means to be a *waegook* there.

#### **4.3 Tourist, Expatriate, Ethnographer**

There are similarities and parallels among the experiences of itinerant teachers, exchange students, tourists, and ethnographers during their time abroad, some more obvious than others. All are visitors abroad, far from their homes and familiar locales, conspicuous in their activities and/or appearance, often transient, rarely conversant with local customs, and immersed in/engaging with cultures different from their own. All of these travelers have “passed out of the security of the relatively fixed identity of home and into a far less clearly defined liminal zone” which is “not at home and yet partly still there; elsewhere but only passing through on an always-returning-home trajectory” (Phipps 2004, 76). Their circumstances on that trajectory are marked by “temporality, displacement, language difference, and perception of ‘distance’” from the locals who surround them (Abbink 2004, 278). The tourist travels to learn from new experiences and the ethnographer works to further their understanding of a people and culture.

Those working abroad occupy a space that incorporates aspects of both these approaches, but conforms to neither. The reactions of tourists landing in a foreign locale are not markedly different from those of incoming foreign teachers, students, or ethnographers, though in the case of the latter, training and education have prepared them for the experience. Foreign teachers experience life in Korea and learn its culture and language to some degree, but their experience is neither as superficial as that of tourists, nor as profound as that of ethnographers, since they are not conducting research. For tourists, the work is travel; for ethnographers, the work is research; for *waegooks*, the work is surviving day-to-day life in and amongst Koreans, with all that entails, while emplaced in the locale.

There is as much difference to be found among different sorts of travelers as there is similarity. Bruner remarks of the difference between locals and tourists that “the perceptions of the two groups are not the same, because what for the tourists is a zone of leisure and exoticization, for the natives is a site of work and cash income” (2005, 192). This is the fundamental, underlying difference between migrants and tourists or ethnographers, because these non-tourists emplace themselves within a locality and participate in the same activities as its inhabitants. They shop alongside locals, cook meals in their own abodes, work and live in a native community, and do most of the things that they would in their homelands, yet they are not. Even the word “home” acquires layers of meaning, as choosing which locale it will refer to is an indicator of where they feel rooted. Often, “home” is the place left behind that persists as an identity anchor while the individual resides or travels abroad; it is not their current abode. Perspectives change as they grow accustomed to their locale and the local language, to new behaviors and appearance, and it all becomes usual and thus somewhat less interesting as emplacement develops. The newly arrived foreign teacher in Korea visits temples, palaces, and

other popular tourist attractions as they learn about the land. Longtime residents find these excursions less enticing, even tiresome, and domestic travel diminishes in their foreign home. For example, my informants rarely traveled much within Korea and when they did, there was a sense of purpose to that travel, often for shopping or just to get away for a bit, not to see the sights. Melanie Steyn said that she finds most of what she needs locally or via the Internet and that trips to shop in Seoul occur, “twice a year at the most, [maybe] once a year” (I\*M. Steyn 2007). When I visited Suncheon, my informants would take me to their favorite restaurants, but while the cuisine was mostly Korean, these sites were familiar to them, not a glamorous or unusual treat for a tourist.

For foreign teachers in Korea, travel outside of the city might mean a day trip to the coast, or a visit to a friend in another area, which does not differ from that of any other inhabitant of any other place, and my informants did not refer to these activities *as* travel. By the end of their first year, most foreign teachers have “done” Korea and are more interested in taking advantage of its proximity to other travel destinations. Thus discussions of travel frequently focused on locations *outside* Korea’s borders –trips to Thailand, Vietnam, Guam, China, Japan, and the Philippines were common. When Kim and I planned a five-day holiday in Beijing, the group became a resource for information as friends who had been there provided recommendations of itineraries, tour companies, sites not to be missed, or desirable souvenirs.

Travel within Korea was no longer worth the bother it entailed after that first year, when interest in the major tourist sites is at its peak. Yi-Fu Tuan contends that while uniqueness can be a source of pride, it “also isolates, causing loneliness and, potentially, despair. It can therefore be undesirable from an individual’s point of view” (2002, 307). To be visibly different on the crowded streets of a city far from all that is home is to feel isolated, exposed, vulnerable, and/or

exotic. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett asserts in Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage:

The everyday lives of others are perceptible precisely because what they take for granted is not what we take for granted, and the more different we are from each other, the more intense the effect, for the exotic is the place where nothing is utterly ordinary. Such encounters force us to make comparisons that pierce the membrane of our own quotidian world, allowing us for a brief moment to be spectators of ourselves, an effect that is also experienced by those on display. (48)

However much *waegooks* immerse themselves in their “exotic” locale, there is no escaping the fact that they are the alien visitors, the exotic. Yi Fu Tuan notes, a “widely used technique [for ensuring cohesion] is the drawing of boundaries. Fences and walls, even conceptual lines, have the effect of promoting difference between groups and sameness within the group” (Tuan 2002, 310). By moving together as a unit, *waegooks* create a closed company with attention focused inward, generating boundaries that separate the foreigners from the Koreans who stared, enabling us to ignore a circumstance that was otherwise discomfiting. George Gmelch describes analogous circumstances among American exchange students, remarking:

Walking around European cities in groups limits students’ contact with local people. It also means they spend much of their time interacting with each other and less time observing their surroundings. Their conversations...are often about people, places, and events back home rather than where they are at that moment. And local people are less inclined to start a conversation with a group of students than they would be with one or two. (G. Gmelch 2004, 423)

Gmelch sees this behavior as unfortunate in students who are meant to be immersed in a foreign culture, but it can become a deliberate strategy for establishing boundaries around expatriates in order to buffer themselves from their environs, at least occasionally. Unlike Gmelch’s students, foreign teachers moving in a phalanx are as likely to be talking about Korea as about life back home, because they are not just visiting and seeing the sights – it is the context in which they operate. The boundary created by such a formation, although permeable from within – as when

one person in the group stops to buy something from a vendor –is more difficult to penetrate from without. Long after foreign teachers have become comfortable in their neighborhood and familiar to its denizens, leaving these areas for touristic purposes draws the local gaze again and reminds them that, still, they do not belong.

Expatriates become amateur ethnographers in advancing their understanding of the culture in which they are immersed, in the face of which the sense of wonder, the feeling of separation and difference, and the fascination with otherness is unsustainable. Eventually, growing familiarity leads to that sense of emplacement Shutika describes in Beyond the Borderlands: Migration and Belonging in the United States and Mexico (2011, 3). This, of course, is the goal for successful fieldworkers/ethnographers – to integrate with the community and surroundings in order to achieve the clearest understanding of the people being studied. The long-term expatriate achieves this as a matter of survival, though not always as enthusiastically, voluntarily, or readily as an ethnographer might and maintaining objectivity can become difficult. Kim referred to the Korean custom of bowing in greeting and presenting a deferential demeanor to authority figures as the “bloody bowing and scraping” (I\*Crosby 2007), and it frustrated her. She perceived these external indicators of respect as superficial and even hypocritical, a polite façade to hide what they were thinking and feeling. Far from objectively analyzing them, as would a trained ethnographer, she instead lost patience with both the behaviors and the people exhibiting them, as most members of the foreign teacher community do at times.

Ethnographers, of course, are expatriates when they conduct their fieldwork abroad. Like foreign teachers, they form extensive local connections, yet they are not immigrants and do not intend to reside permanently within the communities they study. However long their stay or

strong their relationships with their informants, they, like the tourists Phipps describes, are “on an always-returning-home trajectory” (2004, 76). In essays by ethnographers studying tourism, they describe their efforts to distinguish themselves (among locals as well as tourists) from the tourists they study. Susan Bohn Gmelch’s student ethnographers are:

always horrified when they leave the villages they live in and are mistaken for tourists. They are embarrassed by the insensitivity and ignorance tourists sometimes display and are eager to disassociate themselves. After all, they are in Barbados to work, not vacation, they are learning the culture and living with the local people, not lying on the beach being served by them. *Their experiences are deeper and obviously more valuable than those of tourists.* (S. Gmelch 2004, 3, emphasis mine).

Implicit in her remarks are value judgments about the status conferred by the different types of experience these groups have. Like other expatriates, Gmelch’s students have something to lose by being identified as tourists in their foreign milieu, and they are made particularly aware of this when they leave the community where they have worked so hard to make themselves familiar and respected (if always foreign). In being mistaken for tourists, their “deeper” and “more valuable” experiences are no longer relevant status markers and must be reasserted in some way, whether by speaking the local patois or behaving as a resident would. Their research makes them especially conscious of how locals regard tourists and eager to differentiate themselves. While no length of residence confers native status, there is a tacit recognition that foreigners who reside among local people and learn indigenous language and customs acquire greater cultural capital, or social assets and knowledge that allow them to move with ease through that society. They are perceived as having different status from tourists, because they are invested in the community. Koreans tell foreigners who use chopsticks skillfully, speak some Korean, enjoy eating *kimchi*, or demonstrate proper social etiquette, “Oh, you are Korean now!” Given that the successful foreigners’ ethnicity and culture have not changed, nor has their immigration status, this is obviously a platitude intended as a compliment, indicating that they have differentiated

themselves from the average foreigner (read: tourist or newcomer). This provides incentive to conform to local culture and customs and reinforces a sense of elevated social status for successful foreigners who, while aware of the superficiality of the compliment, are proud of their competence and of blending in socially where they will never blend in physically.

This status differentiation takes place not only in local/foreign interactions, but also among various types of travelers. Errington and Gewertz describe their own friendly but competitive interactions with backpackers during their fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. Chiding from backpackers about the amount of baggage they had brought roused them to defend themselves and their status, as they describe in the following passage:

We promptly responded to this taunt. We said that we were anthropologists who had come not to travel but to stay ... Moreover, to ensure our victory in what was obviously a contest, we added that this was our fourth trip to Papua New Guinea during the past twenty years.

Thinking over the incident we were amused to see how easily these tourists had been able to pull us into competition over which, they or we, had had the most authentic experience with the native people in Papua New Guinea. (Errington and Gewertz 2004, 195)

Ethnographer Edward M. Bruner, an anthropologist who specializes in deconstructing the theatre of tourism, demonstrates that he is not immune to the need to stake his own claim to nearer-native status when mistaken for a tourist, saying:

“Tourist” and “ethnographer” are roles that one plays and manipulates. At times, when our tour group approached a new site, the Indonesians would behave toward me as if I were another tourist, and I could rupture that attribution by speaking the Indonesian language, which in effect said, ‘don’t confuse me with these tourists,’ or I could choose to remain silent and to accept the designation. At other times, by emphasizing my role as a working tour guide, I could identify with the Indonesian performers and locals, saying, in effect, that we are in the same situation, catering to tourists, who are our source of income. I stressed to the Indonesians that we were on the same side, as it were, in opposition to the tourist, but I was never sure whether the Indonesians accepted the argument. (2005, 204)

In the situation Bruner describes here, multiplicity of choices for self-identification available to the ethnographer are equally appropriate to the long-term expatriate or migrant because persistent residence promotes familiarity with local culture regardless of one's purpose in staying. Shutika describes this as "multilocal belonging" (2011, 39), where lengthy residence in multiple locales engenders a high degree of familiarity with "the complexities of adjusting and belonging" (2011, 39) in more than one place. The expatriate-as-ethnographer, by remaining *in situ* for years, is at least as qualified to claim deep-seated familiarity as an ethnographer who stays for long periods, but then leaves for years or even decades. Bruner expresses the options available to the ethnographer, as opposed to the tourist, and his ability to *choose* how he wishes to position himself in any given encounter with either the tourists or the Indonesians. In effect, he is highlighting the fact that the average tourist does not have a choice, another indicator of status. His use of the words "as if I were a tourist" serve to emphasize his assertion that he is not and that it is a mistake to perceive him as one.

Expatriate Karin Muller, in her memoir Japanland, describes an encounter with a stranger on a train and her own reluctance to engage in "a couple of hours of superficial conversation" with a Japanese woman. Instead, she constructs an elaborate story of her life in keeping with traditional roles for women in Japan in order to avoid difficult personal questions and awkward explanations (Muller 2005, 134-135). Muller describes herself as exhausted and tempted to feign sleep, but she feels a sense of obligation to show good manners, so she amuses herself by creating an illusory life. Yet her rejection of real intimacy with the Japanese woman (precluded by the contrived life story) generates dissonance. As they are supposedly getting to know one another, one must assume the Japanese woman feels she is achieving a sense of connection through learning about Muller's husband and family and so on. Muller, however, is increasing



her sense of distance because she is fully aware that the family she describes does not exist; it is a fabrication designed to satisfy the cultural expectations of her listener. She is of an age when a Japanese woman is expected to have married and had children and, because she has not done this and it is unlikely she will ever encounter this woman again, she finds it less stressful to invent such a life than to explain her own.

Foreign teachers choose, in such chance encounters, whom they will be and what they share with their native interrogator. It is an area in which they have great creative liberty, a freedom unavailable to them during their usual interactions with coworkers and locals in their area of residence. A new environment requires amateur ethnography, because the quickest route to adaptation is through querying local people regarding any matter of culture or behavior that confuses the newcomer. At the same time, knowledge of cultural expectations, as seen with Muller and Bruner, allow the well-informed traveler or ethnographer to engage with or avoid a variety of situations, whether that means being seen as (or mistaken for) a tourist, pretending ignorance of one's own native tongue, constructing an imaginary life that meshes with local expectations, or other ploys.

Muller chooses interaction over rebuffing her Japanese seatmate, in accordance with her culture's expectations, saying, "I wasn't raised to ignore a polite request from someone who looks like my first-grade teacher" (2005, 134). However, she, like Bruner, is aware of the other alternatives available to her. In each case, their choice is based on perceived advantages and disadvantages and demonstrates how the long-term expatriate develops tools to cope with life abroad. In his memoir, Learning to Bow: An American Teacher in a Japanese School, Bruce Feiler underscores the problem when he remarks, "As I lived in Japan, I struggled with this question: how much should I follow the unwritten rules that controlled the society around me,

and how much should I remain attached to my own customs?” (1991, 89). This is certainly not a concern encountered by tourists as they move from one culture to another, safe in the knowledge that any intercultural contact will be short term and require little accommodation on their part.

The status differentiation I have outlined between types of travelers is further evidenced by the many individuals who go to great lengths to compare notes and determine who has spent longer in a culture, knows it more intimately, and feels entitled to speak regarding it. My interactions with each of my informants included such competitive maneuvering and I was no more immune than the ethnographers mentioned above. My interview with Ken, for example, included a debate on the pronunciation of a Korean word, with each of us presenting contextual evidence to support our positions, in essence defending the superiority of our personal knowledge of Korea. While I conceded during the interview, I later discussed it with a Korean colleague in order to verify that I had been correct, just in case the topic should ever arise again, and included a description of the event in my notes. The interviews were full of discourse on the details of Korean culture, norms, and expectations as all of us were knowledgeable, but each of us knew something the others did not.

Foreign teachers in Korea, even those least enamored of its culture, learn enough Korean to function on a daily basis and many make an effort to broaden their understanding of their home abroad. Phipps suggests that among tourists “[s]tatus is attached to those who have suffered the most or most gruesome afflictions, lost the most weight, or come the closest to death. It is as if the very ill person has succeeded in moving as far as possible away from our everyday world that includes health as normal” (2004, 79-80). Similarly, among foreign teachers, tales of their worst experiences in Korea establish their bona fides as resilient survivors. But status is also attached to those who understand how Confucianism plays out in the workplace,

who make an effort to understand and adapt to the culture, and adroitly walk the line between adaptation to the surrounding culture and being true to themselves, while maintaining a realistic view of Korean life and their place in it.

#### **4.4 The Foreign Teacher's Proper Canon**

As I discussed above, there is more to the work of being an English teacher in Korea than just the job. This is not to say that teaching skills are not valued or that mastering other aspects of living in Korea are not important, as you do need to learn how things work, how to cope with new cultural norms, how to get around, and how to meet your needs. But if you cannot learn to navigate the sensitive arena of Korean workplace politics, you will be perpetually confused by how events play out at best and profoundly miserable at worst. Kim Crosby's teaching abilities and competence in the classroom availed her nothing when she faced problems with her colleagues and could discern neither the underlying cause of the trouble nor the most effective way to resolve it. Narratives of workplace problems and how individual foreign teachers addressed their own difficulties are a way of displaying competence in Korea.

In Korea, "it is often more important the way you do something, than what you actually do or say. This is a universal characteristic not limited to Korea, of course, but in Korea a special importance is placed on mood and atmosphere that is quite in excess of what is considered normal in Western cultures" (Crane 1999, 26). Koreans call this concept of mood or atmosphere *kibun* (Crane 1999, 25) and is considered vital to social relations. It is similar to what Westerners call a vibe, an ambiance that reflects a positive state of mind. When someone brings negative emotions into a setting, they disrupt the *kibun* and ruin the vibe, as the negativity is perceived as touching others and spreading through the environment. Those who bring a positive vibe are improving *kibun* for everyone around them. When Kim Crosby could not work amicably with her coworker, it affected the *kibun* in her *hagwon* negatively, which did not reflect well on her.

Taking her grievance to her boss demonstrated a lack of awareness of this important concept and/or an inability to address the disagreement in a culturally appropriate manner, thereby worsening the problem.

Comprehension of the underlying workings of the culture determines how foreigners are perceived by Koreans and influences their success on the job, which in turn affects their prospects for higher-status work and, to some degree, their standing among foreign teachers. Presenting yourself to Koreans in a way that will garner respect encompasses not just politeness, but manner of dress, tone and inflection in speaking, body language, and expression. There are allowances made for foreigners, as noted in the previous section, but the closer your behavior aligns with Korean expectations and the more awareness you cultivate for the same indicators in your colleagues, the more successful you will be in navigating the environment. If you are lucky, your personality and natural behaviors will already fall within acceptable parameters when you arrive, but not everyone is that fortunate.

Margaret Scates's discussion of how she first found work in Japan, where even stricter expectations are in play, demonstrates how unaware many foreigners are and how long it can take for us to even realize why and how things happen as they do:

**Margaret:** I was a student and um, [*soft laugh*] and a friend of mine, um, had loans. I, I was very fortunate, I didn't owe money. A friend of mine had ... well, I actually had a pretty good job, um, kinda boring administrative blahblahblah-boring job, but a good job nonetheless. It would've been a, a fine career path. Um. And she, she had loans and she wanted to travel and she had gotten, somebody had said, you know, go, go to Japan, go teach and she was nervous about the interviews so she dragged me [along]. I got the job... (Kelly: She didn't?) and she didn't.

**Kelly:** [*laughing*] Oh my god! Are you still friends?

**Margaret:** Yeah, actually, ironically, we are but that was, that was a tough one. It still comes up. It was tough, it was a tough one, um, and of course it sort of sent me on a trajectory that's been a career. Not only did I get to travel and, you know, blahblahblah,

the great thing's it was like, this is a career for me and, um, yeah. It, it was, it's tough, it's a tough sub-, subject between us.

**Kelly:** Yeah, I can imagine. So, did she ever get a job in Japan, or she didn't pursue it further?

**Margaret:** She took failure very poorly! She did not pursue it! *[laughing]* (Kelly: Oh...) She didn't pursue it.

**Kelly:** Because it seems likely to me that, you know, had she tried again she would've have found something; there are so many jobs.

**Margaret:** Absolutely. Well, she's not, she may not have, she actually would've done, would've done better in Korea. A little, a little, the Japanese *[long pause]* ... system is just a little constraining and I can see where she might not have done well, there. Um, the panty hose, the suits, the, um, teaching she'd have been fine, but the, kind of, the other stuff she might... Where Korea is, doesn't have that so she would've actually done much better to come here.

**Kelly:** So what is she doing now?

**Margaret:** She's, she's unemployed.

**Kelly:** Oh no! *[laughs]* Did you tell her she can still come?

**Margaret:** I have encouraged her you know, it's like, look, I can get you a *hagwon* job and *[snaps fingers]* you know. It, eh, and, and the money's good, the work's hard, um, but the money's good and you know, but she's so far not taken me up on that. I think it's sort of a ssore subject to come over here and have me sort of carry her.

**Kelly:** Right, right ... But I think, too, there's a certain personality that that successfully makes the journey here, you know. (Margaret: Oh, absolutely. *[softly]*) You're talking about, she was really shy about the interview?

**Margaret:** Well, she wasn't shy about it, she just had a, a very unique idea of what an interview is. Um. This, this was, um, a Japanese company, I don't know if you're familiar with Japanese English schools. It's a huge English school in Japan, GEOS. And um, and I just took it as, I didn't know what to expect, so I showed up in a, in a, in a borrowed blue suit with a little white blouse. I mean, I didn't know what, what to expect and I didn't really take it seriously except for that it was a job interview and I took that seriously.

**Kelly:** There's a job interview costume even in the States, you know?

**Margaret:** Yeah, and I just, and even though I didn't, I wasn't, like, thrilled about it, I, I wasn't going "Oooo, I wanna go to Japan," I took the ah-, job interview seriously, the act of going on a job interview. She showed up in a cocktail dress. *[soft laugh]*

**Kelly:** Oh my god.

**Margaret:** She had brace-, bracelets up to here [*indicates point halfway up her forearm*] and her hair was down and all fluff-She looked like she was going out for the evening. She was in, like, an evening, you know, going out to, to ... [*soft laugh*]

**Kelly:** Oh dear. Oh dear, I mean you can only imagine what they thought.

**Margaret:** And of course, five years later when I still worked for the company, it was like [*long pause*] ... They, she didn't even make it in the door. I mean, essentially, they, they did the, the interview with her, but she essentially was eighty-sixed when she walked in the office.

**Kelly:** Well, so much is, is visual here.

**Margaret:** Yah, and I knew, it was like, five, three years later I figured it out. It was like, oh, you didn't make it past the elevators. But ...

**Kelly:** They were just smiling and nodding.

**Margaret:** Of course, they were very polite. (I\*Scates 2007)

It was only after spending time in Japan and, subsequently, Korea that Margaret was able to look back at that experience through the cultural lens she'd acquired and perceive that her friend never stood a chance of being hired; "she didn't even make it in the door." At the time of the interview, Margaret was as unaware of the nuances involved as her friend.

Her friend's attire, for the Japanese interviewers, was so far from their expectation of proper business clothing that it is unlikely she was ever seriously considered. The incident Margaret describes is also revealing of the kind of reluctance to deliver bad news mentioned previously, as the interviewers politely went through the motions of a fruitless interview. Far from being baseless, the assessment of the incident that Margaret and I make in our interview is grounded in our long experience in Asia and our familiarity with and adaptation to the cultural expectations in play. Years of living in Korea and Japan had made us very familiar with what such employers would expect from their foreign hires and we had a clear understanding of the

first impression she made with them. When contrasted with Margaret's neat business suit and white shirt, her outfit would only seem even more flamboyant to them and even less appropriate for a teacher. Wearing a suit – even a cheap, dated, or ill-fitting suit – conveys the message that the applicant is taking the interview and the potential responsibility of the position seriously.

Allowance may be made for foreigners, but some attempt at professional attire is expected and we knew, without a doubt, that evening clothes and flashy jewelry crossed that line. Korean teachers and businesspeople wear business clothing – suits, dresses, or skirt suits – even if they only have two or three outfits. For them, it is better to be turned out formally and have fewer choices than to present themselves in anything other than professional attire. The suits, skirts, and panty hose that Margaret describes are the uniform of teachers in Korea and Japan and, at later point in our interview, she describes her relief on learning that Koreans are more forgiving of foreign dress in that area. The clothing of foreign teachers tends towards the idiosyncratic and, while few wear suits, neat and professional presentation is the norm. Melanie's wardrobe seemed similar to mine, comprised of casual clothing typical of teachers back home – slacks, sweaters, tops, and the occasional jacket or skirt. Greta was fond of classic movie stars of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and affected the same sort of style and, as she was more similar in size to average Koreans, she was able to buy clothing there. Kim's wardrobe was more businesslike, with touches of flair like colorful scarves, and seems likely to have met with approval from her bosses. Korean employers would love foreigners to dress more formally, but have come to accept a casual aesthetic as one of our eccentricities.

If truth be told, it is not always possible for us to alter our clothing selection once we have arrived there. When I first went to Korea in 1994, my inadequate attire bothered me, but I had no money for the first couple months I was in Korea and I could not have changed my

wardrobe had I wanted to. I was surrounded by neatly dressed, carefully coiffed and made up Korean women in nicely tailored, designer skirt suits and felt tremendously unfashionable for those first months. However, by the time I had sufficient money, I had learned that my choice of clothing would be forgiven and overlooked and that finding *any* clothing in my size would be problematic anyway. My frumpy sweaters and slacks were standard teacher's uniform in the United States, but allowances were made for the foreigner and they would suffice for the time I planned to be there. Part of acclimating in Korea is not only learning what you have put up with, but recognizing when it is in your power to bend or ignore the rules.

Understanding acceptable apparel in the workplace is just one of many little competences that foreign teachers acquire and the longer you stay, the more you know. Within the foreign teacher community, exhibiting this knowledge through narrative, etiquette, conversation, or even attire is a way of not only sharing information, but displaying expertise. Foreign teachers describe trying to form meaningful friendships with Koreans, but being thwarted by Confucian constraints, since only people of the same age can be friends and those relationships should be formed while young. Other examples of this same sort of expertise arises in discussion of Korean proxemics and the rarity of hugging. This canon of cultural comprehension is developed through willingness to adapt, length of residence, exposure to the competency of other foreigners, and efforts to learn the language and culture from the most reliable experts: Koreans. As is already made clear in previous chapters, this does not mean that the canon is a result of outright adoption of Korean ways. The canon represents a level of comprehension and the development of a skill set that enables *waegooks* to react appropriately and successfully in that environment. It results from grappling with the challenges that typical situations present. Those who make little attempt to try to understand Koreans or their culture deprive themselves of information that might help



them adapt and make their lives easier. As a result, they are also less likely to remain and more inclined to make a midnight run when their frustration gets the better of them.

Like it or not, to survive and do well in the Korean workplace, you have to learn the rules, play by them as best you can, and try to make them work for you. Because they are transitory, foreign teacher community members rely on information sharing to quickly develop their knowledge base. The more you can learn about life in Korea, whether from your fellow teachers, your students, your Korean coworkers, or through personal experience, the better equipped you are to succeed in a Korean workplace and, by extension, in Korean culture more generally. But comprehension is not enough if you cannot employ that expertise effectively; successful navigation of common Korean events is one way of demonstrating effectual mastery of the *waegook* canon. Narratives grounded in this expertise are seen as a positive contribution in the foreign teacher community, where they are weighed against the narratives of others, and offer advice to newcomers, because the narrative of a veteran expatriate who has absorbed the canon is more than a story of an event in Korea. Their knowledge of the culture frames and permeates the scenes and events described, through the use of *waegook* language and lore, and the experienced listener who also has the tools to follow can easily envision the experience.

## Chapter 5: Narrative Life and Survival Tales

### 5.1 Initiatory Horror Stories: The First Year in Korea

As described in Chapter Four, occupation serves as the primary collective feature among foreign teachers, but connections among them are cultivated via folklore, especially through narratives of their experiences in Korea. These stories embody their experiences in meaningful ways and communicate them to others (Braid 1996, 5). Some narratives are long and involved and others are anecdotes, a shorter form of story that still focusses on real people and incidents, but all of them share a frame of reference and serve as conduits of folk practice. Cornelia Cody describes the stories of newcomers to New York City and what these stories reveal, saying, “The stories from immigrants to New York City are compelling because ... these settlers are undergoing transformation; they are becoming New Yorkers. At home, in traffic, while shopping, they participate in the risk, excitement, conflict, and uncertainty of the city” (2005, 220). Foreign teachers undergo similar changes as they acclimatize, embrace new places and behaviors, emplace themselves in Korea, and develop a sense of belonging within the transitory community. Through their narratives, foreign teachers construct *waegook* identities and establish a sense of belonging. As white Westerners, many are feeling sidelined for the first time and their folklore reflects their attempts to come to terms with the discomfort this lack of agency causes them. They are both part of and separate from the indigenous community in which they live, existing in a borderland that is familiar to other migrant groups. Of participation in multiple communities, Peter Narváez wrote, “Covering a broad spectrum of social circumstances, the folklore of marginality, often a folklore of confusion generated by cultural participation in more than one group, is one of the most common threads of expressive behavior in contemporary life and it plays a prominent role in my occupational narratives” (2008, 22). For foreign teachers in this borderland, story swapping is a means of assessing status relative to others and of asserting

cultural superiority over the host culture, as well. In a community where everything else is subject to change – members, jobs, workplaces, abodes – narratives form the ties that give foreign teachers a sense of unity. Of these, first-year horror stories stand out as they are usually the first to be shared with the community and, as everyone has some, sharing them helps to integrate newcomers into the group.

For most who have worked as foreign teachers in Korea, the first year provides a repertoire of unpleasantness from which to construct horror stories of life in Korea. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett says of new immigrants, “The first hours, days, months, and years were filled with new experiences, many of them traumatic, confusing, or embarrassing” (1983, 39), which give rise to “accounts [that] are but one indication that the immigrant experience, which so often involves culture shock, generates its own culture and folklore” (1983, 39). Foreign teachers are white-collar migrants who endure some of the same struggles that immigrants undergo. Where entry level positions tend to be in *hagwons*, and many of these are unsavory operations preying on the naïve newcomer, the horror stories often warrant the name and narratives about these experiences are common. Additionally, neophytes are often striving to accommodate their employers, adapt to the culture, and quickly learn to navigate the new environment. The urge to suppress aspects of self that might be unwelcome only adds to the discomfort of the adjustment and can evoke feelings of anxiety or panic. As Narváez remarks of his own experiences in adapting, “Attempting to overcome ethnocentric panic, I kept telling myself, ‘This is fine. I must learn to accept different cultural perspectives. There’s no problem!’ But there were problems” (2008, 24). These problems, and learning to come to grips with them, are rites of passage for newcomers to South Korea and their initiatory horror stories reflect the struggles foreign teachers go through before finding their feet.

Personal experience narratives intended to shock or horrify carry a cautionary tale at heart. Whether they are about unsanitary or unsafe housing conditions (I\*G. Wilson 2007), withholding income (I\*K. Patterson 2007, I\*G. Wilson 2007), theft of vital documents (I\*K. Harris 2002, I\*G. Wilson 2007), or arbitrary dismissal (I\*K. Crosby 2007, I\*G. Wilson 2007), these narratives strike to the heart of all that an individual may fear when moving to live and work in another country. Cornelia Cody (2005), Jack Santino (1978), Eleanor Wachs (1988), and others have described how personal experience narratives can warn of potential hazards and incorporate practical advice through providing examples of what *not to do* for their audiences. For foreign teachers in Korea, this advice was about were about protecting one's personal documents, being wary of promises from employers and suspicious of their motives, and demanding the rights that are guaranteed by contracts and Korean law. It was more than a month after my arrival in South Korea in 1994 before I encountered another foreigner and began to hear cautionary narratives, but by then I already had my own horror stories to tell. My employers had kept me isolated during all that time, presumably because they didn't want me associating with other foreigners. They had already had foreign teachers create problems for them, with two teachers suddenly quitting prior to my hiring. I believe they were trying to control my movements and contacts to prevent a similar outcome. In any event, I lived with my employers, was not given a key to the apartment, nor information on getting around or finding my way back, nor any sort of real control over my situation or environment. They brought me to work, brought me home, provided me with room and board, and occasionally took me with them when they went somewhere. Just as often, I was left in the apartment alone with no way to explore or make contact with anyone, foreign or domestic. Given that there was no other foreign teacher at our school, I encountered no one but the Koreans I worked and lived with for my first four weeks in

Korea. As horror stories go, it is a mild one, but the lack of opportunity to hear comparable narratives had consequences and that period was a profoundly stressful time for me.

Contact with another culture having different rules and expectations of its own, not surprisingly, leads to misunderstandings, some of which inspire shock, horror, or even fear on the part of the newcomer. In part, the visceral reaction to situations where confusion or genuine conflict arise is because “the perspective one uses for understanding events, for judging another’s behavior, or for deciding one’s own behavior, is largely defined by one’s cultural background” (Hur and Hur 2000, 23). In Korea, for example, laughter is a common expression of shame or embarrassment (Hur and Hur 2000, 24), but when it occurs while a foreign teacher is very upset, it can feel like ridicule or scorn and exacerbate problems. One of my own narratives of my first month in Korea involved being seriously ill and visiting a doctor, where I pressed for information on the treatment I was receiving. Since this is outside the norm for Koreans, as it implies questioning the doctor’s judgment or authority, my interpreter (my employer’s wife) brushed off my concerns and laughed when I insisted on knowing what the doctor had injected. This did nothing to mollify me and I was so upset by the whole incident that day that I contemplated breaking my contract and just going home. Perhaps if I had heard of midnight runs at that time, I might have made one, but I had not. I still count this among the worst of my experiences in Korea for reasons that, while clear to other Westerners used to having control over their health care, might puzzle Koreans. In my narrative, I am identifying themes in life prone to arouse fears and apprehensions to begin with and accentuating those fears by describing my further loss of control over them. This is no small thing when so far from all that seems safe and familiar, especially while seriously ill.

In “Characteristics of Occupational Narratives,” Jack Santino mentions several subjects that are commonly found in such tales, including stories about particular heroes or characters; incidents on the first day on the job; reminiscences about better, earlier times; pranks and pranksters; and cautionary tales (1978, 202-204). The narratives shared among foreign teachers do not fall neatly into any of these categories, though they do exhibit some features. For narratives about a particular individual to persist past the period of their residence in Korea, there needs to be a cohesive group to carry knowledge of that individual from one cohort to the next. As I laid out in Chapter Four, however, there is no consistent population that would render this possible. There may be notable characters, but knowledge of them fades with the dispersal of their contacts. To survive, their personality or actions would need to be extraordinary, to literally be *legendary* in nature, and I have not heard of any such narratives from any foreign teacher. Pranks may be played on foreign teachers by their students, or occasionally by coworkers, but there is no established pranking tradition, again, because of the brevity of tenures there and the nature of work relationships. Because superordinates are likely to be Korean, and business practices in Korea emphasize formality and hierarchy in work relationships, it would be unthinkable for a teacher, foreign *or* Korean, to play a prank on their head teacher or manager. In fact, inability to recognize this denotes failure vis-à-vis the canon of work technique and would likely lead to termination of employment.

In the sense of adapting rapidly and making mistakes that later seem ridiculous, there are parallels between foreign teachers’ narratives and stories of the first day on the job, but they lack a tradition of the sort Santino describes that harkens back to the “good old days” (1978, 204). The short duration of emplacement in Korea, precludes this kind of nostalgia, though such reminiscences about life in Korea are common after teachers return home. Instead, foreign

teachers' narratives incorporate a multitude of firsts that all of them have experienced: eating *kimchi*, using a squat toilet, being goosed by a student, trying to communicate in Korean, being woken by the loudspeakers on a fruit seller's truck, overwhelming smells, lack of privacy and/or personal space in public, and so on. Many narratives might be categorized as cautionary tales, and although they do not carry warnings regarding physical dangers comparable to Santino's accident stories, they do serve the same function – they teach (1978, 202). Santino asserts that these narratives operate like parables and “suggest a system wherein the reason for the accident can be determined, and, if the lesson is properly learned, similar accidents can be avoided in the future” (1978, 203). Because foreign teachers' cautionary tales illuminate the sorts of problems arising from living in ignorance of Korean customs and practices, they provide information that the audience can use should they run into similar difficulties.

Other cautionary tales focus on the disadvantages to the foreigner inherent in the environment, from the lack of language skills in Korean to the apparent flexibility of contracts in the hands of employers – contracts which seem to acquire a great deal of concreteness when the foreign teacher wishes to deviate from the letter. When your employer controls so many aspects of your life – what apartment you have, where and when you work, your health insurance, your visa, your employment paperwork, etc. – grievances are made public as work is the only place where redress may be sought. As mentioned previously, many independent institutions exist solely to enrich their owners, often to the detriment of all of their employees – foreign and Korean alike. Koreans, however, have options and they move on to other employment when conditions become intolerable. The situation is more complex for foreign teachers. If conditions are truly unlivable and the teacher in question has no interest in remaining in Korea and taking a position in another school, the solution is quite straightforward: wait until payday, take your cash

(assuming you actually get paid), and make a midnight run. If, however, the teacher would like to remain in Korea and work elsewhere, it becomes more complicated and a bit of a political nightmare in the workplace.

Greta Wilson, described being hired and brought to Korea without a visa, provided with a miserable apartment full of moldy furniture, and put to working long hours within a couple of days of arriving. During the following days and weeks, she found herself lied to, manipulated, and threatened with firing as her employer systematically took advantage of her inexperience. Her story is unique, yet typifies the introductory experiences of many young foreign teachers in Korea. It is difficult to argue that she did not have bona fide grievances to complain of and her narratives are typical of many foreign teacher horror narratives in Korea, in style and content if not in specific detail. It is worth including some of Greta's narrative<sup>14</sup> from one of our interviews:

**Greta:** Um, I was at my first place, I was in Mokdong in Seoul ... at a *hagwon* in Mokdong and basically I was in charge of teaching, like, um, English kindergarten in the morning, like from nine until two, and then from, um, four-thirty until six-thirty, ... teaching, um, the, after-school programs. You know, but like on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, you know, for elementary school kids (Kelly: Mm-hm.) and so I was like dealing with grade five and grade six, which would be North American grade six and grade seven. (Kelly: Right.)

So ... that position was really, really not good and everything because ... three weeks after I arrived, they said that they were shipping me home because of the fact that one student said I talked English with a slight French accent or something like that. And I said, well, how would a ten- or eleven-year-old child ... be able to ascertain that, you know? They've not been outside of Korea, so how would they be able ... to know anything like that, so I just kind of was a bit suspicious, you know, (Kelly: Right.) that this is, like, being trumped up. You know, this is, like, a kid ... this is not, uh, legit. And then, a week later, they said, oh, we're not gonna ship you home, but he'd already stolen my documents. Like, my parents had sent me ... my diploma and transcripts ... in a courier package, you know, that was sent by express mail from ... Canada. And then, um, two days after it had arrived, I got an email from Canada Post saying that somebody'd signed and, and received it and I said why isn't it on my desk? You know, at the, at the

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<sup>14</sup> Greta often repeated words, sounds, and phrases during our interviews and in the interests of clarity, I have tried to edit for repetition while retaining the tone and sense of what she said.



*hagwon*. I went to as ...did something arrive for me a couple days ago? ... I never got it, you know, where is it? And they said, oh, we have it, we have your documents and everything, so they'd basically taken it and opened it up, and taken the contents, (Kelly: Really?) ... and not even told me, So that was really, really scary. And, uh, I said, no, those things are mine ... you had no right to take my mail and, and open it up and take the contents, and not even tell me ... that something had ever come for me. So, if I had not received that note from Canada Post, then I would not have really, you know, suspected.

**Kelly:** You wouldn't have known.

**Greta:** Yeah, exactly. So basically, yeah, that's what kind of happened and ... I'm starting to see a lot of red flags here. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) You know, this is really, really illegal ... conduct. And then, um, I go and I confront 'em and say, you know, no, those things are mine, I want them back. They, they belong to me, not you (Kelly: Mm-hm.) ... and then he made up a whole big lie that they were at Immigration. I'm saying, like, [a] couple weeks ago you were shipping me home and now you're not, and you're sending my stuff to Immigration. Like, what's going on here?

Um, basically. And I'd just met, like, this Korean girl and everything and so she helped out a little bit, and they said, at Immigration, they say, no, we only need a photocopy, like, not the original stuff ... Because I said, oh, if it's at Immigration I'm just gonna get it, you know, and do a runner and, (Kelly: Mm-hm.) and get a legitimate job, you know what I mean, and ... get out of this situation. I don't want, I really, really don't like what's going on here. And, um, my friend had ... found a safe house for me to go and live with another Korean family in Yeouido until I got on my feet. So that's kind of what happened.

**Kelly:** So were you able to get your papers back from them?

**Greta:** Um, they were not at Immigration. So he'd, then my employer had lied again.

**Kelly:** So, they were holding them?

**Greta:** Yeah, and so basically I ... had the Korean girl totally translate for me and then I told her what had happened to me and then she told the ... officer there and then the officer asked to see my passport. And it, he scanned it through and so he was looking through every list, you know, they, how they have E-1 visa, E-2 visa, F-1 visa, F-2 visa, F-4, F-5, you know, and I think C-4, just for, like, camp. (Kelly: Mm.) You know, like, ... you're in the country for 90 days or less, doing, like, summer camp or winter camps. Um, so they looked through every data base to find my name and that took about five or six minutes for him to go through every single data base to find, to do a search on my name and came up nothing. I was not registered.

**Kelly:** Did you actually have a visa?

**Greta:** Uh, no, he'd never applied for it. I didn't, I didn't have ... a visa and anything, I came in on a tourist one. And ... I was going to be doing a visa run within, you know, thirty days of arrival and so, mm, basically, the officer basically put his head down and his arms out and he refused to even look at me and, eh, he, uh, almost like the see-no-evil or hear-no-evil, and he looked, and he just said, uh, something to me. The only thing he said to me in English was, "After tomorrow, y-, you must stop the work." He was letting me go. (Kelly: Oh.) Because uh, he had, like, a police officer, just right behind him. He could've tapped that police officer on the shoulder and I would've been in the basement in an interrogation room. My, my employer nearly, you know, put me in that kind of a situation where I would've seen ... inside the walls of an interrogation or a jail cell in, in South Korea.

So, that, that was quite generous because he [could] see that it was not any wrongdoing of mine. I think that the officer could really, you know, start to tell that, that I had no knowledge about what was going on and so he let, I was let go and ... the next day, I just acted normally and, and then because I'd ... told them, I really want to either get legitimate here or I'm gonna find another job, my employer took off all of the airfare took off all of the, um, the recruiter fee and everything, and for about six or seven weeks' worth of work I got seven-hundred thousand won [*approx. \$700 CAN at the time*]. Um, and everything, so that was just really, really bad. I should've gotten, oh, like, about, over, almost, uh, two million (Kelly: Mm-hm.) of won. And, but I only got seven-hundred thousand, to live on, so that was quite something, as well. You know, getting gypped out of so much pay. (I\*G. Wilson, 2007)

Here, Greta described her first job in Korea as it played out over the first couple of months and while such occurrences are less common than they were in the mid-1990s, they are still by no means unusual. In fact, she ran into similar difficulties at her very next job just a few months later, as she briefly described during our next interview:

**Kelly:** Have you ever considered doing a midnight run? [*long pause*]

**Greta:** Once I did. My first year.

**Kelly:** Mm. You considered or you did? A midnight run.

**Greta:** I considered it. (Kelly: Uh huh.) Because my situation was really bad and I was getting treated like crap, you know? [*laughter*] (Kelly: Yeah.) Oh, and so, yeah, there ... had been thoughts of it. (Kelly: Yeah.) And, uh ...

**Kelly:** You managed to work it out?

**Greta:** [*slowly*] Nooo. I got illegally dismissed ... from my employment.

**Kelly:** That's right. And then you lived with that family, right?

**Greta:** And then that ... Nnnnnno ...

**Kelly:** Was it in between there, that you ...?

**Greta:** No, it was my second one. So, after my first one, I ended up going and living with that Korean family and then ... the second time ... I was, uh, nine months through my ... contract at that *hagwon* and then, you know, when it gets to be nine, ten, eleven months, sometimes they want to do the dirty on you, you know, and dismiss you so that they don't have to pay the severance or the airfare or anything like that, and make up some kind of bogus claims [*to justify firing foreign employees*] So. I think that that's what happened. (Kelly: Mm-hm.)

And then I had to, ah, and then I [got] taken to the Immigration [Office], get all my rights stripped, get my ... my alien registration card taken away from me and get ... a summons, from the ... Ministry of Justice ... saying that I have got fourteen days to get out of the country, otherwise ... I will be subject to ... criminal charges and ... subject to an appearance in court in Korea, and I'm like, oh, oh my gosh, you know. I'm like, gobsmacked, (Kelly: *laughs*) you know what I mean? Just like (Kelly: Of all the luck.) I didn't, um, I didn't do anything illegally! You know what I mean? Um, my employer [was] doing the dirty (Kelly: Mm-hm.) on me, here. (I\*G. Wilson, 2008)

Greta's loss of control over her official papers in her first account is "scary" and her reference to the possibility of incarceration reflects her fear and feelings of powerlessness in the face of a situation not of her making and beyond her ability to control. Just as obviously, this was not the first time the official at the Immigration Office had encountered such a situation and while he did not offer help, he gave her a little time to try to find her own way out. In listening to her second account, it is clear that I, at first, assume it's the same story, when in actuality she's describing similar things happening to her *again*. This time, she is "stripped of her rights" at the Immigration Office and threatened with prosecution, once more confronted by her helplessness in the face of exploitation by Koreans. Many first-time foreign teachers in Korea are young people hired in the first few years after university and their naïveté leaves them vulnerable to

exploitation by unscrupulous employers. Greta made an effort to escape one such situation so that she could work legally, only to be taken advantage of by her next employer.

In telling the story to me, she was participating in the foreign teacher tradition of sharing horror stories grounded in personal experience. These first-year horror stories are, in fact, survivor narratives that parallel the sort that Wachs describes in Crime Victim Stories: New York City's Urban Folklore (1988). Like Wachs informants, foreign teachers “[do] not categorize crimes or use labels to distinguish different types of crimes. They merely told one story of victimization after another” (1988, xv). Whether the incidents foreign teachers describe are criminal or not, like Greta’s story above they catalogue ways in which their tellers feel they have been victimized by Koreans. The narratives are used to initiate conversations, transmit through folklore valuable lessons learned, reinforce connections between the narrator and the audience, and provide a therapeutic outlet for anger and frustration. The similarities between one story and the next strengthen the sense that teller and listener(s) belong to the same cohort and share perceptions of their experiences and status in Korea. Also, like the narratives Wachs studied, “[these] stories celebrate survival. By sharing a story, the teller is proudly announcing, ‘I’ve survived! Here’s my story!’” (1988, 12), and demonstrating persistence and determination. Thus, despite being stories of victimization, they are also stories of victory.

One coworker from the Seoul publishing company, Kylie Patterson, in Korea for her third year, described her first employer as having a similar disregard for legal niceties concerning employment. In her case, her employer would only pay a portion of the salaries due each month, claiming repeatedly that business was bad and that they hoped to be able to pay the rest soon. This went on for months, with both foreign teachers and Korean employees being treated in the same manner. Many of the Koreans simply cut their losses, found other jobs and left, but

changing jobs for foreign employees is no easy task, requiring a trip to another country in order to obtain a new visa. As she put it, "They'd just string teachers along, giving them a little of what they [were] owed and saying 'Please understand us.' People would take it until they realized [the pay] was never coming. The Koreans could just go get another job, but we didn't have that option" (I\*K. Patterson 2007). In Kylie's case, she resorted to contacting the authorities and seeking restitution. Once it was discovered that her employer had also failed to pay the requisite social service taxes and fees, the matter was investigated thoroughly and, while she did not receive full compensation, she was able to get a portion of what was owed her, was released from her contract, and found other employment. Kylie's employer's behavior was predatory and illegal, yet her demeanor in telling her story was wry and amused, reflecting the pragmatism of the knowledgeable expatriate. Far from playing up the shocking aspects, the matter-of-fact tone and language of her delivery makes her seem older and wiser for the experience.

Kim Crosby's efforts to resolve the conflict she had during her first year with a Korean colleague and their mutual boss were touched on in Chapter Four, but her narrative of the experience merits closer examination. In our interview, she discussed her uneasiness at not being able to interpret cultural cues in the way she normally would and goes on to tell me about her situation:

**Kim:** I, when I was there in the *hagwon*, I started finding...f-feeling...strongly, that the co-teacher was fucking me over, and that she was talking nonsense to the, to the *hagwon* owner. Now that went on for a couple of months and I could not, I, I couldn't ...

**Kelly:** What were you picking up that was leading you to, to think ... ?

**Kim:** Well, she was...hardly talking to me. She was so haughty, and so offish with me and, um, then once she reported me for, in one class, one period, I didn't use the book. And I was called in and sat down. And listen, Kelly, in my, all my years of wo-working, no one has ever called me in or had to sit me down. To me that is...the biggest...um...that is the, the, a sign of the biggest failure on earth. You, that just doesn't happen.

And it was this thing around the [class text-] book. And I said, but that was the one period I felt so excited, because I got these kids to actually use [the book], and I can't remember all the things [we did]...a couple of, um, grammatical things, [and] to use them all together! And not just, okay today we're doing "and" or "the" but to use and-the-yesterday-I-we-us, whatever the thing, and... (Kelly: They were putting things together.) And I thought this was brilliant, those kids, you know, so...

I realized that [the co-teacher] was definitely talking nonsense [about] me... this woman wasn't speaking to me. Anyhow, the owner, she got tunnel vision as she got into her work, and um...anyhow this thing [the conflict among the teachers and the attitude of the boss] grew and grew to such an extent that I knew I had to do...something with my unease.

And then I prepared myself well, I took every class I had [and] I made notes of what I do with them and what I don't do and I made an appointment with this woman [the boss] and she took me out to coffee and I sat her down and I said, "Now listen, this is what I do."

And she was completely, she said, "How can you do this already?! Because this is what we want teachers to do, but yet they can't do it, and blahblahblah." Anyhow, that helped me [to feel more comfortable]. But that took many months for me to get to that point, and she [the co-teacher] was screwing me over. (I\*K. Crosby, 2007)

Personal relationships are considered of primary importance, even in business, and confrontation is to be avoided. In their list of "professionally unacceptable behavior for a Korean," Oak and Martin include arguing over contract stipulations and insisting "on individual rights and privileges from an employer" (2004, 272). Although it is difficult to be certain, Kim's problem may have had little to do with her classroom performance and everything to do with a personality clash. Her blunt and direct nature, while a laudable trait in many Western cultures, is a distinct disadvantage in Korea. In bypassing any existing hierarchy and meeting directly with the boss, without realizing it, she lost face among her coworkers and may have gained a reputation as a troublemaker. Not surprisingly, when the time came for her to move on, her boss reneged on the deal they had, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Kim said:

What happened to me before I came [to Sunchon University was] because I didn't finish the year contract. It was the whole thing about my bonus [for completing my contract], and she [the boss] said that if I could get someone...to do the last six weeks...she would

give me my bonus. So, I advertised in South Africa...um, like real professional stuff, and I got her someone, absolutely perfect. And...that was then just at the stage that Kurt found that he was without a job and he took that job of mine, and she just cut me out of my whole thing [bonus]! And ...Only after the classes, [when] we sat down [and discussed it]...did I know what she was going to give me. (I\*Crosby 2007)

As with many newcomers to Korea, Kim was outmaneuvered by her boss and lost benefits that would normally have accrued to her, though the fact that she was *not* actually completing her contract provides her employer with justification in this case. It is impossible to know what would have happened had she finished her contract, but by leaving early she nullified any protections that contract gave her and left the matter in her employer's hands, to her regret.

The occupational narratives foreign teachers tell, like other traditional folk narratives, include stock characters specific to this setting. In her discussion of crime victim narratives, Wachs points to several stock characters common in these portrayals of New York life: victim protagonists, naïve city greenhorns, and offenders who tend to be either stupid or “crafty manipulators” who trick their victims into taking risks (1988, 17-18). Kim's narrative includes some of the most common stock characters in foreign teachers' first year horror stories. The most common are scheming, greedy bosses who use their knowledge of Korean law, culture, and business practices to defraud their foreign teachers, usually through misleading them or misrepresenting their intentions. This is probably the principal character, because the person with the greatest impact and control over the life of the newly arrived teacher is their employer and the tendency to misuse that power is widespread. The foreign teacher, usually entirely ignorant of the culture and systems that now order their life, is relying on the good intentions of their boss, a long shot when dealing with a *hagwon* owner.

Another common character – and these are often the tellers themselves – is the wide-eyed, trusting greenhorn whose inexperience leaves them vulnerable to predatory Koreans, most

often their bosses or supervisors. Without the innocent abroad of whom to take advantage, there really is no story. As in Wachs' crime victim narratives, foreign teachers relating their own stories "often appear as trusting, polite, and law-abiding citizens who follow the accepted rules of public behavior" (1988, 17) in the tale. When reporting someone else's experience, "tellers often portray the victims as naïve, and they are consequently unsympathetic towards them" (Wachs 1988, 17). Among foreign teachers, understanding the way relationships and intercultural maneuvering occurs in the workplace is a vital part of the canon and the first year horror story illustrates where and how the teller first confronts this reality. In describing their personal failures in those important first months, they are "engag[ing] in the more expressive verbal aspects of their work culture" (Santino 1978, 202) and underscoring the lessons they've learned, as Santino described. These are the cautionary tales of foreign teachers, although they are used to compare notes and promote a sense of belonging within the community as much as they are used to warn anyone.

There are other common characters in foreign teachers' first-year horror stories, but devious bosses are the most frequently described villain. Backstabbing coworkers of the kind that Kim described, who seem nice enough to your face, but who engineer problems for you at work appear pretty frequently in these narratives. There are unscrupulous Korean businesspeople, shady employment agents, strangers who invade your personal space, and children who enjoy goosing foreigners. In addition to the naïve greenhorn, there are other non-Korean characters, as well, such as the foolish foreign coworker who cannot figure anything out, the incautious foreigner giving illegal private lessons who gets caught and deported, and what Melanie Steyn termed "the inadequates" or "FBHs – Failure Back Home" (I\*K. Steyn and M. Steyn 2007) who seem to hang on in Korea longer than others. FBHs are perceived as making a



place for themselves in Korea since they were unsuccessful in their homeland. These characters seem socially awkward to their fellow Westerners, but pass in Korean culture, possibly because cues and signals are different and foreigners are given the benefit of the doubt when they make faux pas. Prior to Melanie sharing this acronym with me, I had not heard “FBH,” but I knew what sort of character she was referring to, because most foreign teachers know (or know of) someone like this who seems to feel more adept or welcome in the Korean milieu than in their own. For this reason, they stay longer, and come back more often, than the average foreigner who comes for a couple of years and then leaves. While narratives of negative experiences involving any of these characters may be set in any period of the foreign teacher’s stay, the worst stories tend to arise from the first year in Korea, when ignorance leaves newcomers most vulnerable to victimization.

Because *hagwons* are businesses first and only secondarily places of education, owners cut costs wherever they can. For the foreign teacher’s living space, this can mean housing that is second-rate, unhealthy, or far from work. At the *hagwon*, it might mean large class sizes, late hours, lack of heating/cooling in the school, no allotted time for meals, or being pressured to perform duties their contracts do not include. With the most unscrupulous operators, it means lost wages, lack of legally-mandated insurance coverage, or illegal seizure of vital documents such as passports, identification cards, or university diplomas. For Kristin Harris, it meant wresting her university diploma from her employer’s hands, as they wanted her to continue working and believed she would not leave without it (I\*K. Harris, 2002). They were mistaken, because, as she said, she "would rather go through the hassle of getting another from the university than stay in Korea" (I\*K. Harris 2002). Such narratives inspire disbelief among Westerners who have not experienced *hagwon* life in Korea, but within the foreign teacher

community they are expected and predictable because the tellers and audience share that frame of reference. The behavior described would have to be truly egregious to lead other *waegooks* to question their veracity.

Manipulative behavior on the part of Korean employers is not limited to *hagwons*, either. An Australian actress described her conditions with her employer and explained her motivation for continuing to work in Korea despite serious provocation, saying:

My parents aren't happy with my being in Seoul, and so I felt like I had to be successful and make some money over here, otherwise I'd go back home with my tail between my legs. My agent was a complete ass and very cunning, though. He would only give me a certain amount of my earnings, and usually only when I was without any money at all. This would result in me saving nothing and therefore it would ensure my having to continue working for him. (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 126)

Not only did her employer control her financially, he also kept news of her sister's death from her for fear she would wish to go home (R. Harris 2004, 126). Employers are in a position of power over their foreign employees, especially during the early months, because it takes time to realize that one is being manipulated. Once you do, it is hard to know what to do about it when you are ignorant of the language, the laws, your rights, and potential avenues for finding help.

Unfortunately for Greta, more than one *hagwon* owner would take advantage of her during her first year in Korea. She detailed some of her second employer's infractions (or creative interpretations, depending on your point of view) regarding her contract, as well as the unhealthy living conditions she had to contend with:

**Greta:** [It] wasn't exactly a pleasant experience... They were, you know, cheating us out of vacation days... they were only going to give us, um, the equivalent of six working days of vacation per year. Said, on my contract it says ten. They were gonna use the weekend days as ... holiday days, as well so that basically you would be working on, at some point, in every single week of the year... And, um, ... the behavior and attitude towards me really wasn't all that great. And... they gave me diseased furniture that was moldy and, uh, I ended up getting ... a toxic reaction to, to the (Kelly: To mold.) I, um, I did not know why I was getting these allergic reactions. Um, about... three or four months after I moved in, I started getting these really bad reactions and then I was basically sick

for three months, on and off. You know, I was going to the...ear, nose and throat specialist, and getting myself completely, like declogged and all that kind of business and having...like, objects, you know...pumped, put down my throat and all this kind of thing. So, it was, like, really, really not all that pleasant and, and taking medicines.

I just really hated it. And, um, then, well, I just looked at the bottom of my furniture. I'm saying, why is it turning more and more black and green? And then, I just, like, pushed, I just, like, brought it out? It was really fragile and underneath was all black. And so this was...really, really bad, and so I was like, I have to get rid of this, and also I couldn't use my fridge for two months because it stank like a, like, like a toxic waste dump and everything.

Even when I got it, I couldn't, you know, get the really bad smell out of it and it was used and all that kind of thing, so. I had to get...another English teacher [to help me. He] was a really muscular guy. He looked at it and he says, "Oh, my goodness, I would've gotten rid of this months ago" and everything. And, uh, we pulled all of the furniture out and as soon as he picked it up, it fell apart under his hands, you know? It was, like, that rotten...

In the process of removing the furniture from her apartment and putting it in the disposal area for her apartment, she is discovered by the security guard for the building. Whether it was the time of the activity (she was clearing it out in the middle of the night) or restrictions on appropriate garbage disposal, the guard tried to stop her. However, once he saw the condition of the furniture his attitude changed:

**Greta:** He saw how moldy everything was, he was going, like, 'Out, out, out!' He, the only thing he knew in English was 'Out, out' or 'In, out,' you know. And so, it was really kind of funny. He says, "Oh, out, out," and he even, like, took the stuff and...was getting things shifted...to the...elevator to take down...for it to get taken away ... (Kelly: Mm-hm.) And, and everything, so, um, and I said, yeah, it was, uh, it was really good. And then I had quite the clean-up job and I had to ah, to clean up all of that mold and then basically, like, once, uh, the, the cloth was filled, I threw it in the garbage and then had to take a new cloth and, and wipe it all down and, and everything and so. Yeah, that was, you know, pretty nasty, but it was almost immediate that, um, that once I got all of that cleaned up, I mean my con-, my, my, my symptoms completely vanished.

But then I told them? That, that I'd gotten rid of the refrigerator and the, the stuff, and then they were so yelling and everything like that, and, and then, the, then the, the boss, the, the man, he goes around trying to search for his fridge.

And, and everything. I was saying, “Yo! That fridge is toxic, you know!” [*Kelly: chuckles*] I mean, even the dang security guard, you know, says “Out, out, out!” You know what I mean? I said, that is just...

And, and, so that’s really something I just haven’t, like, there’s like that...money meaning more than people. It’s, like, really, really a sad part of, you know, Korean life, that, that, it seems to be that, that, um, money and material wealth is more important than human life and really treating people...properly...and also how...they almost, like, view or treat people like slaves sometimes and I just really don’t like that attitude towards other people...and, that, that I’ve seen that, I mean, not everybody is like that, but, you know, there’s a, a sizeable section of the population ... that is engaged in those kinds of practices... (I\*G. Wilson 2007)

It is interesting to note Greta’s reference to undervaluing human life and her mention of slavery, especially in conjunction with her earlier comments on being stripped of her rights, potentially prosecuted or incarcerated, and/or deported. This is what Goudge describes as “a discourse which concentrates on the position of whites, almost invariably as unfairly beleaguered and dominated by their “Third World” hosts” (2003, 26). Greta’s employers have “done the dirty” on her and, while she has genuine grievances, the terminology employed is indicative of her feelings about what has happened. The framing of her narrative exposes her anxiety and reveals she is cognizant of, and feels the injustice of, her victimization and her lack of agency.

The events described in these narratives share abundant similarities and reveal shared frames of reference and perspectives among individuals as they are immersed in a new culture. Wachs remarks of crime victim narratives, “These stories are about common situations: corroboration of the events by others or by written accounts is not essential to ensure their derivation as folk narrative. Everyone has his or her own story to tell” (1988, 60). Each foreign teacher also has his or her own story to tell and the commonalities strengthen the sense of shared hardships and belonging within the community. While I was never supplied with moldy furniture, I did not doubt this aspect of Greta’s narrative because my experience of living in rundown, roach-infested slum housing rendered her account entirely believable. This body of

shared insider knowledge effectively creates bonds through communal understanding of culture contact in Korea, especially through horror narratives of that initial year.

## 5.2 Narrating *Waegook* Identity

While the initiatory stories represent the first experience of alienation and adaptation in South Korea, those who adjust and remain after that first year also tell different tales. In their discourse on life in Korea and their narratives, experienced foreign teachers focus on their sense of difference and emphasize their competence in the new culture as a form of status. Even though outsiders themselves, their anecdotes of life in Korea are exercises in the othering of Koreans, a “construction and valuing of difference” (Greenhill 1994, 62) that contributes to a sense of belonging to a shared culture. Foreign teachers come to understand themselves as both separate from and integral to Korean culture. These are *waegooks*, knowledgeable veterans, skilled navigators of the complexities of life in Korea, and their stories reflect an understanding of their place. As expressions of competence, the emphasis in their personal experience narratives tends to be on personal rather than collective identity. At this point, their membership in the community is a given rather than a matter of construction, but *waegook* identity is asserted as a key to their status within this folk group: how much do they know and how do they show it?

In the wake of World War II and the Korean War, all foreigners in Korea were liable to be called *meegook*, meaning American, as the majority of foreigners at the time were Americans. Even in the mid-1990s, it was as common to be called *meegook* as it was to be called *waegook* (sometimes spelled *waygook*), but today most Koreans are using the more accurate term *waegook* to designate foreigners. Those seeking other foreigners in the Suncheon area will discover that the “Foreigners in Suncheon” website address is “waygook.org,” another indicator of the ubiquitousness of the term. It is impossible to live in Korea for very long and not learn this word,

as any foreigner in public is likely to be pointed at and to hear Koreans saying, “*Waegook saram!*” or, “Foreign person!” with some degree of enthusiasm.

Confusing at first, this type of incident quickly becomes a source of annoyance for most foreigners, though there is little to be done about it. In my joint interview with Kurt and Melanie Steyn, Kurt described some of his frustration, tellingly using terms like *waegook* in describing how he wished to deal with the problem, and describing a couple incidents in the small village where he teaches:

**Kurt:** I stopped to buy some flowers for Sue [his Korean fiancée] ‘cause she was feeling terrible. (Melanie: Mm, oh, [*a*] shame. Mm.) But I did it in Jingyo, and Jingyo’s my home village (Melanie: Mm.) [*softly laughing*] and kids were all out. (Kelly: Ohhh. [*sympathetic*]) I mean I wa-, I was literally stormed from all sides. (Melanie: Oh, really?) [*Kurt expels his breath*] Whoo. [*abrasively*] Go teacher! As my car’s leaving, they’re banging on the car. (Melanie: Ohh, dear. [*amused*]) It’s like being a movie star or something. [*general laughter*] I mean, and the town’s so small, I mean, I can’t go out, you know, at all without (Melanie: Yeah, mm.) being hit by ab-about ten kids. I mean, I don’t know ...

**Kelly:** You’d think it would wear thin in such a small town.

**Kurt:** [*amused*] That’s why I want to get that t-shirt [*described below*]. [*laughter*]

**Kelly:** I was actually surprised when I came down here because ... I live on a tiny campus with three hundred kids. (Kurt: Oh.) And, yeah, they all know me. (Kurt: Yeah.) And when they first met me, (Kurt: Yeah.) it was like, [*gasps*] “Ohhh.” But you become a fixture.

**Kurt:** But they ... Yeah.

**Kelly:** You know? And then I came down here and ... Was it Wednesday? I just wanted to, [*starts laughing*] like, kick people. ‘Cause, (Melanie: Mm.) ‘Cause all during my lunch, this little kid was, like, staring at me (Kurt: [*softly*] Oh, god, it’s so annoying. Jesus.) and pointing and laughing. (Melanie: Mm.) I’m like, ugh. And they can’t stop.

**Kurt:** It is just so annoying. (Melanie: Mm.) I’ve been fighting with myself, been trying to find some psychological space to go to where I’m not getting fuckin’ pissed off by this behavior. (Melanie: Mmmmm.) You know. ‘Cause I feel, I just feel like I’ve had enough. (Kelly and Melanie: Mm.) I wanna get another t-shirt that says, “*Waygookin cheombasah?*” You know? “First time you’ve seen a foreigner?” [*laughter*] (Melanie: Oohoo!)

**Kelly:** And they'll go, Yes! [*louder laughter*]

**Kurt:** Probably!

**Melanie:** [*amused*] Eh. Oh, dear, oh dear.

**Kurt:** Sometimes you have these moments, though, I mean, like my ... But, of course, they, these are special needs kids that happened, that this happened with. I was in my office. [*ironically*] My office. Well, ah, a shared office, but I was alone in it. And the, one of the special needs kids, he always, if I'm alone in there, comes in and just, like, takes over the place. He's quite loud, you know. But there's not a mean bone in his body. (Both Kelly and Melanie: Mmm.) And he comes in with the other guy and, uh, [*laughs*]

So, eh, I'm on the Internet and [*briskly*] "Teacher, what are you doing?" All in Korean of course, eh? Just doing email. "Ohhhh, email." [*everyone chuckles*] And then the, there's a "Teacher, what's this?" I had, like, a Thermos™ [*insulated beverage container*] with my tea in it. I said, It's tea. They said, "Can we have some?" So, I said, O-okay. [Kelly: *laughs*]

So, I got a little paper cup and I pour and they taste it. But it's like, it's like, um, the Lipton, you know, (Melanie: Ah.) it's like English tea, black tea. And they taste it and they go, "Ooh, very nice."

Then they stand around for a little bit and they see my guitar and they go "Teacher!" [*louder laughter at the ubiquitous exclamation*] and it's like, I say okay. And they say, "Whoa!" And they open the guitar case and they say, "Whoa. Guitar *cheombasah*." They'd never seen a guitar before.

**Kelly:** Really.

**Kurt:** Except on TV, they said, you know. So I said, what, really? And they said, "Yeah, only on TV." So of course they're fiddling with it. (Melanie: Mm.) And then, uh, they said, "Okay, teacher, we have to go now." I said, "Okay, bye." They said, "Can we get a hug?" [*general laughter*] The one boy said, "I want a hug." [Kelly: *laughs*] Hey? So I said, okay, and we hug each other. And, the other boy, of course, wants a hug, too. (Melanie: Ah.) Hug. And he says, they go outside and I hear them tell [others] "We got a hug from the teacher!" [*loud laughter*]

That's so cute, I mean, (Melanie: It is, yes.) they, and then, those guys are so, so harmless, you know? (Kelly and Melanie: Yeah.) And you know, what's interesting, though, is that Korean kids don't hug. Koreans don't hug.

**Melanie:** Mm. No, they're not huggers. (Kelly: Ahh.) Mm.

**Kurt:** They don't hug at all.

**Melanie:** They'll bow, and there's no contact in that, now is there?

**Kurt:** Ah. And the other day I went back to my old *hagwon* with ... (Melanie: Ah.) Sue's friend's *hagwon*. (Melanie: Oh yeah?) And my advanced class was there. And they all came running and all hugged me, as well.

**Melanie:** How sweet. Ah.

**Kurt:** Which is nice, 'cause it's, uh ...

**Melanie:** That is nice, darling. Yeah.

**Kurt:** Koreans aren't, usually that demonstrative. (Melanie: Mm. Mm.)

(I\*K. Steyn and M. Steyn 2008)

There's a lot going on in this exchange and it merits some unpacking. In his narration, Kurt employs language and tone to express how exasperating the situation was, while also conveying his sense of being trapped – firstly, by his visibility in Korea, as well as physically by the children who surround his car, and spacially by the confines of the tiny village where he lives. He “can't go out at all ... without being hit [surrounded] by about ten kids,” or be “alone” in his office, which leaves him with only his home as a refuge in which to feel at ease. This is a familiar sensation for foreign teachers in Korea and, even if they do not feel it all the time, all feel it some of the time. As Shutika says of a group of Mexican migrants, “The decision to work in the United States means that the individual ... must give up significant control of their lives” (2011, 179). Likewise, by choosing to live and work in Korea, the foreign teacher is accepting a similar loss of control and management of any ensuing anxiety or resentment is an ongoing process of which venting is a vital part.

The behavior Kurt was referring to – the staring and pointing of Koreans on seeing a *waegook* in public and calls of “*waegook saram*” – is pervasive in Korea, particularly in rural areas. He goes on to describe himself in a space where he might expect privacy, but instead finds it the target of curious children who do not understand his boundaries. They proceed to invade not just his office, but also his lunch (trying his tea) and his personal effects (his guitar in its case). Throughout, he describes his response to this invasion as one of tolerance and patience,



expressing understanding of the special needs child and a sort of frustrated amusement at their antics. Lastly, they penetrate his physical space by demanding hugs, which he willingly gives. The whole is comprised of example after example of Korean transgression of his personal boundaries, but even as he describes his indulgent response, it is bound up with his frustration and desire for “psychological space to go to where [he’s] not getting fuckin’ pissed off by this behavior” (I\*K. Steyn and M. Steyn 2008). He is tolerant in the moment, and yet a seething frustration is revealed in his desire for the taunting t-shirt.

His audience follows both the meaning of the narrative and the emotional undercurrent it evokes (Braid 1996) and they reinforce a sense of concurrence through laughing at key moments or with utterances like, “Yeah,” “Ah,” or “Mm.” Braid asserts, “Listeners do not passively receive meaning. They actively interpret meaning for themselves as they interact with the performer in the performance event” (2004, 119). The incidents Kurt describes are so familiar to his audience that they create an expectation of what is coming next, allowing them to follow his narrative through the lens of their analogous experiences. In those moments, we are simultaneously following along with Kurt’s story and mentally replaying comparable occasions from our own *waegook* lives, which may or may not be articulated within that performance event.

In saying *waegook*, Korean and foreigner alike are identifying the individuals as belonging to a specific group, whether esoterically or exoterically. In Kurt’s story of his encounter with the children in his village, we hear their cries of “*Waegook saram!*” but we also see his casual use of the term in narrating the event. The idea that these *waegooks* are, literally, “foreign” emphasizes their position as persons out of place, defying indigenous categories, from any external place or having no more specific, immediately identifiable regional identity. Also

woven into Kurt's narrative is a subtle articulation of his expertise in Korean culture, beginning with his assertion that his conversation with the children was "all in Korean, of course." This comment, his use and translation of various Korean terms and phrases, and his explanation of Korean proxemics stakes his claim to a relatively advanced degree of fluency in Korean culture. He has established his bona fides for his *waegook* audience, meaning me, as his mother was well aware of his proficiency. Indeed, Melanie backs up his assessment of Korean norms, confirming that "No, they're not huggers. They'll bow, and there's no contact in that, now is there?" (I\*K. Steyn and M. Steyn 2008). These remarks not only affirm their understanding of the culture, but point to the affection his students, past and present, show for him – a further expression of his competence. My only other conversation with Kurt was during a group dinner where our comments were part of the general discussion, but here he lays out his claims to the canon of work technique we share. Based on our interactions, including the above narrative, I concede that his is the superior skill set in terms of the Korean language, though we had comparable knowledge in other areas. In response to our confused expressions at his use of the Korean phrase on the t-shirt, he provided a translation, which clarified the import of the story.

The sounds of agreement that punctuated his performance and the general laughter on hearing the translation of the phrase from the t-shirt (which actually exists in the marketplace), exhibited empathy and reinforced *waegook* status. While his audience was not familiar with the expression on the t-shirt, the contextual use of it and the frustration expressed through the story resonated with his listeners and furthered that sense of belonging. There are also subtle undertones in the message that hint at feelings of superiority. To ask if it is "the first time you've seen a foreigner" is to imply unworldliness, a lack of sophistication or exposure to the wider world, and a sort of provincial backwardness. The gawkers are put in their place relative to the

world traveler. The comment on the shirt also evokes the broader context wherein the foreigner is the outsider surrounded by a majority that sees but may not understand them, dismisses their needs (for privacy or anonymity) or concerns (the desire not to be stared at), yet expects them to satisfy the demands (for entertainment or satisfaction of curiosity) of that surrounding majority.

Bauman, in his introduction to Paredes' Folklore and Culture on the Texas-Mexican Border, says of the folklore of the borderlands:

the significant portion of the repertoire, the most distinctive portion, is generated by the stark social opposition of the border region, a response to differential – not shared – identity. Moreover, the generating force out of which such folklore emerges is conflict, struggle, and resistance, and folklore operates as an instrument of this conflict, not in the service of systems maintenance. (1993, xiv)

*Waegooks* may not inhabit a physical borderland, but boundaries are drawn between their community and that of their host society and their folklore shares similarities with that of other migrant groups. It pushes back against the forces of the surrounding culture and marks out a space of their own. The shirt can no more effect change than the foreigner who wears it, but can convey a sense of superiority. The message cleverly asserts that despite their minority status, the foreign teacher can lay claim to superior knowledge and/or sophistication, both as an educated person from abroad who has seen the world and as someone who can communicate that message in the native language. This narrative reveals Kurt's transition along the arc of adaptation from the wide-eyed naïveté of newbies in their early days to the maturity, experience, and authority to speak as a veteran.

Though it is unclear whether the sarcasm and criticism intended in saying, "First time you've seen a foreigner?" would translate for Koreans, it does not really matter. To the extent that the audience makes approving sounds and demonstrates that they identify with Kurt, the narrative reflects the group's attitude toward Korean behaviors they perceive as intrusive. The t-

shirts are produced by foreigners for purchase by foreigners and the meaning that inheres makes sense and allows them to express their exasperation and disdain in a non-confrontational manner. That Koreans might not “get it” may make wearing these t-shirts all the more satisfying, as the foreigners do not get why they are being stared at, pointed at, and singled out for what is, to them, unwarranted attention. “It’s like being a movie star or something,” as Kurt said, but without any of the benefits such status would bring. The explanations foreigners come up with for these Korean behaviors can be laced with ethnocentrism or even racist attitudes, as will be addressed presently.

Thus the foreign teacher in South Korea not only becomes accustomed to hearing the term *waegook* on the street, they incorporate it into their sense of identity within the Korean milieu. Their sense of isolation and exclusion within that milieu, of the kind William Hugh Jansen describes in “The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore” (1965), encourages esoteric factors in their folklore that help distinguish them from Koreans. Even among other foreigners who recognize their diverse nationalities, the word *waegook* is commonly used to describe the foreign population, minimizing differences within the group while emphasizing their separation from Koreans. In adopting the label for themselves, foreigners in Korea are socially constructing a transient social space where they can feel they belong (Shutika 2011, 96-97). It is not unusual to hear foreign teachers asking what the *waegooks* are doing this weekend and there are usually a couple of popular gathering places (restaurants, pubs or clubs) in most towns and cities that would be referred to as a *waegook* place. Even in towns where there are few foreigners, there can be significant turnout at such locales on weekends as others travel in from outlying villages in the area to socialize with fellow foreigners over food and drink. Within these social spaces, nationality and background are matters of conversational interest, rather than boundary markers.

Since not all Koreans, whether business owners or customers, are comfortable being surrounded by foreigners, social spaces are discovered by trial and error. Gatherings are planned and word flows out through conduits to other foreigners, who invite others they know or encounter (given the nature of *hagwon* work schedules, Saturday evening get-togethers are common). Venues are businesses where foreigners feel welcome, the menu often being a secondary consideration. On my first visit to Suncheon, Kim took me downtown to a small restaurant, Juliana's, on the second floor of an unremarkable building. This was one of the most popular restaurants for foreigners in Suncheon, where they could have a good burger or a plate of nachos while surrounded by other foreigners and the sound of English. Juliana's was operated by Kevin, a Korean-American from California who had come to teach, met his Korean wife, and settled in Korea. In his case, the reasons for foreigners feeling welcome in his establishment are clear, but Korean business owners who do not feel intimidated by the presence of so many *waegooks* can be just as hospitable. Given the nature of the business location, however, situated as it was in the middle of a busy downtown area with many other restaurants around, I would not have discovered it on my own in the typical course of events.

Such venues serve as a hub for foreigners wishing to relax with friends, meet new people, or share stories and vent their frustrations, to the extent that some of the Suncheon *waegooks* referred to larger gatherings as "culture clash clinics" (I\*M. Steyn 2007). The narratives shared within the foreign teacher community are *waegook* stories that can be difficult for outsiders to "follow," as Braid has described, as "an individual's own associations, and shared associations with the teller, create a context of knowledge which informs the listener's understanding of what the narrative means" (1996, 17). Braid's concept of the interactive relationship between narrators and audiences is important in this context, because the *waegook* experience is frequently

perplexing to outsiders. Without familiarity with the life and work environments of expatriates in Korea, and a shared corpus of parallel experiences, listeners are prevented from fully processing the insights the narratives reveal. Additionally, because the perspective in these tales is that of foreigners, Koreans who hear them may be confused, offended, or embarrassed despite their familiarity with their culture and the nature of Korean/foreigner interactions.

As Braid expresses it:

If the listener cannot accept the teller's patterning, the listener may fail to follow, or even...lack the desire to try and follow, the teller's narrative. Problems may also result from a difference in understanding of the characteristics of performance. If the narrative experience is sufficiently *foreign*, listeners may not be able to recontextualize it in terms of their own experiences and their following may result in a 'vicarious' or 'virtual' experiencing. (Braid 1996, 26, emphasis mine)

Koreans who fail to follow *waegook* narratives may try to explain a situation described, or justify behavior encountered, or may show anger or embarrassment at how their culture is being portrayed and interpreted. Foreign newcomers often react with shock and dismay, sometimes taking offense at what they perceive as unfair and/or ethnocentric interpretations and advocate greater tolerance and understanding. Neither group is following the performance, whether due to rejection of its constructions or lack of the tools to understand its framing.

Another example of failure to follow occurs when explaining the circumstances of life in Korea to family and friends back home, most of whom have no equivalent experience to help them frame what is being described. Many are taken aback by the dark humor in these stories and cannot fathom why one would stay for a year, never mind go back, and they struggle to understand the context of events so far outside their own experience. Cody describes the stories of New York immigrants as:

particularly attuned to the spectacle of the city, and [immigrants] become part of [the city] by crafting their experiences into personal narratives that capture its pace and its paradoxes ... If tellers of New York personal narratives foreground the negative, they do

so humorously. They have to, in order to reconcile the dangers, threats, and inconveniences ... with the fact that they have chosen to live here. Finding the humor in everyday travails also transforms narrators from victims to survivors. “Yes,” they imply, “I was scared, hassled, annoyed, or threatened ... but I lived to tell the tale. (2005, 220)

This is an important aspect of foreign teachers’ narratives, as well. For all that they are full of complaints and criticisms, the tellers have chosen to remain in Korea, sometimes for several years or more, and can be assumed to have come to terms with their environment. These narratives are “read” differently by *waegooks* than they are by others, and shared frames of reference allow them to appreciate what may be incomprehensible to others.

Even those who intend to work in Korea, and who may have done research into it, experience difficulty in grasping *waegook* narratives until they have lived in Korea themselves. During my ESL training seminar in Los Angeles in 1995, described previously, my colleagues were fascinated by my narratives, but disturbed at their tone, as I was very candid in describing those aspects of life in Korea that are most challenging. While my stories were intended to provide information on life in Korea, like most storytellers I was also using them to entertain and I’m sure emphasis was placed on those aspects most likely to elicit laughter, shock, or disbelief. Their response demonstrated Braid’s concept of “following a narrative.” As he says:

Part of [the] experience of following [a narrative] involves a recontextualization of the narrative imagery and events in terms of the listener’s own life experience. In this sense personal narratives can generate experiential resources for the listener – resources that may be “thought with” and “thought through” in the struggle to make sense of the world. (1996, 6)

My colleagues, at that time having no context or experience with which to “think through” the stories of life in Korea they heard, could not derive “experiential meaning” from them. After listening to descriptions of behavior and circumstances they were likely to encounter in Korea, one even asked (and friends and family had asked similar questions), “If you hate Korea so much, why are you going back?” In relating my *waegook* narratives to them, covering how to

deal with negative situations common to expatriate experiences in Korea, I had given the impression that there was nothing I liked about my life there.

Of course this is not true, or I would not keep returning, but most foreign teachers who live in Korea speak of “good Korea days” and “bad Korea days,” depending on their state of mind and the challenges of the day. This is probably true of any expatriate experience, as “when you move from one country to another you have to accept that there are some things that are better and some things that are worse, and there is nothing you can do about it” (Bryson 1999, 8). Once my colleagues from Los Angeles had been in Korea for a time, several of them expressed appreciation at having heard my stories as they helped in coping with the kind of situations I described. The woman who asked why I kept returning to Korea even called me once she’d been in Korea a few months, just to tell me she now understood. Living there had given her the experiential resources needed to recontextualize the story as a *waegook* narrative. The inability of friends and family to relate to foreign teachers narratives renders the stories boring to listeners, which may be why it is gratifying to encounter others who can “follow” the “flows of thought” or “experiential meaning” (Braid 1996, 5) of a *waegook* narrative, particularly after leaving Korea.

The *waegook* who sees no negatives is somehow missing something, or choosing to overlook those aspects of life abroad that tend to aid the formation of bonds within the group.

Gary Alan Fine has remarked that one purpose of narrating:

personal experience stories is to distinguish the members of a folk community from those who are considered outsiders. It is not simply knowledge of a particular set of stories or themes that differentiates members from non-members, but a common set of attitudes that make the stories relevant and successfully tellable. (1987, 232)

Even within a group, however, differences in attitudes and opinions can serve to further divide it into subsections. Barbara Allen maintains that “personal experience narratives can convey a



meaning beyond that of their content by commenting on, offering an evaluation of, or revealing an attitude toward, a situation without making a direct statement about it” (1986, 240), thus the narratives chosen reveal the narrator’s perspective on life in Korea. The question then becomes, is this individual so partial to Korean life that he or she sees no negatives, or is it a case of rejecting the *waegook* group in favor of an attempt to integrate more fully with Korean society?

Tuan maintains:

A distinction that all people recognize is between “us” and “them.” We are *here*; we are *this* happy breed of men. They are *there*; they are not fully human and live in *that* place. Members within the we-group are close to each other, and they are distant from members of the outside (they) group. (2008, 50, italics in original)

When the “we-group” goes “*there*,” however, there is still an expectation that these boundaries will be maintained, and narrating difference is one means of accomplishing this. The narratives we choose to recall and share reflect a positionality within the larger community, one that implies either solidarity with or disconnection from their fellows.

In her essay “Co-Narration, Intersubjectivity, and the Listener in Family Storytelling,” Katherine Borland asserts that “oral personal narratives, like other verbal performances, have voiced and unvoiced dimensions and are directed to a particular listener or set of listeners who actively contribute to their form and meaning” (2017, 453) and that audience members “work with the narrator to inhabit the discourse, sometimes strongly identifying with the position they are offered and sometimes maintaining a critical distance” (2017, 453). Vocabulary, perspective, tone, and framing of foreign teachers’ narratives are expressive of their attitude regarding the events they describe. Relating narratives that portray Koreans in an unsympathetic light is seen by some as necessary, but there is usually an implicit understanding that a balance must be struck. In voicing a critical narrative, the teller establishes their perspective vis-à-vis life in Korea and opens the door for the listener to negotiate where they fall relative to that position.

Melanie Steyn asserted that she was uncomfortable with those who seemed to be relentlessly critical of Koreans in our discussion of the local foreign population:

**Kelly:** Some of the groups seem to have changed or expanded in, in the years (Melanie: Yes.) since I first came here.

**Melanie:** Because there's coming and going, coming and going, and the nature of the Suncheon crowd, with that website that it has, changes a lot. There was a time when a group of them were doing a lot of things together and they were very supportive of one another and so on and then it sort of degenerated into just, uh, mocking each other and mocking Korea and, and, uh, and getting drunk and that was [awful, I hated it] ... and now it's, it's improving again. (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

Melanie's account describes the evolution of mindset in the local foreign teacher population as newcomers arrived and others transitioned out. Though Melanie rationalizes why particular individuals have some justification for their criticisms, in general her attitude is disapproving. The disparaging comments and insolence that developed on the local expatriates' website seemed to go too far for her liking, but, conversely, those who had nothing but positive comments regarding Korea and its culture were also seen as suspect:

**Kelly:** Some days it's easier to focus on the positive than others, too.

**Melanie:** It is, that is true. And actually, funnily enough, sometimes I've been aware of people focusing on the positive and I haven't liked that either. If what they are doing is they're in denial and they're, and they're praising Korea to the Koreans because they're on the take. (Kelly: Right.) You get that, also. And then I think, why don't you just get honest and bitch a little bit like the rest of us and (Kelly: Right.), ah, you know. Get real. Mm.

**Kelly:** But I mean, even Koreans must bitch about some of this.

**Melanie:** Of course, of course! (Kelly: Right?) They do. (Kelly: So...) Yeah. Mm. Mm.

**Kelly:** That is true, it is an unusual person [who remains exceptionally positive] though, and those people tend to be the ones who make friends with Koreans.

**Melanie:** Yes, that's right.

**Kelly:** You know?

**Melanie:** That's right.

**Kelly:** They find a different way of surviving, I think, than most.

**Melanie:** Yes. And, I ... They do. And I think that after a few years, there's a, there's a deep bitterness in some of those people, because when they then start bitching, they are the worst of the worst. (Kelly: Right.) So.

**Kelly:** Because they've repressed it all that time (Melanie: Absolutely.) and denied it.

**Melanie:** You know another thing I've noticed, talking about that, is that people who marry Koreans are often the most negative of all. And I think it's because they feel a bit trapped and they feel I'm never gonna escape this and it's driving me crazy. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) Yeah.

**Kelly:** And, and (Melanie: Unfortunately) they've joined that group, too.

**Melanie:** They've joined the group and, and what's really sad is that very often the wife, it's usually a Western man and a Korean woman and, and the little wife just goes along and listens to all this terrible complaining about her own country and feels helpless to do anything about it. (Kelly: Mm.) Ah, ah. Not very healthy, not very healthy.

**Kelly:** So, she has (Melanie: No.) no choice, she can't divorce. (Melanie: No.) No one would have her now.

**Melanie:** No, they wouldn't. And, and probably she still doesn't want a divorce, probably a marriage to a Korean man would've been just as bad, you know, so. [*laughs*] (Kelly: If not worse.) Or worse. Ah. Yah. It's, um, yeah, that has made me sad. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) Mm.

**Kelly:** It is hard sometimes to see these Korean women in these marriages (Melanie: Mm.) and to see that they have the intelligence and the consciousness to realize (Melanie: Yes.) what it is they're stuck with.

**Melanie:** Yes. Yes. Because sometimes their English isn't that good and I suspect that by the time they really understand everything their husbands are saying, they think, "How did I ever marry this boor?" Um, because he might be one of the fugitives or the failures. (Kelly: Right.) But she only saw a Canadian passport, maybe, or whatever it was (Kelly: Right.) and, uh, and, and wakes up one day and thinks, "Oh, no! Look what I'm saddled with." Yeah. Yeah. (Kelly: Yeah, that's true.) But, some of them are fine. Some of those marriages are fine. (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

By "being on the take" in her remarks on the overly positive foreigner, Melanie means to say that they seek in some way to gain from praising Korea. Whether through feeling more culturally competent than other foreigners, or by ingratiating themselves with Koreans in their social circle for material gains, deference to Koreans can bear fruit. Certainly those who are perceived by

Koreans as respecting and/or adapting to the culture are more likely to be included in their social gatherings and assisted with any complications they might encounter while living in Korea.

Cultivating a network of Korean contacts and refraining from critical commentary on life in Korea also enables foreigners to line up lucrative illegal tutoring work or to reap the tangible benefits of having dinner with those who wish to practice their English.

Many foreign teachers see Korean attempts to establish relationships as a deception and in speaking about friendship with Koreans, the question of the “free English lesson” often arises, as it did in several interviews. Melanie outlines one such circumstance:

**Melanie:** I belong to a Bible study group of, um, Korean professors, um, because, yeah, they asked me to just come and join them and we, we read books together and discuss them and it's a support group, for sure (Kelly: Mm-hm.) It is a support group for me and ... but not one of those people is what I would call an intimate friend. A close friend. No. (Kelly: Right.)

And there is always the sense ... [*long pause*] although, as I say, they've helped me with my adjusting problems or communication problems ... there is always just the knowledge that they're practicing their English, as well. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) You know? (Kelly: Mm-hm.) It's okay. But ... [*long pause*]

**Kelly:** And if you didn't speak English, they wouldn't really be interested.

**Melanie:** Exactly. (Kelly: Yeah.) They wouldn't have kept up, yeah. (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

Greta, while expressing awareness that the free English lesson might be a factor in her friendship, seemed less cynical about it than Melanie and I:

**Greta:** I, uh, I think that if I knew the [Korean] language ... Because the language barrier, that is my biggest [obstacle to] me not being able to make the friendships, I just find myself quite lonely sometimes. Um ... m-my Korean friend ... and I speak English all the time (Kelly: Mm-hm.) with each other. 'Cause she doesn't get, uh, the chance to speak English, very much with other people and it's kind of more important that she practice her English than me learn my Korean, if you know what I mean? [*both chuckle*] Yeah, and ...

**Kelly:** It's always a trade-off.

**Greta:** Yeah, so, I think, uh, that if, uh, I did know the language? I, I would be able to form more friendships and, and things would be a little bit more comfortable and I could, a bit, you know, settle down a little bit more. (I\*G. Wilson 2007)

The expense of English lessons makes friendship with a foreigner the most affordable means of practicing their language skills. Some Koreans are truly interested in forming friendships, but lack opportunities. In any event, veteran foreign teachers are wary as most have felt exploited in this fashion by Koreans and suspect ulterior motives as a result and this cynicism is indicative of experience. Foreigners who choose to go on outings and dinners with Korean are often regarded by their fellows as naïve or foolish, for not understanding they are being duped, or lonely and desperate for knowing it and going anyhow. They may also be seen as behaving in a comparable fashion to the Koreans by using them in return. Extolling the virtues of Korea can also be considered a betrayal of the *waegook* community, in choosing and preferring Korean life and society over that of the foreign population and/or the West. When she says, “Why don’t you just get honest and bitch a little bit like the rest of us ... Get real” (I\*M. Steyn 2007), Melanie implies that alignment with Koreans represents a withdrawal from the *waegook* community and choosing artificiality over qualities like honesty, sincerity, and frankness.

In advocating others to “just get honest and bitch a little bit like the rest of us,” Melanie’s comment also suggests that critical discourse is essential among foreigners and that failure to participate can be problematic. In his article “Personal Narrative and Experiential Meaning,” Donald Braid emphasizes that:

Each individual selects, interprets, and narrativizes lived experience in terms of their own understanding and cultural worldview and therefore, to them, the narrative may appear to accurately reference past events. But individuals may construct differing narratives out of the same “events” by virtue of their differing identities, points of view, interests, attentions or understandings. (1996, 17)

In Korea, these differing “identities, points of view, interests, attentions [and] understandings” define the boundaries for sub-groups of foreign teachers as they come to align with compatible acquaintances. What Melanie regards as “being on the take” represents an effort to fit in through respecting and adapting to Korean culture and expectations. However, it also marks an alternative approach to life abroad, opening the individual up to criticism by disapproving peers. Perspectives in narratives demarcate divisions within the group, as those who emphasize positive over negative aspects find it difficult to understand or tolerate especially critical narratives about Korea, and vice versa. If one part of the purpose of these narratives is to teach means of adjusting to this life, then they cease to function for those whose cannot accept the underlying premise (positive or negative), though either path leads to an effective adaption.

Like Melanie, my own social preferences tended to align with those who tended to “bitch a little bit.” Neither excessively positive nor overly critical attitudes appealed, as I saw the former as unrealistically saccharine or even deluded and the latter smacked of unforgiving bitterness – the reality of life in Korea lies somewhere in between. During a visit to a restaurant with a mixed group of foreign and Korean *hagwon* colleagues back in the 1990s, I reproached Christopher, an American colleague, for his negativity regarding Korea and Koreans. He was relentless in his criticism of how Korean women presented themselves in public – carefully dressed, wearing excessive cosmetics, and behaving demurely or submissively (especially when dealing with Korean men). He lectured the Korean women present on asserting their individuality and autonomy. They, of course, were intimidated and dismayed by his censure and fell silent, which irritated him even more. His confrontational manner unsettled the group and his mocking of Korean culture, customs, and mores was aggressive. In the discussion that followed, particularly after he critiqued their table manners, I pointed out that *he also* was telling them how

to behave, wielding his culturally superior position in Korea relative to theirs to pressure them. While he acknowledged the truth of this, he replied that he simply wanted them to stand up for themselves, even to him, persisting in using his cultural standards as the model for their behavior. This individual was virtually intractable in his negative perspective, making being in his company stressful and provoking numerous confrontations; although we had to work together, I spent as little social time as possible around him. His animosity regarding all things Korean was extreme and it exemplifies how expatriate negativity *à propos* Korea can be divisive in social interactions. This is not the negativity interleaved with humor that Wachs (1988) and Cody (2005) describe among New Yorkers, but an unalloyed and toxic contempt that suggests other influences were at work. After so many years and without the benefit of interviews with him, however, it would be irresponsible to speculate about the reasons for his behavior.

Others take an exceedingly positive approach, to the extent that they protest any disapproval of Korean ways, reproaching critics for being close-minded, judgmental, and/or ethnocentric. This excessively positive, conciliatory position, regardless of situational considerations, creates resentment because it leaves no room for other interpretations, and imposes limitations on relationship where there are misaligned narratives. The company of positivists may be less discomfiting than that of the bitterly critical, and can be gratifying on a “good Korea day,” but it is equally irritating on a “bad Korea day.” Those who identify as centrist or “realist” find it more congenial to associate with those whose views are in line with their own. Interestingly, the two informants exhibiting the most positivist outlook on life in Korea – Greta Wilson and Ken Harrison – repeatedly made critical remarks during our interviews.

Ken Harrison said he loved living in South Korea and spending his free time with Korean friends (many of whom were former students) and learning about Korean culture. When asked what he tells people about Korea on visits home to Korea, his response seemed positive:

**Kelly:** So what're your stories about Korea, like, when you go home. What do you tell people about Korea?

**Ken:** Uh, I don't know, let me think. [*pause*] The things I talk about are the things I like, which is food. I love the food. Especially where we are now, in *Chollanamdo*, or in *Chollabukdo*. [Chollanamdo and Chollabukdo are the names of provinces on the southwest portion of the peninsula.]

The cooking is better, most of the food is local, so the quality is better, especially in season. So the food is definitely one thing I like about this country. I grew up eating spicy food in my family? Uh, a second thing I talk about would be friends, I have lots of good friends here. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) ... Um ... Third, would be my job, which, regardless of how bad managers may be, Korean managers, ah, my co-workers have always been very good. In the five years, never had a major problem.

Ah, and my students are always excellent, too, never had a major problem. Rarely even small problems, too. Those three things I talk about the most and of course, if I'm with men, you can probably guess another topic I talk about would be women. So, those'd be ... four, like, good or things I talk about, or things I like. The negative things would probably be cultural. Uh, the Confucian system gets me a little angry sometimes, especially if I see Korean staff I like, or a friend of mine get treated in a very poor way. It happens, 'cause I got some friends that work in the, um, in the university administration? Especially one woman? And ...she's twenty-nine, not married, bottom of the seniority pile and, you know, she'll often get asked to clean, like, the president's office at 9 p.m. at night, I'm not kidding, this has happened. And, but she's really nice and she works hard and I feel sorry for her sometimes. She's a very good English teacher, too. So, yeah, things like that, and then I guess the other negative would be anything related to management at work.

**Kelly:** 'Cause that affects you directly.

**Ken:** Yeah, I mean, I'll be brutally honest. Um, our current director is, has very good social skills and is very nice. He knows to interact with foreigners very well. Sometimes un-, uncommon in management here. Um, the one we had before, I call her "the bitch from hell," and that's just me being polite.

**Kelly:** So, you liked her quite a bit. [*amused*]



**Ken:** Yes, yeah. [*sarcastically*] [Kelly: *laughs*] She was one of those ones that [will] be all, like, “Hi, how are you?” on the surface, but behind stabbing your back (Kelly: Oh.). Then when it happens, she’d say, oh, it’s the staff’s fault. Never her fault.

**Kelly:** Though she orchestrated the whole thing. Whatever it was.

**Ken:** Yeah, yeah, I mean, and then she changed some things, because she was breaking, um, not written agreements, but, um, not legally binding, but they were agreements that we had between us and the previous director (Kelly: Uh-huh.) and so she had to change back ‘cause everybody got angry.

**Kelly:** Right. So she didn’t honor those commitments and ...

**Ken:** Yeah. So, you’re talking about things like that.

**Kelly:** You find that happens a lot? The, breaking promises with foreigners?

**Ken:** It, it depends, I mean, uh ... [*pause*] I mean, uh, you know, when we were talking earlier, in this, this society, you’re dealing with Korean business people that run their own businesses, small businesses (Kelly: Mm-hm.) usually, like, the service is awesome, better than North America. They get no tips (Kelly: Mm-hm.) and they will always honor you and, you know, if usually they don’t have any grievance with you but (Kelly: Right) they’ve, I’m sure if there’s anything you would want [them] to do for you, they would do it. They’re very good. So that’s one area, you know, it’s not something that’s endemic to Korea, I think it’s just, you know, foreigners, we talk about Koreans being the worst managers. So, it depends, some, some will be very good, some will be okay, or do good and bad (Kelly: Mm-hm.), and then some will just be absolutely horrible. [*chuckles*] (I\*K. Harrison 2007)

Ken had studied Korea’s history and language, frequently used Korean words in our interviews, often spoke appreciatively of the people and culture, and seemed to have a positive view regarding Korea.

Ken described himself as comfortable in Korean society and accused other foreigners of insensitivity or lack of effort, but his comments reflect a more negative assessment of Korean behavior than he realizes, along with suggestions of misogyny, Orientalism, and the type of white superiority discussed previously. Here, again, we see the villainous boss as a stock character in his horror story about working conditions in Korea, with the familiar comments about backstabbing and two-faced behavior, reminiscent of Kim’s story discussed earlier in this

chapter. During our second interview, I asked what he wished to take from Korea as a memento and he replied, “Korean wife?” When I asked him if he was “working on that,” he dissembled and said he was “partly joking,” then quickly diverted to another topic (I\*K. Harrison 2007). In saying that he was partly joking, it must follow that he was also partly serious and this was a theme he returns to in our discussion. At another point, he laughs as he describes suggestive English text on a woman’s t-shirt, then comments on young Korean women’s dress, criticizing their choice of casual clothes:

**Ken:** So I bought [the shirt]. But then there was some other ones in Gwangju and I wish I could remember the worst one, but it was one that also said, a woman was wearing it and it said, “Caution.” and then down at the bottom near the naughty bit, it said, “Do Not Enter.” [*chuckles*] But I don’t think it meant to be, come across that way, but you could (Kelly: Right) interpret it that way. [*laughs*] (Kelly: Right, right.) That’s the thing, you’re playing with fire. I was like, I was like, ‘cause it had a hand up like [*holds up hand, palm forward, to indicate “Stop.”*] that and I said, “Well, luckily it’s not an arrow and pointing down instead of a hand.” (Kelly: Or a hand pointing down. [*laughs*]) Yeah. (Kelly: That’s true.) So, yeah, I’ve seen that a lot lately. I don’t know, the younger people seem to want shirts more with English (Kelly: Mmm.) as opposed to the students a few years ago.

**Kelly:** Maybe it’s a cyclical thing.

**Ken:** I think so. And also, I do tend to find, like, when I first came here, uh, especially, the women would dress a lot better than they are now. Now they’re dressing more, uh, informal, which in a way is good, I guess. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) But it, you know, as a result they’re wearing more of these shirts with English on them whereas before they were wearing the nice blouses, or they had nicer dresses and longer dresses so then of course it didn’t have English on them, (Kelly: Right, right.) it was nice clothing. But, yeah. So that, and, and the younger women, too, are wearing sneakers a lot more. I don’t know, it’s ...

**Kelly:** I’m kinda liking the sneak-, sneakers instead of the hoochie shoes.

**Ken:** Yeah, that, (Kelly: Stuff like that.) I, I have no problem with, ah, most of that, it’s just having all the English that just will have things that are bad, sometimes. Heh. You know?

**Kelly:** And you know they don’t know [the meaning of the text on their shirts].

**Ken:** Yeah, I mean...

**Kelly:** That’s the hard part.

**Ken:** You know, if it's a guy that has a shirt, it says, "I Love Hookers"? Okay, that's bad, too, but you know, okay, fine, it's a guy. You know? I mean obviously he has some problems, (Kelly: [*laughs*] Right.) but, you know. Whatever. He's being honest about it. But if a woman has one, it's kinda, like, hmm ... (I\*K. Harrison 2007)

Ken's general attitude and comments indicated an appreciation of the country and its people and culture, but our conversations revealed undercurrents of resentment, distrust, and bitterness, and his objectification of women, especially Asian women, often made me uncomfortable. In our further conversation, while speculating on marriage between Koreans and foreigners, Ken mused, "Oh, you know, if you get married to a Korean, maybe the family will fully accept you, but, you know, society? Nah, I don't think so. Especially if you're taller or bigger or whiter than everybody else" (I\*K. Harrison 2007). Given that he is tall, pale, and slightly overweight, he seems to be pondering his own odds of being accepted as the spouse of a Korean woman, and not for the first time.

Even when he spoke positively about aspects of life in Korea, his remarks made me uncomfortable and sometimes I wouldn't know why until I went back and listened to the interview. There was a sophistry to his enthusiasm for Korea, as he would interleave criticism and mockery throughout his praise, and the passion he expressed made it that much harder to reproach him for the disparaging comments he made. On the one hand, he praised Korean women's modesty, but then critiqued the ways in which their attire did not please him. He laughed as he told the story about how he and a friend went to a restaurant called "The Cock" and kept asking the young Korean woman who was their waitress what the name of the place was. Their sophomoric humor in getting her to say the word "cock" repeatedly reveals a distinct lack of respect for the woman herself. Despite enjoying the "honor" that his own position, sex, and age accorded him in Korea, he claimed to disapprove of the system that generates that respect, as when he spoke of his female colleague cleaning the university president's office.

While I, too, find the Confucian system frustrating and was critical of this sort of treatment, it is this same hierarchy that stresses respect for professors and educators, as well as older males, a system that both he and I benefited from, even as outsiders. In light of this social hierarchy, it is telling that Ken's Korean friends tended to be former students, all of whom would be younger and expected to treat him with respect, defer to his opinions, and make efforts to please as a mark of their appreciation of his impact on their lives. As Daniel Tudor described this hierarchical relationship, "The superior partner should act with a duty of responsibility and benevolence to the lower, who should respond in turn with loyalty and obedience" (2012, 43). For example, in my interview with Melanie Steyn, we discussed the difficulties of forming friendships with Koreans and she provides an explanation, from her own experience, of where the difficulty lies:

**Kelly:** So, I have not found that I can really make Korean friends, (Melanie: No.) which made me very sad when I was here before because [that] is something I think I expected to take away from it.

**Melanie:** Yes, yes. You see how it's so structured, not only by when you make friends, but the age thing. If you are even one year older or younger, they say, oh well. We can't be friends, you've got to be the same age. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) And that's where the going to school together thing comes because if you were in the same class with the same age, that means you can be friends. [*pause*] It's that Confucian, that if you're a year older, they've got to pay you so much respect, they can't just call you friend. And if you, they're, you were a year younger, they can boss you around and (Kelly: Mm-hm.) ... yeah. Strange, yes.

**Kelly:** And even when ... they are friends and they go to the same year, they know who's the elder of the two. (Melanie: Absolutely.) Oh, he is two months older than me. (Melanie: Yes.) And that makes all the difference.

**Melanie:** It does indeed. (Kelly: Mm.) Yeah, yeah. It isn't ... but I often teach my students the difference between friends and peers because they will write in their little essays, um, I have this friend and I hate him and he always betrays me and, and then I say to them, now, that isn't really what we'd call a friend. [*laughter*] Oh, but he's in my class! They'll say.

**Kelly:** My classmate, maybe. Yeah.

**Melanie:** Yes. So then I teach them peer, classmate, so on, so on. [*thumping on table to emphasize*]

**Kelly:** Acquaintance. [*laughing*]

**Melanie:** And they find it so interesting that I'll say in your class, you know, you're lucky if you have three friends, in my opinion. One is as good as you can expect, two is nice, three is starting to be really lucky, hey.

**Kelly:** Right. You've hit the big time. [*chuckling*]

**Melanie:** Good friends. Yeah, yeah ... And uh, and what's nice about Western society, I think, is that we are always open to making a new friend. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) Always, I do believe that. Even if, after I retire and go back to South Africa, I'll be looking to make new friends. (Kelly: Right.) I'm, I'm gonna try and find those ladies my age (Kelly: Yeah.) that I'm missing right now. [*laughs*] And if they're not my age that's not so radically important (Kelly: Right.) as it is here. They can be a bit younger or older it'll still be fine. Yeah. (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

Friendship relationships between student and teacher are therefore inherently out of balance according to Confucian mores and might be regarded as inappropriate by Koreans, particularly if one spends excessive amounts of time with younger people and calls them good friends. There is no way for me to know whether Ken's former students also interpreted their relationship with him as friendship, either, but Ken's awareness of the Confucian social hierarchy means he would have been aware of his superordinate position.

At the same time Ken Harrison was touting his close friendships with Koreans, he was concerned with his outsider status there and felt subject to potential discrimination. He generalized about Korean police being prejudiced against foreigners, saying:

Many foreigners I've met from Seoul, like, some of my friends, they've had run-ins with the law through accidents and usually, even if they're usually not to blame, they end up getting blamed ... it just tends to be [if] there's a legal issue, foreigner bad, Korean good. And then also it's always easier to do it that way, too, right. To blame the foreigner. (I\*K. Harrison 2007)

Even his positive assessments of Koreans are tinged with colonialism, as when he points to being honored, receiving good service, and having them go out of their way to please. Then, as if to be sure that I understand that he sees Korea through a non-discriminatory, open-minded lens, he

implies that Asians are actually better than the foreigners when it comes to how they treat people. Harrison says:

Yeah, it can, well, the thing is, if you're in a private institute, yeah, you hear some of the same stories about bad management. Um. But you know, you know, there [are] differences between people, especially [in] East Asia and Southeast Asia. I've noticed it, going to Southeast Asia ... I've been very lucky and it hasn't happened to me, but often I hear other foreigners in Asia talk about how sometimes the worst people can be other foreigners, they will stab you in the back. (I\*K. Harrison 2007)

As it happens, a fellow Canadian took advantage of Ken, damaged his property and his reputation with his Korean employers when he did not cover Ken's classes in exchange for a place to stay, as he had promised. Ken says of this incident, "Yeah, that's the only really, really bad experience. Other than that, you know, just the occasional crazy Korean, like, you know, crazy woman sticking her finger in my butt in the bus terminal, you know" (I\*K. Harrison 2007). This representation of another foreigner as worse than any Korean he's dealt with seems to represent, for him, a pro-Korean attitude, but this is far from the case.

Although I originally perceived Ken Harrison as a positivist in his approach to life in Korea, my interviews with him revealed considerable complexity in his actual perspectives and a negativity that he attempted to suppress or mask. It is interesting that in criticizing Korean management, he targeted a woman in a position of power relative to him, then disparaged Korean society for its oppression of a woman who would have occupied a subordinate position in the social hierarchy. Our interviews are riddled with awkward, cringe-worthy moments and my stilted, uncomfortable laughter, reminiscent of Jeannie Thomas' work on laughter as an expression of abjection (1997). Within the foreigner community, he was considered pro-Korean, but his misogyny, homophobia, and Orientalist inclinations left me frustrated at needing informants for research purposes, but wanting to call him out for hypocrisy as I had done with Christopher, years before. Ken's mix of positivity regarding the benefits of living in Korea while

deriding the culture at the same time epitomizes the worst of Orientalist thought among foreigners in Korea and it does not surprise me that few of the other informants spent much time with him. The fact that he claimed to have a “girlfriend” in Vietnam whom he had “visited four times” (I\*K. Harrison 2007) only reinforced my impression of his fascination with the Orient and, especially, its women. The art and essays in Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images (Galang, 2003) include numerous examples of the fetishization of Asian woman in Western media and popular culture. I have no doubt Ken believed it when he said he loved Korea and thought his point of view was positive regarding the people and culture, but his remarks bely that positioning and point to more troubling signs of prejudice and stereotyping.

While I was not conscious of making a clear decision about it at the time, in retrospect I realize that I did not pursue questions that would clarify his attitudes for multiple reasons. First among these would be that his remarks about women made me uneasy and apprehensive. His remark, above, that “Okay, that’s bad, too, but you know, okay, fine, it’s a guy,” plainly illustrated a boys-will-be-boys attitude, after which he immediately moved on to judging women for identical behavior. I was never sure whether there was some underlying message directed toward me, nor what it might be if there were. In addition, orientalist and colonialist themes, as I have already discussed, were not part of the project as I’d originally conceived it and had not yet piqued my interest, so I steered the conversation to address those things that were. I was also uncomfortably aware of the difficulties I’d had in finding informants to that point and reluctant to offend him and risk his cooperation by asking more incisive questions. Lastly, I had not set out to expose my informants to criticism nor to make them look bad or feel embarrassed and, since I saw Ken’s attitude as integral to North American culture, rather than foreign teacher culture, I chose to move past it.

Personal attitudes regarding Korea normally influence associations, but, as my experience with Ken demonstrates, I worked to connect with any foreign teachers I met who were willing to participate. Although there was some range in perspective, all of my informants made positive and negative comments about Korea, depending on the topic, and I had no informant who exhibited the kind of vehemently anti-Korea position I had seen from my colleague Christopher in 1996. My relationships were with people who generally enjoyed living in Korea, had been there for some time, saw the good and the bad, and had stories about all types of experiences. Their narratives reflected their attitudes, even when they were unaware of it, and conveyed information about their experience of life in Korea, often saying implicitly what they would never make explicit.

In his study of touring actors, Laba found “the narrative as fulfilling three basic functions for that group: to entertain, to offer through example a strategy for appropriate behavior for typical situations, and to establish and express a strong self-image for the in-group” (1979, 165). Many narratives in any group will serve as entertainment, but the latter two functions noted by Laba are of particular interest in my study as they operate to delineate and reinforce group boundaries and identities. Laba provides the example of an actress who defecates in her clothing in order to discourage the police from searching them and finding the drugs she is carrying (1979, 165-167). In narrating this particular story, the woman is sharing an “occupational strategy in that it provides the in-group audience with an appropriate response/action for tour perils” (Laba 1979, 167) and such a narrative can “become an expression of strategy, belief, and identity for both the narrator and the listeners through its repeated performance” (Laba 1979, 168). Wachs (1988) and Cody (2005) describe similar functions in the narratives of New Yorkers, where the narratives demonstrate street smarts and how to survive the travails of life in



the big city. Donald Braid described how personal experience narratives among Travellers are “used as a form of entertainment, a vehicle of education, a way of reminding themselves of who they are, and a way of knowing or comprehending experience in the world” (2004, 37).

Similarly, foreign teachers’ narratives share strategies for dealing with life and work in Korea or illustrate where and how things can go wrong. The sense of shared identity Laba depicts aligns with the sense of belonging within a migrant community Shutika describes (2011), as well.

In addition to telling a narrative of an encounter with the host culture, *waegooks* sometimes excuse behavior that would be deemed unacceptable in other circumstances. At other times, they emphasize their own intercultural faux pas and focus on what they learned from the experience, providing a sort of coda for their audience. Melanie Steyn, for example, described a telephone interview when she was first searching for work in Korea:

**Melanie:** [I had] applied to quite a few places. I had one or two telephone interviews, and, uh, and in this one *hagwon* in Suncheon, I was picked up.

**Kelly:** About how long did that take? Was it just a few weeks or?

**Melanie:** Mm, a few weeks. (Kelly: Right.) Yeah. I was older and I knew that that put some people off and, and the one ... telephone interview, I had with Gwangju? Ah, he said, “Be very honest. What’s your health like?” And I’m a very healthy person, but I do have raised blood pressure, which is under control with medication. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) So, but I could hear, the minute I said, well, the only thing is my, I’ve got high blood pressure. From his tone of voice, his reaction and how quickly he ended the, I knew that cost me the job. (Kelly: Right.) At a nice university, it would’ve been a good job. (Kelly: Right.) Yeah, yeah.

**Kelly:** So by being totally honest [*chuckles*]

**Melanie:** I lost the job! And, and yet here I am, I’ve been teaching for five years, fit as a fiddle, never been sick and uh, so I feel that they lost (Kelly: They lost.) a good teacher. Yeah. [*laughs*]

**Kelly:** They lost a good teacher. There’s a certain short-sightedness there. [*laughs*]

**Melanie:** Well, I don't blame him. When you've got a whole lot of applicants and there is something that is a good reason to disqualify one of them... Sure. He did it. (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

While many Westerners would see it as inappropriate to ask such questions in an interview, Melanie shrugs it off and defends his actions as common business practice. Of course, it also educates the *waegook* listener on what to expect and/or avoid in Korean job interviews.

Laba's functions may be distinguished in the folklore of foreign teachers in Korea, as well, whether the narratives may be described as educational, entertainment, or community-reinforcing functions. Gary Alan Fine points out that:

in many leisure worlds, participants enjoy making sense of their experiences and sharing them with peers. This world of talk builds a community of knowledge – a basis for elaboration. This function of cultural elaboration is at the heart of the establishment of all folk communities, particularly those based upon the establishment of voluntary ties among members. (1987, 226)

*Waegook* narratives are frequently amusing, as tales of culture contact often are (and I am sure Koreans tell plenty of hilarious stories about foreign teachers). Christopher, a colleague of mine at the *hagwon* where I worked in 1996, showed up wearing a tightly-knit hat at a weekend gathering of local foreigners. After a great deal of teasing, he finally pulled it off to show a new haircut, a crewcut, which is an odd hairstyle choice during a bitterly cold November. He angrily described how holding his forefinger and thumb a centimeter apart failed to convey that he wanted a slight trim of the ends of his hair, not a close trim to his head. The barber spoke no English, and Christopher spoke no Korean, but he made no allowances for this or for the Korean cultural trait of avoiding saying "No." He was furious at being misunderstood, insisting that he had been clear in his communication, and pissed off at having to wear a hat until his hair grew out. Given that this was the same colleague who ranted about Korean women's subservience and how nasty Korean food was, the incident only reinforced his sentiments. The story was met with

general laughter, which made him even angrier. For most, it provided incentive to bring a picture or a translator when going for a haircut.

Above all, in foreign teachers' narratives there is an awareness of the complications of the daily activities of foreigners in Korea. Because audience members are trying to communicate their needs to Koreans without necessarily having a strong command of the language, such things can also happen to them. Only the *waegook* runs into difficulties just getting a simple haircut. This is where personal experience narratives come in, where "[e]xplicit statements reinforce the advice implicit in the stories. Experience stands behind each piece of advice" (1988, 62), as Wachs described. Akin to the missionaries studied by Terry Jill Rudy, for foreign teachers "[n]arrative becomes a significant instrument for sorting through and sharing the new and the strange elements" of life abroad (2004, 136). Rudy's article, "'Of Course, in Guatamala, Bananas Are Better': Exotic and Familiar Eating Experiences of Mormon Missionaries," centers on missionaries' experiences with food and she describes their narrative sessions, saying

These stories of exotic eating experiences usually are humorous and may be told in a 'story war' session of returned missionaries that escalates from accounts of strange to even stranger food items and eating experiences, usually with each person attempting to relate a happening more outlandish than previous narrators. (2004, 136)

The *waegook* gathering often takes on a similar form, though the narrative need not be food related, as seen in the haircut example above. What is clear in these instances is that the narrators are presenting strongly exoteric perspectives on these experiences, reinforcing their marginal status in their foreign home and their insider status with the group.

Mark E. Workman, in his discussion of the folk subject in a poststructuralist world, quotes Molly Bloom from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, wondering, "Who's he when he is not at home?" (1993, 172). This apt quotation touches on the heart of the expatriate experience: if the people who surround you know nothing of you, your people, or your personal history, whom do

you become for them? To what extent are you free to reinvent yourself in this wholly new environment? “Every person consciously or unconsciously cultivates a repertoire of narratives which enact memorable life experiences” (Laba 1979, 164) and, more than any other folkloric activity among *waegooks* in South Korea, the sharing of personal experience narratives is the defining characteristic of interpersonal relations. Informants described impromptu conversations in supermarkets, on trains, at tourist areas, in coffee shops, or even in restrooms, with these meetings often including exchange of contact details. Julie Diamond, in her study of networks, identifies discourse as “a multileveled matrix of meanings in which speakers are not merely conveying information, but are performing actions which constitute social life” (1996, 6). She asserts, “People’s behavior in ordinary conversation is not as random as it sometimes appears, but reflects the social structures in which the momentary conversation takes place, as well as the nature of the participants’ relationships to each other. Behavior not only constitutes but perpetuates the larger social structure” (Diamond 1996, 1). The narratives that foreign teachers tell are operating on a variety of levels, conveying information about themselves and their experiences, fostering feelings of connection and belonging. As Dong-ha, a Korean owner of a bar popular with expatriates, puts it:

Most of the foreign teachers here aren’t permanent people. I’ve been doing this for almost 10 years, and I’ve seen so many people come and go. When you aren’t permanent, you can be whoever you want, because you know you are going home in the end. I think that’s the attraction of coming here in the first place. (quoted in Potts 2006)

Like other migrants, tourists, and travellers, foreign teachers narrate themselves into being for the strangers they meet, who can have no other way of knowing their fellows. For some, this becomes a powerful tool for reinvention, though for most it is a means of forming connections in a new environment where none yet exist. But first they have to find each other.

Foreign teachers form their friendships and network ties through coincidental contact in public spaces. The importance of these encounters cannot be overstated in terms of their importance in developing networks. For Greta Wilson, a random encounter led to a stable job when she really needed it:

**Greta:** I got illegally terminated from my employment on the first of February, 2006. [But] in the third weekend in October, um, of 2005, I'd met at JonggakYuk [*Jonggak Subway Station*] ... you know, I'd gone to Seoul and to Bandi and Lunis [*a bookstore in Seoul that carries English-language books*] and gone to the bookstore and come back out and was going back home and at the subway station, I met I met a couple and they were teaching at Woosung University and they were saying, oh, there are some positions opening up from the end of October to ... the end of December and would you be interested. I said, I can't because my contract with the *hagwon* goes until the end of April (Kelly: Mm-hm.) of 2006.

They say, oh, that's unfortunate because we have positions o-opening up and everything. But they took down my contact details and about three weeks later, the director of the English program at Woosung University [contacted] me by email (Kelly: Wow.) [asking] if I was interested or anything like that. ..

...I had my job at the *hagwon*, but then, um, the evening after I'd been dismissed (Kelly: Mm-hm) um, I was at the PC Bang [*literally "PC Room," a shop providing computer/Internet access*] and I immediately fired off an email responding back to him. Um, my contract has just ended with my employer, would you have any jobs going? And then immediately, the next day, I was called by the person and I spoke with the new director. Because they were doing a transition ... like, I [had used the email for] the old director. The new one ... had just, you know, taken over.

And they said, um, yah, I'd be interested, and they said, yah, we're a bit short on teachers. You know, would you like to come in for an interview, and that was in Daejeon. So, I went for an interview, that [phone call] was on the Friday. I went for an interview on the Monday and they hired me on the spot.

So, I was so happy to, to, to line up another job so quickly. (I\*G. Wilson 2007)

Greta's brief, casual conversation with a couple of strangers in a subway station, and the exchange of pertinent information, provided her with a job opportunity when she found herself suddenly out of work. Similarly, Melanie shared an anecdote about eagerly exchanging contact info with other foreigners at the supermarket, showing how unexpected encounters helped build

her personal social network. My chance meeting with Kim Crosby in a ferry terminal, and our story swapping session there, connected me with another foreign teacher community willing to participate in my research. Likewise, my connection with Greta Wilson began when she approached me in a stationery store, breaking the ice by commenting on how few foreigners there were in the town and how surprised she was to see me there. The serendipity of these encounters lends immediacy and openness to such exchanges, adding to their intimacy. Tuan says, “Intimacy between persons does not require knowing the details of each other’s lives; it glows in moments of true awareness and exchange” (2008, 141), an apposite description of the type of conversations common between foreigners in Korea. Consciously or not, some of the narratives disclosed in these encounters constitute “resources that may be ‘thought with’ and ‘thought through’ in the struggle to make sense of the world” (Braid 1996, 6) and later repeated to the benefit of other foreigners, a further signal of their importance within the community.

Foreign teachers’ tales strike a chord with others they meet who have dealt with comparable difficulties and adventures abroad. The sense of connection arising from the liminality common to all travel situations is augmented through the sense of shared emotions and common travails of the expatriate. “Language...can expose – and through exposure fire up – emotions and feelings that are deeply disturbing” (Tuan 2002, 313), which narrative-telling sessions epitomize when they are rife with indignation, anger, and confusion. In conversations with informants, coworkers, and casual acquaintances in Korea over the years, voices rose and speech accelerated as they launched into descriptions of what were, for them, some of the most challenging or disturbing incidents they had been through. The narratives of these events, like those Wachs collected (1988), share themes of victimization and/or exploitation and elicit sympathy from an audience subject to the same risks and stresses. The underlying assumption, of

course, is that in our homelands immigrants and foreigners would not be subjected to similar treatment: a comforting self-deception at best. But such ethnocentrism is an integral part of the re-experiencing of these moments, as the differences cannot be perceived without holding up the mirror and comparing oneself and one's own culture as it comes up against another culture or people, or situations that fail to meet expectations.

The reality is that such tales are a predictable part of coping with the threat to identity, or self-sameness (Erikson 1968), represented by immersion in a foreign cultural context. Indeed, learning to live in a foreign land is a life-altering experience and it must follow that it changes one's self-perception as well. As Rosan Jordan says, "The Mexican-American who fits into American culture gives up something of his Mexicanness" (1981, 262-263) and, while foreigners never truly "fit" in Korean culture, they do adapt and are changed by the experience. Many foreign teachers are not aware of how much they have changed until they face returning to their home culture and face re-adaption. To quote Heraclitus, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man" (2013), and life abroad changes you. A couple who had been in Korea for three years recently found themselves being deported through no fault of their own and posted a video on YouTube of them struggling with the thought of leaving something of themselves behind:

**Leah:** We feel like we're losing a piece of our identity. We identify so much with Korea now, um, and we feel like we're a part of it and we feel like we're a part of something good in Korea. And so, to be told that everything we've done here, all the students we've helped, was wrong, and to be kicked out for it, essentially, is really painful to deal with. Um, it just, just is. 'Cause we're losing more than our favorite foods, and, you know, going outside and seeing Korean people. It's, it's an entire way of life that we've become accustomed to. I, I don't know how to equate it into, "Oh, well, we have this here and we don't have this at home," because that's not really the way that it works. It's just a sense of belonging that we have in Korea that we no longer really have for, um, the U.S.

**Steve:** This has ... become our home and ... it, it's hard to explain, it's, I, I'm saying, "We're going home to the U.S. , but that's not ... accurate. Part of my home is here, part

of my identity is here. Not to say that I think I'm Korean or anything, like, I know I'm not, but it's, it's impossible to live in a country like this and not have some part of your identity, you know, self-definition, shift. Like, I'm, I'm so used to calling myself a foreigner. [Leah: Yeah! *Laughs*] I, I don't even think about, I am a foreigner, like, that's just, that's it. And there are, like, certain ... I, I don't know, like, subconscious changes that are going to have to happen. It's not like, oh, I went from being a Michigander to an Ohioan or something, like ... it's waaay deeper than that, and I'm, and as, don't get me wrong, I'm so happy to see my family, I'm happy to have Chik-fil-A again and ... get real cheese on my Pizza Hut, like, I'm so excited for that stuff. Don't get me wrong ... but ... I'm also losing a part of myself. We're, we're losing a huge part of who we are.

**Leah:** We're aware that it's not a loss that people are familiar helping someone through. Our family has done a great job at not minimizing the loss that we're going through, um, and accepting that we are gonna be different people when we come back. That's just ... a fact. And we're gonna want different things. (Rigby 2017)

Steve and Leah's remarkable video seems like an effort to solidify the changes they have experienced and hang on to the identity they have built as *waegooks*, even after they return home. Many foreigner teachers try to maintain their own customs, foodways, etiquette, and standards of behavior, but at the same time, they are changing, sometimes in ways they do not even recognize. Faced with returning to their own culture, the Rigbys seem anxious to preserve changes that have made them feel fulfilled, successful, and appreciative of their life in Korea. Part of what they are struggling with is losing that sense of emplacement that they have invested three years cultivating and, naturally, given the feelings they express, they plan to return to Korea once their 365-day ban has expired.

Bauman emphasizes that, "members of particular groups or social categories may exchange folklore with each other, on the basis of shared identity, or with others, on the basis of differential identity" and that folklore "may be as much an instrument of conflict as a mechanism contributing to social solidarity" (2000, 49). Given their social positioning in Korea, foreign teachers' folklore both highlights common experience and points to shared *or* differential characteristics, depending on the context of the exchange. This folklore transmission is



sometimes an exercise in informational exchange, but at other times it represents an attempt to establish a hierarchy of expertise. For example, Greta Wilson and I swapped stories of our early experiences of culture contact in Korea and the difficulties we had with our employers. We had our horror stories, gender, life as a teacher in Korea, North American origins, and other factors in common. But our differences permeated our conversations: nationality, age, education, and profoundly different political and religious views, all of which informed the folkloric exchange between us. Our narrative exchanges also established our relative length of residence in Korea, familiarity with the culture, facility for the language, competence as teachers, tolerance for cultural difference, and political perspectives. Like many acquaintances in Korea, we really did not have compatible worldviews, but the value of camaraderie and belonging in isolating circumstances meant that we were unwilling to cut the connection altogether. As Melanie put it, “So you choose your friends from among the foreign community and you have to settle for making friends with people that frankly you wouldn’t really have much to do with at home” (I\*M. Steyn 2007). Greta and I maintained our connection until I left, though our conversations did tend to focus on mutually agreeable topics, and then the tie fell away.

Given the long hours on eccentric schedules, often requiring foreign teachers to work until late at night during the week or including a half day on Saturday, socializing and letting off steam together remains important, especially for young newcomers to Korea. The “culture clash clinics,” mentioned previously, occur wherever foreigners gather to socialize, air grievances, and share concerns. What I heard among my informants, especially Greta and Kim, was reminiscent of my early months in the country in 1994, and is still echoed today in the posts from Nick Holmes, rife with anti-Korean sentiment as foreign teachers react to and rebel against the culture and their treatment. The venting of resentment enables the construction of a shared identity that

serves as a bulwark for these migrants and the gatherings are physical manifestation of belonging to the community. This is not to say that negative attitudes are universal, as they are not, but, like crime victim narratives (Wachs 1988), they function as a leveling, unifying force within the community. Those who survive that first year have established themselves and earned their bona fides.

### **5.3 Narrative, Stereotype, and the White Minority Position**

As I have explained previously, I began my fieldwork among English teachers in South Korea with expectations based on my experience of living and working there. Throughout my participant-observer fieldwork among foreign teachers in Korea, I took part in numerous discussions with my expatriate colleagues and negotiated the kind of shared stance that Goffman (1959, 4) has outlined, reaching mutually acceptable conclusions as to our position in Korea, the nature of Koreans, and the comparative status of our respective cultures. My focus while there was on gathering data and documenting the networks that foreign teachers shared. It was only after I returned home and began to analyze my research that I reconsidered not only what I'd found, but how I was looking at and understanding those findings. As Angel Lin points out in the introduction to TESOL Quarterly's special issue on race, "The idea of race, racialization, and racism are inescapable topics that arise in the contact zones created by teaching English worldwide" (Kubota and Lin 2006, 471) and I needed to consider what that meant for my informants and myself. This section takes a closer look at those topics as they pertain to this thesis.

In listening closely to the interviews I had done, I found there were more serious undercurrents to them than I appreciated at the time, and the impact that Western cultural perspectives and normative conceptions of the world have on the evaluation of cultures other than our own was clear. Any culture contact is likely to be plagued with misunderstandings,

which provide entertaining material for personal experience narratives. I was familiar with the types of narratives foreign teachers in Korea share, the view they have of their position and work there, and what experiences are most likely to be expounded on and embellished in narratives. What I had *not* considered was the implicit content of those narratives regarding our shared white, Western perspective and what it might say about our view of Korea, Koreans, and ourselves. While I believe that similar situations play out in other Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Vietnam, I can only speak here to the situations and people that I observed in Korea.

The narratives in this thesis, particularly the initiatory horror stories, show how foreign teachers air grievances, engender a sense of intimacy, and negotiate a sense of shared identity and belonging. They can also reinforce stereotypes and culturally-influenced attitudes of superiority in the white Westerner and the fact that it took me so long to recognize this is an indication of my white privilege. Despite the amusement in the retellings, and many of these stories were greeted with laughter, our situations and events in our lives in Korea often infuriated us. Revealing our feelings publicly would entail a loss of face and standing, further weakening our social position in a culture where status is everything. Those who can – and these tend to be the “survivors” who stay on for a year or more – suppress their fury in the moment, go along with the demands of the situation, and get through it, but resent the resultant feeling of impotence. That suppressed anger and resentment comes through in their narratives, as when Kim rants about her former employer, when Christopher fumes about his haircut or conformist behavior, or when Kurt is simply trying to find a space where he won’t be “pissed off.” They are expressing frustration at their feelings of powerlessness in situations they can neither avoid nor control, stemming at least in part from being marginalized migrants in Korean society.

It is revealing to compare how Kurt and Kim talk about Korean culture with the attitude of a Brazilian apprentice to a sword-maker in Japan quoted in Karin Muller's *Japanland*. He says:

If you want to live in Japan for a long time, then you must be reborn. You must forget everything you know and everything you believe in, and start over. You must value age and experience over book learning. You must do as you're told and blank your mind to any other thoughts. You cannot feel resentment against the system, not even for a single moment. You cannot demand fairness or equality, or even hope for it. You must learn to believe in a society that is based on hierarchy. It is a completely different way of thinking, of living, of being. If you do not accept it utterly, into your soul, then you will not survive. (2005, 66-67)

I quote him here not for his assessment of Japanese culture, but because it is difficult to imagine a white Westerner adopting this approach, relinquishing all the things listed by this man, right down to their culture, beliefs, even identity. In addition, they would be yielding their agency and status as mainstream white majority members, as Greenhill described, where labeling minority cultures as "ethnic" is an application of their power of to define non-whites as "other" (1994, 18-21). Through emphasizing the perceived failure of Koreans to educate properly, to conform to our sense of appropriate hygiene, to interact in predictable ways and to meet foreigners' expectations, we were defining them as inferior based on status, culture, industrial development, and other factors. In essence, they weren't good enough because they weren't Western, they weren't white, and their culture lacked compatibility with western culture regardless of any appearances to the contrary.

In her essay "Salvaging the Savage: On Representing Filipinos and Remembering American Empire," Catherine Ceniza Choy describes her reaction to an ad for Chino Latino, a Minneapolis restaurant, which uses the line "As exotic as food gets without using the dog" (2003, 35). The phrase evokes a stream of images for the author: "Filipino, savage, dogeater, monkey" (2003, 35). Choy interprets "the advertisement as one form of the persistence of U.S.

colonial narratives of white supremacy and Filipino inferiority,” and asserts, “The racist narratives implied in this particular advertisement are no accident” as she later sees another ad for the same restaurant that reads “All the flavors without the vaccines” (2003, 35). These ads equate Asians, their foods, and, by extension, their people, with “diseased (meaning backward and uncivilized) places” (2003, 35). The anthology that includes the essay Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images (2003) is primarily devoted to discussion of Filipino perspectives, but when it comes to Orientalist Western perceptions of Asians, such labeling is equally as common for Chinese, Korean, Japanese, or Vietnamese as it for Filipinos. For many years, folklorists have been documenting contemporary legends about missing pets and eating of cats and dogs, which arise in communities experiencing an influx of immigrants (Brunvand 1988, Brunvand 1994, Fine 1992, Ellis and Fine 2010). These legends often appear first as news items about authorities investigating such reports, and the stories reveal underlying anxieties regarding newcomers who are labeled as “ethnic” by residents distressed at the changing demographics.

To return to Kurt’s experience of being accosted in the streets in Korea, discussed earlier in this chapter, such occurrences can be seen as opportunities for positive interaction and development of cultural capital. Just as easily, it can be used as an illustration of the lack of tolerance and understanding of some foreigners, or as an indicator of the backwardness of Korean culture. How it is construed depends a great deal on the individual telling the story and the nature of the audience, but in conversations among foreigners in Korea, an unflattering portrayal of local culture is often intended. For Koreans, there is nothing so remarkable in coughing up phlegm and spitting it on the sidewalk, burping loudly while eating, squatting while waiting for a bus, or selling raw, unrefrigerated chicken in the local market. A Korean might see

blowing one's nose or spitting phlegm into a tissue and tucking it in one's pocket as far more disgusting (i.e., What are you saving that for?). Burping and slurping are seen as ways to show enjoyment and appreciation of one's food, squatting is a natural position in a culture where sitting on the floor is the norm, and refrigeration is expensive, so it does not always make economic sense for vendors to refrigerate everything. As with Filipinos and other Asian cultures, dog meat has a place in traditional foodways in Korea and is perceived as another indicator of the backwardness of their culture. Foreigners are likely to use words like filthy, disgusting, backward, uncivilized, or even barbaric (in the case of consuming dog meat) in narratives that describe such behavior. The narratives emphasize the need for wariness, that the natives are not to be trusted, that they are inferior.

The prevalence of these prejudices and stereotypes lends additional weight to the infrequently heard term "whiteys" among *waegooks*. While "*waegook*," "foreigner," and "foreign teacher" are commonly used as simple descriptors, "whitey" appears in discourse that emphasizes their lack of agency, or potential for victimization. There is a bitterness to the word, a reduction to skin tone that cannot help but evoke its counterpart racial slurs, such as nigger or redskin. These, and other racial slurs, have been used by whites for centuries to assert superiority over others, of course, which means that saying "whitey" can be no innocuous or unintentional remark. The semantic load is too heavy for that. As George Lipsitz says, "Whiteness is ... a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity" (1998, vii). "Whitey" encapsulates the experience, for whites, of not having full access to the systemic privilege and entitlement that has traditionally been their lot. They *feel* oppressed and associate that oppression with their race because they are immersed in the Other, and to name themselves as white is to mark that out and lay claim to

former power while creating “a sense of besieged solidarity within the group” (Lipsitz 1998, 49). In Nigger: The Strange Career of a Troublesome Word (2003), Randall Kennedy asserts, “To proclaim oneself a nigger is to identify oneself as real, authentic, uncut, unassimilated, and unassimilable” (39). To say that the boss wants the whiteys to do something, or that a Korean wants to meet a whitey, is to acknowledge current lack of agency, mark out separateness, assert solidarity, and evoke the enduring power of whiteness.

Foreign teacher horror stories are nearly always narratives of *losing* in some way – being shorted on pay, deprived of benefits, housed in slums, imposed on, stared at, laughed at, touched inappropriately, or tricked into performing in some way for the benefit of Koreans. Thus, it may seem counterintuitive that such narratives are expressions of the power of whiteness, the superiority of Western civilization, or the inherent pre-eminence of Western ideas and patterns. However, as Said remarks, “Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand” (1994, 7). In foreign teacher horror narratives, the narrator has been badly treated and acknowledges it, but they can still feel superior to those doing the pushing so long as they can position Koreans lower on the moral and ethical spectrum of human behavior. In foreign teachers’ narratives, Koreans don’t know that sidewalks are not for motorcycles (ignorant), they can’t be counted on (morally lacking) or trusted (unethical), and they can’t solve problems that seem simple to the narrator (inferior intelligence). They can’t teach properly (substandard education), their hierarchical culture prevents competency and/or flexibility (culturally backward), and, in short, they are inferior to the narrator and others like him or her. An inversion of power is generated through these tales, giving the underdogs the upper hand. Even as *waegooks* trade tales of horror about life in Korea, full of embarrassment,

shock, or anger at the abuses endured, we laugh because in the end we are still able to see ourselves as morally, culturally, naturally superior, a belief reinforced by the constant, ongoing demand for our services.

It is worth remembering that some stories are just funny or are humorized for the audience's entertainment and I am not claiming that all, or even most, foreign teacher narratives are insulting, mocking, or scornful. As Cody remarked "If New York personal experience narratives highlight negative aspects of the city and city life, they rely significantly on humor to do so ... But these narratives are also funny because of the *way* they are told; after all, they are personal experiences crafted into narrative form, rather than cursory reports of random events" (2005, 239). Some foreign teachers' humorous anecdotes and narratives are just that, stories of a ridiculous event that happens to be framed by life in Korea. However, some *are* vehicles for subtle, and not so subtle, critiques of the host culture. Surely, they imply, if they could figure out how to teach English properly, they would, and we would be rendered obsolete, yes? But clearly they can't or they would have done so. From Elizabeth Bird's comments in 1897 to today's contemporary legends, an insidious conceptualization of Asians as inferior has a lengthy history in western cultures. Greta Wilson compares Koreans to other Asians, saying:

But it's just ... they're so wrapped up in their little tradition and ... way of doing things and it's almost like seeing any kind of change to the way things are taught is, like, oh a threat to their culture or something like that. And that is really, really wrong. It really creates, like, a, a xenophobia ... in people's minds, so I think that there is that, oh ... don't get too close, like, to, to Western people or anything like that because ... if they don't have that crutch, you know, to fall back on, that, no, you [can't] learn English [then] it's just because your education system is crap and the way that your society is organized is crap, then it's not other people's fault anymore ...

It's [Koreans'] own [fault]. You know, and ... that's something that is so difficult to admit. And so ... until these, these things are gotten over, then it's never really going to ... improve any. [And] then, why is it that Chinese people or Vietnamese people or Thai people can learn English so much better. And I mean, I even saw, like, a documentary from, like, Bhutan ... and they're like tribe people in the country, you know, like in the



... middle of nowhere and how is it that they can speak English, like, really, really nicely? And, like ... [people in a] reasonably well-developed country like Korea can't?

... That does not make any sense to me. Why some rural, very poor country ... can have their, their people speaking English very, very well and ... at an intelligent level ... it's not just, like, basic stuff but they can speak it ... with a high degree of command and, uh, and be understood in, like, perfectly comprehensible English ... and why some ... so-called richer country, you know, top fifteen in the world, can't ... get its act together with that. So, I think ... that there are serious cultural issues that need to be dealt, uh, dealt with there and the whole system of education. Personally, I would have no faith in, in the way that they're training their teachers. They would never pass muster in any other country. Such, uh, a low level of intelligence in the teachers. I mean, in Canada, you have to have an eighty-percent average to get into teacher's college. (I\*G. Wilson 2007)

In Greta's attempts to illustrate Korean teachers' inferiority in the passage above, it does not suffice that they do not measure up to Western educators, though she makes that point, too. In addition, she compares them to other countries and cultures that she perceives as *even more backward* – especially very poor, tribal, rural Bhutan – and *still* finds them lacking. She then attributes their shortcomings not only to a poor system for educating teachers, but to lack of intelligence and finishes by evoking the superior teachers and educational standards found in Canada. During our interviews, Greta at times criticized the high rates of divorce and alcoholism in Korea, the laziness of educators, and the general inefficiency of the education system. Greta was repeatedly victimized by Korean employers and went to great lengths to resolve her subsequent difficulties, move on, and find legal work. Despite this, her comments reveal a conception of Koreans that falls in line with and reinforces pre-existing Western stereotypes of Asians, Orientalist to the core.

It is important to bear in mind here that Greta Wilson was one of the two informants I worked with who most identified themselves as pro-Korea in their perspective and considered themselves well-adapted to life there. She chose to socialize primarily with Koreans and was critical of other foreign teachers' unwillingness to "fit in" and adapt to the culture. It may be that

the wariness regarding those who seem overly positive about Korea and Koreans, as Melanie expressed, for example, has to do with this kind of contradictory thread of harsh criticism. Where it permeates their narratives, it belies the positivity they are trying to project. After two years in Korea, the tenor of Greta's stories meanders from praise of particular Koreans or customs to sweeping generalizations that disparage the culture, making it hard to be sure of exactly where she stands. While it is rare to hear the kind of brutal critique Greta delivers above, disparaging comments often slip into conversations and go unremarked.

In the face of perceived shortcomings in Korean educational methodologies, the foreign teacher feels deserving of the high rate of pay – much higher than our Korean colleagues generally receive. This may explain why so many Koreans proficient in the English language choose to pursue more lucrative careers in the business sector, thus leaving plenty of teaching positions to be filled by white foreigners. The white face is preferred even if Korean English teachers are available, as it sells better. Angel Lin, an English professor from Hong Kong, was dismayed by her superior's choosing a white, less qualified department member for the post of deputy program leader in order to “boost the public profile of [the] program...in the local communities” (Kubota and Lin 2006, 471). She was left feeling that even with all of her education she still only had “second class status in her profession” and that her boss had “let the perceived superiority of White native speakers exercise its power, and he was unaware (or refused to be aware) of the injustice done to [her] through reproducing this ideology” (Kubota and Lin 2006, 471). Whiteness and native English-speaking skills trump the skills of Asian nationals, no matter what their level of education may be, or how proficient they are in English, or how talented they are as educators.

The glamour of foreignness, in conjunction with the power of whiteness and the demand for English teachers, drives a machine that draws white foreigners to Asia to teach and, even as it chews them up and spits them out, allows them to enjoy a more affluent lifestyle than they would experience at home. It bolsters their own belief in their race/culture/nation's moral, ethical, intellectual, and educational superiority and their own personal value. The laughter that so often accompanies these sessions of tale telling may sometimes be that of abjection at powerlessness or humiliation, but far more often it is the laughter of superiority. Its power lies in knowing that no matter what these people have done, how they have treated you, you can laugh because you share an understanding with your fellows that you are still better than they are. This is laughter is familiar because social inequality and power differentials inspire this sort of laughter the world over, as expressions of superiority or as counter-hegemonic tactics in the face of oppression, without anything ever being funny. To paraphrase Paulette Goudge, "I have come to see the whiteness of power – I was able to go off to a country about which I knew little, and there to fairly quickly assume a position where I was giving out advice and assistance" and being respected as a teacher because "my whiteness was a badge of superiority. The more I have reflected on my experiences, the more I have realised the crucial role of notions of white superiority in the maintaining of the whole structure of global inequality" (2003, 8). The perception of white superiority in English education in Korea is perpetuated by narratives that emphasize Korean malfeasance or backwardness in their interactions with foreign teachers and thereby reify the preeminence of white foreigners and Western culture and norms for their narrators.

## Chapter 6: Foodways, Improvisation, and Survival

### 6.1 Food, Community and Boundaries

When Jimmy Buffett sings of a “Cheeseburger in Paradise,” he underlines his North American origins and explores the emotional and physical response he experiences when he finds a favorite food in a foreign locale. He sings of this experience:

But at night I'd have these wonderful dreams  
Some kind of sensuous treat  
Not zucchini, fettucini, or Bulgar wheat  
But a big warm bun and a huge hunk of meat

Chorus:  
Cheeseburger in paradise  
Heaven on earth with an onion slice  
Not too particular, not too precise  
I'm just a cheeseburger in paradise (Buffett 1985)

It is a quirky song, but takes on nuances and layers of meaning for those living an expatriate life who can sympathize with his longing for a familiar taste experience. In later verses, Buffett sings, “When I'm in port I get what I need” and that it's “worth every damn bit of sacrifice, to get a cheeseburger in paradise” (1985). The cheeseburger, for Buffett, is vividly remembered, evocative of home, “sensuous” in its juicy deliciousness, and evokes his nostalgic indulgence in tasting memories of home. Accessibility, individual food preferences, culinary habits, and nostalgia all play a role in the expression of self through food. For those abroad, food bears a significant semantic load, reminding us of home and all that means and creating moments of virtual travel, bringing us back to special times, places, and people. Michael Owen Jones says of food and memory, “Thoughts of loved ones, past times, and attachments to family, community, and birthplace abound as a result of transnationalism – the migration of people from one country to another – and are manifested in culinary longings” (2017, 24). Our much-loved foods are what we make sure to pack, hoard and use sparingly while we are away, share judiciously with select

individuals, and ask friends and family to send us. These comfort foods vary from person to person, but residence abroad does not diminish our fondness for the flavors of home. Living abroad also increases our repertoire of comfort foods, inspiring the “culinary longings” we will later associate with Korea. Any ethnography of an expatriate community, therefore, would be incomplete without an examination of its foodways.

In surveying *waegook* foodways in Korea, however, I am immediately faced with a conundrum; food procurement and consumption is either very public or extremely private. Meals are either consumed in restaurants, cafés, cafeterias, surrounded by others, or in the privacy of back spaces, primarily apartments. Packages from home are opened in private, trips to the nearest markets, convenience stores, and supermarkets are made solo, and what is purchased remains unseen. A foreign teacher’s grocer or local restaurateur is likely to have a more solid idea of what they consume than their friends and coworkers do. Generally speaking, I had no awareness of what was in my friends’ and colleagues’ cupboards and only rarely shopped with someone else. Information about available items is transmitted through the network, but that does not translate to knowing who is buying what. My knowledge of my informant group’s foodways is grounded in my observations during visits, those aspects discussed in interviews, and my personal experiences with foodways in Korea over the years. I spent time having coffee or tea, going to restaurants, and talking about food with all of my informants, particularly in terms of lack, adaptation, and procurement of specialty foods, all of which expose important aspects of foreign teacher foodways. Everyone had foods they looked for, missed, or brought from home, but adapted to the lack of them when they could not be had.

Foreign teacher get-togethers nearly always include some form of food and drink and it is this aspect of foodways, the commensality, that plays out in public. Foreign teachers frequently

meet in cafés for coffee and a snack and, since coffee shops are ubiquitous near universities and in areas where *hagwons* are found, they are a favored meeting place. There are also many small restaurants with traditional Korean foods at very affordable prices and these, along with the widespread availability of simple, cheap, prepared foods from convenience and grocery stores are contributing factors in why many foreigners do not cook for themselves. Kat Bilodeau outlined her food habits in Korea, saying:

Generally I would come in for school lunch, since it was super cheap and generally really good ... I had a bakery I would pop into regularly on the walk to school for coffee ... I cooked for myself on occasion, but I ate out a lot, almost entirely Korean food. Tuna bibimbap is my all time fave, but I also love BBQ, mandu, and the fried chicken. Korean fried chicken is so addictive. My neighbourhood didn't have a lot of western choices, beyond pizza and McDonalds delivery (which was almost exclusively for hangovers). So I mostly ate at the local places ... There was a Homeplus [*supermarket chain*] grocery literally next door, so I walked there most nights that I wanted to cook for myself. I only kept things like snacks and crackers. (I\*Bilodeau 2018)

For special occasions, higher end restaurants, such as a *kalbi* (short rib barbeque) restaurant my informants favored in Suncheon, provide a locus for commensality and more luxurious foods than can be produced in the tiny kitchens of foreign teachers' apartments. The scarcity of large private spaces for congregating often means that sizable gatherings require a location designed to accommodate groups, and public spaces become substitute sites for socializing and commensality that might otherwise be private.

At the other end of the continuum are the personal foodways of individuals, and these play out in private, in their own residences, alone or with a small number of close associates. Most foreign teachers live by themselves, particularly if they have been there at least a year, and adapt their food procurement, preparation, and consumption to the environment and their own needs and preferences. The effort made reflects the significance of maintaining food traditions, as well, and therefore the importance and meaning of those foods. A simple meal of bagels and

coffee every day is a small thing ... until you account for locating ground coffee and the rarity of bagels in Korea. For that breakfast to happen, the individual must make the effort, in advance of the day, to obtain coffee and a coffee maker and track down a supply of bagels. Since bagels do not keep well, they cannot be shipped or stored, so that bagel-a-day habit reflects an ongoing effort to procure them. Eggs and bread, on the other hand, are abundant and can be made into a variety of breakfast foods, from eggs and toast, to omelets, to French toast. Cereals, especially sugary varieties favored by children, are also easy to obtain, as are Korean-style porridges. This means that the bagel eater is so determined to have that particular breakfast that they plan for it, work to get it, and thus value the experience of it highly. All of this seems stark in print, but that fails to reckon with the smell of freshly brewed coffee, the soft chewiness and unctuous sensation of biting into a freshly toasted, generously buttered bagel, the aroma mingling with that of the coffee and making a tiny apartment redolent, for a few minutes, of the breakfasts of home. In such moments, as Michael Owen Jones and Lucy Long observe in Comfort Food: Meaning and Memories, “The taste of food conjures images of the past or particular people; its aromas remind one of places; its texture can take one back to a previous experience, sometimes literally” (2017, 9). This is what makes it worth the effort and gives it meaning, the evocation of another time and place.

Early research in anthropology and folklore incorporated facets of food and foodways in their studies “because of [their] central role in many cultures” (Counihan and Van Esterik 1997, 1), and over the years more researchers have increasingly placed food at the core of their research. According to Counihan and Van Esterik, “Scholars have noted how food presents a rich symbolic alphabet through its diversity of color, texture, smell, and taste; its ability to be elaborated and combined in infinite ways; and its immersion in norms of manners and cuisine

(1997, 2). Food plays an integral role in vernacular life among foreign teachers in South Korea, and is incorporated in many of the narratives they tell about life in Korea. Stories about food consumption experiences are exchanged over coffee or meals, with foodways and food events being a topic of acute interest within the community, not just because of its fundamental necessity, but because it is common ground. This, too, is part of the work of being a foreign teacher in Korea, as everyone has to learn to provide for themselves and navigate Korean menus. Familiarity with Korean foods is a marker of *waegook* experience, and demonstrating acceptance or appreciation of them signifies adaptation, while rejection of them or dependence on home foods for comfort may be a sign of uneasiness or anxiety.

Like most people, Koreans are eager to introduce guests to their foodways, but the differences between Korean and Western food traditions can come as a shock. For example, coming from Euro-American traditions where breakfast is often comprised of bread/cereal products, eggs, and meats (Yoder 1972, 337), some are surprised to learn that the traditional Korean diet includes rice, soup, fish, and *kimchi* among typical breakfast foods because “Koreans make no distinction between breakfast, lunch and dinner food” (Hur and Hur 2000, 119). In contrast to the relative blandness of Western breakfast foods, the “extreme spiciness and powerful odor” (Long 2004, 41) of *kimchi* seems out of place in the morning. In live-in situations, as I experienced during my first month in Korea, the foreigner must adapt to this type of meal, though their hosts may provide special foods intended to please foreigners, with varying degrees of success. Those not housed with Korean families have the freedom to dine as they please in their own space, but are still expected to participate in work-related dinners and events. If foreign teachers can count on one thing in Korea, it is that how and what they eat when in public will be observed and choices they make regarding food are revelatory. Food carries



messages, as “[t]hrough food we can communicate identity, relationships, ideologies, and emotions, as well as fulfill basic physiological needs” (Long 2004, 45). Foreign teachers, depending on the circumstances, will choose to consume Korean foods, refuse to consume particular items, go to some lengths and/or expense to find or make familiar foods, and decide carefully how, when, where, and with whom they will share in the creation or consumption of foodstuffs, all of which signify.

Take, for example, the bagel eater described above and the trouble they have gone to in order to have their favorite breakfast food. If, on a visit to that person, they offer you a bagel and a cup of coffee, that generosity has a significance that it does not carry outside of this context. When Melanie offered me a cup of tea with a tea bag in it, I knew she was sharing her stash with me and that she was welcoming me to her home. Visits to each other’s apartments were relatively rare and marked a close relationship of the sort that might survive the return home. Similarly, the effort to recreate a traditional holiday meal, such as the Thanksgiving meal discussed in the next section, is rare and thus meaningful, because the components to make such a meal are nonstandard for Korean cuisine. Access to large quantities of meat was rare for Koreans in the past and it still tends to comprise a small component of a dish. Traditional cooking methods – such as stewing, pan-frying, or grilling – are not conducive to preparing an entire turkey or a large piece of meat. Thus, such a meal is a challenge from the outset. Add to this the limited capacity of the average foreign teacher’s kitchen, with just a two- or four-burner cooktop and no oven, and the difficulties expand. Kat Bilodeau said of her accommodations, “The cooking arrangements were ... not great. I had a tiny two-burner stovetop, a fridge/freezer combo, and a temperamental microwave, in a galley-style kitchen that was smaller than the bathroom was. Oh and a kettle. At home, I made a lot of *ramyeon* (ramen) and ate lots of fruit.

And I learned how to make a stovetop bread” (I\*Bilodeau 2018). The facilities, in conjunction with the unavailability of particular foods, combine to create obstacles for Western cooks, ruling out roasting, baking, broiling, and deep frying. Commensality, therefore, was usually reserved for public spaces and deviations from that signify intimacy, friendship, and trust.

Korean foods are distinct, differing from those of China or Japan, and used to be relatively unknown to most Westerners, but increasing interest in authentic foreign foods has led to a growing presence of Korean cuisine in other markets. The affluence of the Western world in the twentieth century allowed more people to travel than ever before, giving rise to appreciation of culinary experiences of other cultures. For this reason, Korean food is not always a shock to newcomers today and they may be more willing to give it a try than in the past. Most foreign teachers adapt to the new foods and even develop a taste for particular Korean dishes, foods they miss when they return home. When I say they adapt to Korean foods, I do not mean they love them all; it simply means that through trial and error, they find an array of foods they enjoy. Some they eat to be polite and others they will not. Foods I have refused in Korea include raw beef, raw liver, fermented fish, soup with large chunks of cartilage in it, and boiled silk worm larvae (번데기). But I have eaten and enjoyed many things I never dreamed I would eat – dried cuttlefish (오징어, especially good shredded, in a sweet spicy sauce), blood cake soup (해장국), seaweed (김, good in soup, dried, pickled, etc.), fish cakes (오뎅 are to fish as hot dogs are to pork), foods spicy enough to make my eyes water and my nose run, and some that, to this day, I’m not sure what they were. I didn’t know what I was eating in the blood cake soup for the longest time, but it was good, so I ate it. *Kimchi* was difficult for me to become accustomed to and it was about a year before I adapted to it, not because of the spice, but because of the

fermented tang. I remain picky about it, preferring it fresh and crisp to the limper, grayer stage. At that point, if you want me to eat it, you'd better put it in a soup.

My informants had similar arrays of likes and dislikes of Korean foods. Ken was effusive in expressing his fondness for Korean foods, indicating that he enjoyed their spiciness, but he – like so many others – also has some that he prefers not to eat, including live octopus. Margaret told me, “I don’t like spicy food, but there’s fortunately plenty of food that isn’t spicy” (I\*Scates 2007), then went on to mention fried rice and *bibimbap* (비빔밥, a bowl of mixed vegetables, meat, and rice with an egg on top, with an optional hot red pepper condiment) as examples of non-spicy foods she enjoyed. The key is in learning to navigate, as part of the canon, Korean foodways and dining events. Even as some foreign teachers develop a strong preference for certain Korean foods, there are those who do not enjoy them and continue to seek out the kind of foods they are used to having at home, no matter how long they remain in South Korea. Fast food chains like McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, or Subway, while not home cooking, at least provide a familiar experience.

While most associate Korean foods with extreme spiciness, like *kimchi*, or *gochujang* sauce, there are plenty of milder dishes. *Bulgogi*, a beef dish with ginger, soy sauce, sesame oil, garlic, and sugar, is popular among Westerners, as are fried rice and *pajeon*, a savory pancake made with scallions. Korean barbeque is famous, especially *kalbi*, and Koreans are aware that foreigners enjoy it, as well, so they often suggest it as dining option. Many of their soups have a mild beef broth base and include *dduk*, a kind of pounded rice cake that is texturally similar to really dense pasta. Korean cuisine comprises a multitude of other dishes, of course, and no foreigner learns them all, but the point is that a variety of flavors, forms, and textures are available. Korean dining events are communal affairs and a foreigner who is observant, has even

rudimentary chopstick skills, and is willing to listen can enjoy the meal and learn basic etiquette in their first dinners out with Koreans. There is actually little guesswork involved, as Koreans are more than happy to explain the how and why of their etiquette traditions and I, like many others, learned most of my Korean dining skills in this way. Koreans were quick to laugh, but also forgiving of my mistakes, and willing to explain anything confusing. Never use your left hand to give something to someone, pour drinks for your betters and wait for juniors to pour for you (never do it yourself), and women usually manage the grill at the table. Newly-arrived foreigners are often taken out for meals by Korean employers or colleagues and learn the basics from them, often through unsolicited instruction and advice, with lessons reinforced through critique. It quickly becomes clear that this is something we are expected to master. While the etiquette learned may be a topic of conversation among foreigners, and in that way it may be passed on to others or have its purpose or origins clarified, these are not Western manners and are not necessarily maintained where Koreans are not present.

Jill Terry Rudy explores personal experience narratives in her essay “Of Course, in Guatemala, Bananas Are Better: Exotic and Familiar Eating Experiences of Mormon Missionaries” (2004). As did Rudy, I found that “practically unavoidable immersion in an unfamiliar or other culinary system invites an eater to both highlight and shade exotic aspects of eating” (2004, 131), depending on the occasion. Foreign teachers are often the conduit by which others learn about new foods, too, as they introduce each other to foods they have enjoyed and found “safe.” Dining out with Melanie and Kim included the Korean *kalbi* restaurant near campus, where I ate several times, as well as excursions to the coast for seafood and to the countryside to try *shabushabu*, or “Mongolian hot pot,” a dish of thinly sliced meat and vegetables cooked at the table in hot broth. We also went out of our way to eat at a fancy

Western-style restaurant in a gorgeous garden, where the setting was elegant and the food was truly awful. It may have had the correct appearance, but seasonings to make lasagna flavorful – garlic, oregano, basil, flavorful cheeses, and so on – were lacking. It was a bland mess of noodles and tomato sauce, buried in tasteless cheese. We sought new food experiences together, but had been in Korea long enough that in order for them to be attractive, they had to be unusual even for Korea. In going to these places, sometimes an hour or more outside of town, we were removing ourselves from our usual setting, perhaps in an attempt to revive our sense of experiencing something out of the ordinary.

Just as foodways are often the last marker of ethnic or national identity to be maintained by immigrants, so foodways are a subject of considerable interest to foreign teachers, many of whom will go to great lengths to obtain particular food items or ingredients, because “food is not only an item or a thing but also a way people express themselves, a means by which they can communicate with one another” (Humphrey, Samuelson and Humphrey 1991, 5). The vastly increased availability of Western foods and the expansion of foreign franchise restaurants in Korea, especially American franchises, mean that familiar food is usually not far away. In some instances, its mere presence is reassurance enough, and actual purchase and consumption of the food becomes less important. For example, I never went to the Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) restaurant on my block in Seoul; it was enough that the option was available. Fried chicken is extremely popular in Korea, so the franchise does well. When I came back for a visit, I had lunch once at KFC, but even as I ate that greasy chicken, I wished I had gone to a Korean restaurant.

One omnipresent Korean food that is not to everyone’s palate is *kimchi*. “Kimchee can be made of almost any vegetable, but usually it is made of Chinese or *napa* cabbage which is rinsed

with salt water and left to ferment overnight” (Hur and Hur 2000, 119, italics in original).<sup>15</sup> Cabbage *kimchi* is served with every meal and has a distinctive, pungent odor that lingers. Because it is, in essence, the national dish of Korea, Koreans encourage foreigners to eat it and may be disappointed when they do not enjoy it. As Daniel Tudor remarks in his comprehensive text on Korea, “many Koreans themselves will tell you that a meal not accompanied by kimchi simply feels wrong” (2012, 221). Foreigners who eat *kimchi* are perceived more positively by Koreans, as consuming this staple food implies adaptation to and acceptance of Korean foodways and, by extension, Koreans themselves. When I would use a leaf of cabbage kimchi to wrap around and scoop up rice, Koreans would show approval by saying, “You eat like a Korean!” There was always a sense of being closely observed while eating with Koreans, especially if they had not met you before, and, as noted previously, they would be quick to comment on your eating habits.

Refusing to try it or making faces or sounds of disgust when confronted with it imply a failure to modify one's eating habits to fit into Korean society. Tudor says, “When non-Koreans express distaste for *kimchi*, often it is because of the spiciness of some of the most popular varieties” (2012, 222), which is a reaction that does not make sense to most Koreans, who are taught to eat it when very young. Additionally, kimchi is such a fundamental part of their diet, that they would admonish non-consumers, saying, “You must eat it for your health.” There is pressure to try other native delicacies, but because *kimchi* is such a central part of Korean cookery, rejection of the national dish carries more significance than other foods and is regarded with disappointment or disapproval. In addition to particular foods, adopting Korean food-related behavior is encouraged and expected, including behaviors seen as unsanitary. This is a process

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<sup>15</sup> This is the most basic recipe for *kimchi*, but it is generally fermented longer and includes other ingredients like garlic and hot pepper.

that all foreign teachers go through, but it is one they usually go through alone, as it occurs in their earliest experiences of socializing with Koreans. With *kimchi* present at every meal, it is not long before they face the challenge. During the first week, while still shepherded by Korean management, the teacher arrives at that first meal entirely ignorant of acceptable norms and manners. How they handle themselves, how willing they are to accept instruction and try eating kimchi, use metal chopsticks, or sit on the floor to eat tells those around them a great deal about how they will approach life in Korea, more than the subject realizes. The well-adapted foreigner learns to eat from the same vessels as everyone else, finds a tactful way to bow out of the experience, or loses face among their Korean coworkers.

Foodways and folk cookery are an integral component in the folklife of any group, “an area of such obvious and basic relevance for everyday life” (Yoder 1972, 325), and every foreign teacher has to deal with their food needs. Food and foodways play an important role in defining identity – ethnic, cultural, national, or personal (Douglas 1970, 1997; Abrahams 1984; Brown and Mussell 1984; Everett 2007, 2009; Molz 2004). Again and again, research on immigrant communities and ethnic foodways have demonstrated that the foods consumed represent vital associations with nationality (“the Old Country”), class, faith, ethnicity, and familial traditions, as well as more intimate associations with particular people or memories (e.g., Allison 1997; Douglas 1997; Jochowitz 2004; Jones and Long 2017; Long 2004; Rudy 2004; Saltzman 2004; Tafoya 2008). Considering that “[t]he whole pattern of what is eaten, when, how and what it means...are very closely tied to individual and group ethnic identity” (Kalčík 1984, 38), the foodways within the diverse foreign teacher community in South Korea can indicate adaptation, identity, and belonging, but of all of these, it is belonging that matters most.

I made multiple research trips to Suncheon, spending time with Melanie, Kim, Margaret, Ken, Kurt and his friends, and others like Marianne and Lily. In that time, the primary activities were always food related – having coffee, having food delivered to Kim’s apartment, going out to eat in groups or pairs, planning excursions to special restaurants, trips to the coast for seafood, and so on. While I did visit some of their apartments (Kim’s, Melanie’s, and Margaret’s), never did I see anyone cook, though I did have tea at Melanie’s and Kim’s sometimes. Several of us went to Marianne’s farewell dinner and ate together in her apartment, but she mostly prepared the meal before anyone arrived, so there I saw little of her process. She made *laksa*, an Indonesian chicken dish that she had tried during her travels and learned to make. Her guests sat around a low table on the floor and snacked on a motley assortment of Western foods – green olives, puffed wheat cereal, potato chips –while she put the finishing touches on the *laksa* at the nearby stove. This was one of just three in-home commensal meals that I had during my research period (about two years) and in both cases, the host was a near stranger (the other being a work colleague in Seoul that I never got to know very well). So, despite the fact that the most common expression of foreign teacher solidarity was food sharing, and my visits to Suncheon were a succession of food events, minor or major, communal cooking was rare.

The focus of these events was commensality, the breaking of bread together, and the locus was nearly always public, the meal described above being an exception. My notes of one visit with Kim describe meeting her and going to the *kalbi* restaurant, then to Dunkin’ Donuts for muffins and donuts, then to a coffee shop to hang out for a while longer. Perhaps because their apartments were tiny and awkward for having company, most of them preferred meeting elsewhere and, as they had no common area, there were few other options than public spaces, most of them food establishments. I would have breakfast in my hotel room, then make contact



with whomever I was meeting that day and plan our day. This usually began with either meeting at their apartment and having an interview, meeting to go out to a restaurant, or meeting at the nearby coffee shop nearest campus and improvising, or some combination thereof. It was not unusual to run into one of the other teachers at the coffee shop and sit together for a chat, even turning around and going back in to do so, as I went there with one person or another almost daily.

Not only was our socializing often conducted in these public spaces, but some interviews occurred there, as well. My interviews with Ken took place at his favorite Korean restaurant, at his request. It was an inexpensive place near campus that served a variety of Korean standards – the *kimchi* stew he chose, fried rice, ramen, and other low-budget foods popular with college students. One interview with Melanie was at Dunkin’ Donuts, where we had coffee and muffins. I spent most of my time, and therefore ate out most often, with Melanie and Kim, though we did all join a group of Kurt’s friends for dinner one night, at a Vietnamese restaurant, where I am pretty sure intestine was part of the dish we shared. I was unfamiliar with the dish, but followed the example of those around me and, since no else remarked on the oddly textured meat, I simply ate it along with everyone else. Taking new foods and textures in stride is a measure of adaptation and, therefore, status vis-à-vis the *waegook* canon.

Margaret and I most often met at the coffee shop to chat, though our interviews were in her apartment, and she rarely socialized with the others. In point of fact, other than conversation, there was no other activity commonly shared within this group – no movies, no hiking, no karaoke, no TV marathons, and no visits to tourist sites, save those that were food related. Day trips were spent in seeking new restaurants and foods, like the *shabushabu*, and evenings were spent over dinner or coffee. When they were all otherwise occupied, my own foodways consisted

of things I could keep in the fridge in my motel room – yogurt, juice, milk, fresh fruit and vegetables, and snacks like salsa and chips. For fear of insects, everything had to go in the fridge and my cup and bowl were washed in the bathroom sink. Although they had apartments and I was staying most of the time in a motel, it would not surprise me to learn that they ate the same way when they were not eating out. Korean foods are delicious and affordable and for the equivalent of a couple of dollars you can have a wonderful lunch without needing to cook or wash dishes, so foreign teachers choose to eat out much of the time.

The frequency with which foreign teachers eat in restaurants reinforces the sense of impermanence in their living condition. Preparing food and enjoying commensality in one's abode is part of what makes it feel like a home. In rarely cooking for themselves in their own space, seldom having friends over for meals, and habitually eating in restaurants, whether alone or with others, their apartments become comparable to a hotel room. They provide a space that is briefly inhabited, but never modified to suit or identified with its occupant. Foreign teachers alight softly in Korea, never quite settling, and, when they go, leave scant trace behind.

## **6.2 Eating Home When You Cannot Be Home**

As discussed elsewhere, although foreign teachers in Korea do not comprise an ethnic group, if we define “group identity as a *process* rather than a series of relatively static markers” (Brown and Mussell 1984, 5, italics in original), we see that the teachers are bound by other considerations than ethnicity and nationality. As Toelken puts it, “a given person may have a wide repertoire of potential traditional dynamic interactions, each of which is set in motion by certain particular live contexts” (1996b, 78). Living as a foreigner in Korea supplies a context that broadens the scope of group identity to encompass greater diversity. The manipulation of foodways at a symbolic level further communicates information regarding membership, status,

and boundaries as they pertain to the group (Kalčík 1984, 54). In discussing expatriate Americans, Oring says

Although they may have learned to appreciate the local food traditions, on certain occasions they develop tremendous cravings for familiar foods from home and they may travel hundreds of miles or go to great expense to obtain a meal of hamburgers and fries. With this kind of emotional attachment to food and eating, it is not surprising that foodways serve as highly charged markers of ethnic identity both for those within a group and for those without. (1986a, 34-35)

Oring's observation brings Jimmy Buffet's "Cheeseburger in Paradise" (1985) to mind once again, with its evocation of yearning for a much-loved and pleasurable favorite food. Thus when a small group of individuals goes to great lengths to assemble the traditional foods (or reasonable facsimiles thereof) for a Thanksgiving dinner, or pay large sums to attend such a dinner, it has significance; they are reinforcing their boundaries as a group and affirming their connection to their culture, traditions and the past. When they do so across lines of nationality and ethnicity, they are embracing the diversity of their foreign cohort and reinforcing belonging among its members.

In 1995, my coworkers and our friends constructed an American/Canadian Thanksgiving dinner, even though the holidays are celebrated in different months and we all had different traditions. Thanksgiving in both countries is manipulated in similar ways as a cultural product, as reflected in advertising that markets it as a celebration of home and family, or as a nostalgic homecoming. For us, it was a chance to celebrate something that was familiar to us, collectively, at a time when none of us could make that journey home. Participants were assigned a food item ahead of time to track down and contribute to the dinner. These included turkey, apple pie, peas, carrots, potatoes, squash, and bread as these were deemed most evocative of the meal among foods available in Korea. Although these foods are not integral to Korean cuisine, and the character of our kitchens governed what was possible, some creative substitutions aided in the

reenactment of our holidays. Individually packaged smoked turkey legs were located at a convenience store, deep-fried apple pies were purchased at McDonald's and reheated in a wok, and mashed potatoes were made and kept warm in a rice cooker. Rolls were purchased at a bakery and heated in a pan, a local variety of pumpkin was cooked with butter, cinnamon, raisins and sugar, and fresh peas were served with butter. The goal was to satisfy a need for both commensality and nostalgia, evoking memories of holidays spent with people we missed.

These particular foods were important because of the associations they bore. Apples and chicken were available and could have been prepared in more traditional, and palatable, ways, but instead we focused on more representative Thanksgiving foods, prioritizing symbolism over taste. Of foods that one repeatedly consumes with loved ones to mark celebrations, Michael Owen Jones says:

A dish, then, becomes cognitively linked to family or other relational partners, to be served on such special occasions as holidays. A repast might carry markers of ethnicity because of the "flavor principle," a distinctive taste owing to herbs, spices, and manner of preparation. As either family fare or cultural cuisine, the food often becomes conceived of as "traditional," that is, exhibiting continuities through time and consistencies in space, and therefore imbued with value. (Jones 2017, 33)

These were not *our* comfort foods, but the foods we cooperatively perceived as integral to the holidays, which we prepared and consumed in our effort to connect with the past. In Jones's terms, our feast was a failure; these were not the flavors any of us associated with our family celebrations. There is no way a smoked turkey leg warmed in a pan can replicate how the smell of an entire turkey, replete with onion, sage, and other herbs, roasted for hours, pervades, perfumes, and warms a home. While none of these was exactly "right" according to our traditional forms and methods, the participants enjoyed the meal, seated on the floor around a traditional Korean table. The pleasure came not from the food itself, which was somewhat unpalatable (the turkey was quickly cold again, the pumpkin watery and bland, and the peas, in

particular, were singled out as unpleasantly mealy), but from the sense of community the occasion engendered. Memories of past Thanksgivings were evoked and compared, laughter erupted at how far off the mark our attempt was, and narratives of past Thanksgivings and what our meal *should* have been made it a fun day. The feeling was that, against the odds, we had managed to celebrate customs we had in common and the event promoted a feeling of belonging, of being in the same boat and thankful to have others with whom to celebrate. In Lin Humphrey's experience of Soup Night, "A tribal or 'family' feeling is created among individuals who are not related by playing down status. The emphasis is on contact and a feeling of community" (1991, 61). As with Humphrey's gatherings, the casual atmosphere and lack of ceremony in conjunction with the evenly distributed responsibility for food provision eradicated any feelings of obligation or awkwardness.

The members of this group variously self-identified as American, Jewish, Southern (U.S.), and Canadian of British, Irish, Serbian, or Croatian descent, or some combination thereof. Only two members of the group had known each other prior to arriving in Korea, but over the months in Korea had become part of a small network of individuals who knew each other. As the North American holiday approached that fall, one individual set the event in motion, contacting the various participants, assigning the search for various components, and keeping track of what contributions had been found by whom. The communal consumption of food retains social significance as it is performed in the new, Korean context because of the "messages it encodes" (Douglas 1997, 36), regardless of an individual's origins. All of the participants wished to celebrate Thanksgiving and in Korea it was enough to find at least something that spoke to the traditions of the holiday. Far from noteworthy aesthetically speaking, the event was memorable in that we were thankful to find these foods and to consume them with fellows who shared an

understanding of the holiday's customs and traditions. On this occasion, our foodways signified our membership in common descent groups and regions (North America) through the display event called Thanksgiving. In other cases, foodways-related habits, choices, manipulations, and behavior can signify degree of acculturation, social status or state of interpersonal relations of individuals within this group, depending on a variety of contextual and cultural factors.

That Thanksgiving was the holiday on which the group chose to focus signifies in part because it is “derived in part from British, European, and even Middle Eastern harvest feasts that lead back to the dawn of humanity” (Santino 1995, xviii). As such, it is likely to either be a familiar tradition – both the United States and Canada have official Thanksgiving holidays – or possess shared aspects with the harvest celebrations of other peoples and cultures. Additionally, while giving thanks can certainly take on religious overtones, the holiday itself is not religious *per se*. This made it particularly viable as a common ground for celebration within a diverse group. Perhaps more importantly, “Thanksgiving has the meal as its center” (Santino 1995, 14) and the foods and foodways associated with the holiday are thus symbolic. Some of the attendees did not know others well but, by focusing on the food and comparing it to similar foods back home and sharing remembrances of past Thanksgivings, everyone came together to enjoy the convivial occasion. As Santino maintains, “A turkey dinner on Thanksgiving is more than just another dinner; we do not eat it simply because we are hungry” (1995, xviii), and this celebration provided a catalyst for deepening relationships within a loose association of foreign teachers.

In Korea, foreign teachers are seen as a body, socialize in groups, regard themselves as sharing particular characteristics, and generally behave in ways that set them apart. Research on foodways has often focused on ethnicity and its adaptation or persistence in ethnic communities, but this body actually does not represent an ethnic population, coming as they do from multiple

nations and ethnic traditions. In some ways, their experience parallels that of tourists, as they explore the food landscape, but there is a level of familiarity that allows long-term residents to communicate about and manipulate food in ways that other tourists cannot (McAndrews 2004). They constitute a subculture in Korea and are more similar to what McAndrews describes as “local tourists,” differentiating between “the local and the local other” (2004, 122). As Brown and Mussell have pointed out:

Today foodways researchers need to explore *other socially bounded lifestyle groups* as well. The methods that illuminate the foodways of traditional ethnic and regional groups may also be used to understand the transactions of any socially bounded group whose social network includes the sharing of a food system. (1984, 11, italics in original)

The “local other” status of foreign teachers and the vast differences between Euro-American and Korean foodways make this a prime area for the expression of difference as these individuals experience what Kalčík calls, “the push-pull of cross inclinations about maintaining their traditional foodways” (1984, 38) or letting them lapse. If traditional foodways are a predictable array of local foodstuffs ordinarily available in one’s home region, which are prepared using familiar, customary methods in habitual patterns, we have already seen that foreign teachers curtail or abandon these practices for the most part. Their location, the equipment and ingredients available to them, the schedules they keep, and their perception of their status in Korea as temporary combine to discourage the investment of time, money, and energy that maintaining traditional foodways would require. Instead, they adopt native cuisine and cooking methods, indulging in “home” cooking where common sense and resources permit.

Foreign teacher foodways may not be synonymous with the sort of sharing that occurs in immigrant and ethnic communities, but foods still bear symbolic weight as they serve to express solidarity and identity. For those of us who participated in that impromptu Thanksgiving meal, it created the illusion of cohesion and symbolized solidarity at a time when we were nostalgic for

home. The reality was that we were, essentially, strangers and would remain so, but we felt a need to join in a demonstration of our shared identity as North Americans, as outsiders, and as foreigners. Immersed as we were in Korean culture, this performance of a holiday meal in a private back region (Goffman 1959, 112) was a means of pushing back, of escaping through foodways to a remembered time and place, and reaffirming our non-Korean identity among our fellows. Goffman described a “back region or backstage” as a place where “suppressed facts make an appearance” (1959, 112), where individuals “buffer themselves from the deterministic demands that surround them” (1959, 114). Shielded from observation, we performed our celebration on our terms without concern about how it would be read by a Korean audience. Interestingly, while I celebrated that Thanksgiving event and a similar Christmas dinner in my first years in Korea, I did not hear of any similar celebrations during the research period. The relationships formed, the age of the participants, or the nature of the folk group in that first stay seemed to call for a symbolic gathering, signifying community at a time when emplacement is incomplete. Belonging among my informant group, however, seemed a looser, more casual affair, where food sharing in itself was the thing, sufficing for the needs of the folk group. Aside from the farewell dinner that Marianne cooked, I attended no gathering of foreigners in anyone’s home for a special celebration or event.

### **6.3 Going the Distance: Maintaining Foodways Abroad**

The importance of foodways events like Thanksgiving is reinforced by institutional efforts to help expatriates create that same meal. As I observed at Christmas of 1996, a friend was able to arrange for a feast for us in advance of the holiday, go to a U.S. military base the day before, pick up a roast turkey, mashed potatoes, peas, gravy, rolls, canned cranberry sauce, and a pumpkin pie, put it all in his duffel bag, and transport it via train from Busan to Daegu for our holiday gathering. While the contents of his duffel were cold and a little worse for wear, they



were soon transformed into a satisfactory Christmas dinner. I don't know that officials at the base made such foodstuffs available to people unassociated with their operations – obtaining it may have involved subterfuge on Ed's part – but clearly they were making it available for military personnel far from home. Christmas, for many North Americans, is seen as the quintessential family holiday, beyond its religious significance. Jack Santino has described both Thanksgiving and Christmas as “nationalized” holidays that have grown, in being “celebrated by people on a grass-roots level, to national magnitude, and elastic enough to be inclusive rather than exclusive” (1995, 191). It is in this sense that both Thanksgiving and Christmas can be seen in the Korean context as providing an inclusive space for the celebration of belonging, solidarity, *and* diversity among foreign teachers. That the U.S. military recognizes the importance of these holidays for Americans is evidenced by their producing huge quantities of traditional foods at Thanksgiving and Christmas, with all they represent, for individuals affiliated with their organization (and perhaps turning a blind eye when they are diverted to other expatriates).

In the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, I am not sure access to this resource still exists, but the U.S. military bases are not the only example of such opportunities in Korea. Another organization making similar efforts in 2007 was the Canadian Association, which hosted a turkey dinner close to the Canadian Thanksgiving holiday, selling tickets for the equivalent of \$75. The high price (a similar meal might cost \$15-20 in a restaurant back home) is indicative of how costly it can be to obtain the makings of a holiday meal, but, as I was told, it is certainly cheaper than flying home to get it. Tanya, the Canadian co-worker who told me about it, opted not to go, as she would soon be heading home that Christmas where she could expect to consume very similar foods with her family and friends. But she had attended the event in the past and considered the price of the meal acceptable even though the food was “not great.” It had

been worth it to her to have the opportunity for commensality with other Canadians, eat familiar traditional foods, and have some sort of Thanksgiving holiday dinner experience because, as Lin Humphrey points out, “the act of eating together is both powerful and symbolic” (1991, 66). There is a luxury in sitting to dine with others who share your background and history, where there is no need to explain the food, the customs, or the meaning of what you are doing; the act of sharing the moment creates an intimacy and warmth among participants. The work of conforming to Korean societal expectations in public is suspended for the duration. As with Goffman’s back region (1959), it becomes permissible to lower your guard, to be exposed as yourself, and to be free of the risk of conflicting norms or censure. Like other holiday meals described in this chapter, the quality of the food is secondary to the significance it, and the sharing of it, bears for its consumers.

Travelers, explorers, immigrants, and expatriates have often gone to great lengths to bring with them or obtain at least some of their favorite foods (Bird 1985; Campbell 1994; Duruz 2006; Morris 1993; Muller 2005). The cupboards are bare when a new teacher arrives and the need for food cannot long be avoided, which means either eating in restaurants or tackling the job of shopping in markets or grocery stores. Some have the foresight to bring some of their favorite foods or ingredients, but not all lacks can be anticipated and any supply they bring is bound to be finite. Some items I initially brought were expensive but available (once you knew where to go) in South Korea, such as deodorant, shampoo, cheddar cheese, and coffee grounds. However, I had not anticipated other things that seemed basic to me would be scarce or impossible to find. In particular, I was surprised at how few familiar herbs and spices would be available, such as oregano, thyme, marjoram, parsley, clove, nutmeg, allspice, and so on. Although a couple of these were found in interesting places – such as the nutmeg a friend found

at the Chinese apothecary's shop – many were unobtainable in Korea at that time. Instead, there were those ingredients that were commonly used in Korean cooking: garlic, soy sauce, hot red pepper, black pepper, sesame oil, ginger, and cinnamon. While these were sufficient to make many wonderful foods, they were no substitute for the many flavors that were missing. I filled the gap by asking friends and family to send me things and stocked up when I went home, as did other foreigners of my acquaintance. After her return to Canada, Tanya shipped me a box of treats, including Doritos, tea, over-the-counter analgesic, and candy in exchange for a jade puzzle ball from China she wished she had bought along with packages of Korean cookies and shrimp snacks (the latter as a prank, because she hated them!) from me.

As a stranger in a strange land, discovering sources for familiar food items may require what Duruz has described as “an almost forensic search for familiar foods” (2006, 103). She goes on to say that nostalgic foods “touch chords of remembering for generations of Europeans on the move” (2006, 103). Nostalgia is the wistful longing for a fondly remembered past or things that hold strong personal associations for the individual. As we saw with the Jimmy Buffett song discussed at the start of this chapter, nostalgia often intersects with food and home. Undoubtedly, even after years of expatriate residence and adaptation, the desire for home foods can remain strong and “familiar food items and well-known ways of procuring and preparing food usually become highly valued and comforting” (Rudy 2004, 132) for long-term residents. This is part of what makes it worth \$75 for a Canadian to participate in a Thanksgiving celebration that includes the foods they know, love, and miss, especially as the indulgence is a means of commensality with other Canadians. What changes is that even though a particular favorite food becomes no less desirable, one becomes accustomed to missing it.

When asked about which foods they sought out when they went home for a visit and what foodstuffs they made the effort to carry back with them, nearly all of my informants asserted that, having lived in Korea for some time and having adapted to local foods, they did not miss much. All ate Korean foods daily, whether contrived at home or purchased from local restaurants and stores, and claimed they rarely thought about it. In real terms, daily consumption of Korean food meant meals at work – my Suncheon informants and I were entitled to eat free of charge at campus cafeterias, and other informants who worked at *hagwons* reported their schools served lunch for employees – or they ate at local restaurants. Korea is a work-focused country and its restaurant scene caters to the needs of workers. There are thousands of small restaurants (some of them tiny) and street food vendors all over the country, particularly in business or heavy traffic areas. Some specialize in a single type of food, such as porridge, and will offer many varieties of that one item. Most restaurants, however, offer a similar array of Korean standards, such as *kimchi* stew, fried rice, dumplings (steamed or fried), noodle dishes, *kimbab* (rice and seaweed rolls with vegetables in the middle, similar to Japanese *sushi*), and soups. They are served and consumed quickly, without any fanfare, and the prices for these dishes range from about three to five dollars. Bakeries sell loaves of bread and filled pastries, along with sandwiches and savory items, at similar prices. Convenience stores offer *ramyeon* (ramen noodles) in many flavors and provide the hot water and chopsticks needed to prepare and eat them immediately. Like our own convenience stores, those in Korea offer many ready-to-eat foods, but with Korean flavors and expectations in mind. I was particularly fond of the triangular rice cakes stuffed with *bulgogi* or tuna and mayonnaise and wrapped in seaweed. They were cheap, easy to eat, delicious, filling, and traveled well. Street vendors are even quicker and cheaper, with food ready to eat – corn dogs, scallion pancakes, cakes filled with sweetened bean paste, grilled octopus, barbecued

chicken skewers, and so on – for just a dollar or two. The convenience of having easily accessible, cheap meals at restaurants, stores, and stands en route to and from work or near their apartment complex encourages many foreign teachers to give up cooking, and all that entails, and instead simplify their life by dining out.

Most of my informants took advantage of the easy availability of affordable, appealing, and enjoyable food, and this accessibility aids in the transition to a pattern of Korean food consumption. The desire for the familiar foods of home, however, remains. Despite their nonchalance regarding unavailable foods, each of them went on to describe food items that they either made a point of having while home for a visit or brought back with them when they returned. The items they sought out, brought back, or had shipped to them were not absolutely necessary, most of them emphasized, and they felt they could get on well without them, and yet they did find them, consume them, import them, and describe them in detail. The foods they reported consuming during visits home, generally, were meals or restaurant foods that would be difficult to find or recreate in Korea – veggie burgers and pizza (Ken), deli sandwiches (Margaret), beet salad (Melanie) – while things carried back to Korea were obviously more portable and tended toward snack food. These included chocolate/candy (Ken, Margaret), coffee (Margaret), tea (Greta, Kim, Melanie, Margaret, Kat), hot chocolate (Greta), processed convenience foods like boxed macaroni and cheese dinner (Greta, Margaret), and custard powder (Melanie), to name a few. Each selection speaks to its significance to the individual going abroad, in that it is intentionally singled out, from the myriad foods available to them, as a hedge against anticipated nostalgic longings or the need for comfort.

Ken asserted that when he describes his life in Korea to people back home, “The things I talk about are the things I like, which is food. I love the food. Especially where we are now, in

*Chollanamdo*, or in *Chollabukdo*.<sup>16</sup> At one point, he went so far as to indicate eating the food and drinking green tea were a sort of hobby for him, one of the things he most enjoyed about life in Korea. The framing of his response here suggests that the practice of engaging with Korean foodways renders his experience of the country and its culture more rewarding or profound. Lucy Long says of culinary tourism, “foodways may be one of the fullest ways of perceiving others. Sightseeing is only a partial engagement with other, whereas culinary tourism, utilizing the sense of taste, smell, touch, and vision, offers a deeper more integrated level of experience” (2004, 21). In his pursuit of green tea and distinctly Korean food, Ken deepens his sense of connection to the place he inhabits and, in enjoying these experiences, increases his desire to continue this pattern. This is evidenced by his choice of Korean restaurants as the site for our interviews, where we had dinner, either before or after, and enthusiastically discussed various types of Korean food. Despite the fact that he ate there habitually, he was always ready to go there again, the multiplicity of visits adding complexity and depth to his familiarity with that one restaurant, as it was a new experience every time he went. During one interview, I followed up on his interest in foods, Korean and otherwise:

**Kelly:** Let’s talk about food. Like, when you go home, what are the things you gravitate towards first? What are the things you’ve just got to have?  
[pause]

**Ken:** Uh, veggie burgers. [*chuckles*] That’s what I ate a lot of this summer when I went home, veggie burgers.

Other than that just, maybe to eat, um, I usually don’t like Korean apples, so we have some good apples in my province so I’ll eat apples more. Apples, veggie burgers.  
[pause]

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<sup>16</sup> Chollanamdo and Chollabukdo comprise the two most southwesterly provinces in South Korea, known for their food production. Chollanamdo, in particular, is known as the “Rice Bowl of Korea,” an indicator of the extent to which it provides agricultural products for the rest of the country. In fact, the university where most of my informants worked was primarily invested in the study of agriculture.

Ah, ah, I don't really go towards anything like I used to. It's like, I had pizza I think once, like, this whole ... twice when I went home this summer, in four weeks.

**Kelly:** So this is different from how it was, maybe when you first got here?

**Ken:** Yeah, when then, then if I went home I might've looked for specific things. When I [go] home, now, it's kinda, ehh [*dismissive noise, claps hands*]. You know, I go, I go out to restaurants a lot when I go home, and I'll eat food that I don't eat here, but I just randomly pick stuff. (Kelly: Right.) You know, and sometimes it's like fusion stuff or Tex-Mex or just, well, that looks interesting, I'll have that. It'll be a ...

**Kelly:** Not so much a craving kind of thing?

**Ken:** No, I don't really have that anymore, I'd say. Ah, I just, I guess I've just gotten used to Korean, but I, you know, I do eat, my breakfast is always Western style, and then I eat a lot of bread, but I can get some healthy bread here? A kind of grain bread, so.

**Kelly:** Really?

**Ken:** So, man, I'm just, I'm not, even when I live by myself, I'm kinda very simple. If I eat at home, I usually just, uh, fruit, salad, breads, pasta. Simple stuff.

**Kelly:** Is there stuff that you make an effort to bring back with you?

**Ken:** Uhhh.

**Kelly:** Food or otherwise?

**Ken:** Fair Trade chocolate bars.

**Kelly:** Very specific!

**Ken:** 'Cause you can't get those here. But I stopped bringing so many because, not this summer, but the two before, I brought like a hundred back? And it weighs a lot. That's about ten, fifteen kilograms.

**Kelly:** Might as well leave your clothes home.

**Ken:** Yeah, so, I mean it just, made it too heavy, so this year I brought, I think about twenty, and then I've got another, like, forty being shipped to me. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) So not as many. And then ...

**Kelly:** So you like your chocolate.

**Ken:** Yeah, and then that's Fair Trade chocolate, too. Mmm, delicious. And then, yeah, 'cause a lot of the time they won't ship them to other countries, especially in the summer or (Kelly: Right.) late spring 'cause it might melt. (Kelly: It'll melt.) And then the other thing, food, um, is um, well mostly just vitamins because it's so much cheaper back home and I can get stuff I can't get here. And then these, uh, Echinacea, you know, Echinacea

is, like, (Kelly: Right.) a plant? Echinacea throat drops, I brought like, about twenty bags of those, 'cause, like, [only] fifteen in a bag and I'll give some to Korean friends, too.

**Kelly:** Right.

**Ken:** But yeah, those are the only two things I brought back this time, though. I try and bring less now because I used to bring too much.

Since veggie burgers were unheard of in Korea, his desire for them and the level of consumption implied by his statement indicate that they *are* a significant food item for him and that, in fact, he does miss them while abroad. In addition to these items, as well as the pizzas he mentioned and perhaps other beloved foods too mundane to elicit comment, his habits in importing foodstuffs are revealing. Additionally, his remarks indicated that when in his own apartment, he ate Western food – salads, bread, pasta (note he did not say “noodles,” which could imply Korean-style preparation) and “Western-style” breakfast are not commonly consumed by Koreans. The fact that “Fair Trade<sup>17</sup> chocolate bars” were so valued by him that he brought them back in a quantity that made transporting a liability reflects a strong desire for that food. This particular effort is interesting, because it seems to speak to the maintenance of a “persistent sameness within oneself (selfsameness)” (1980, 109) that Erik H. Erikson described. “Fair Trade” is neither a brand name nor a flavor, but a certification that the product was manufactured in an ethical fashion. What made this chocolate distinct, then, for Ken, was its social message, one he wanted to link to himself and which he made sure to include in our interview. In going out of his way to purchase (and mention) this specific chocolate, he was expressing his support of fair trade practices in consumer goods, something that seems to have more to do with identity than with food cravings. So, despite his adaptation to Korean food, and even love of it, there are still food

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<sup>17</sup> Fair Trade goods are certified according to strict guidelines by organizations such as Fair Trade USA and seek to encourage "equitable trade practices at every level of the supply chain" in an effort to fairly compensate producers, particularly in economically depressed regions of the world ("Fair Trade USA," 2014).



items he finds worth the effort to seek out, some of which represent an expression of his self or how he would like to be viewed, while others are meant to be enjoyed for themselves.

Other informants related similar actions and priorities in obtaining favorite foods, though in each case the precious home food differed. During one of our unrecorded conversations, Margaret said that when she was in the U.S. during her visit over the summer, she couldn't wait to get a sandwich and that was the first meal she wanted after she arrived there. Korean sandwiches tend to have things that Americans find surprising, like corn or peas, and cold cuts (processed or cured meats that are sliced for use in sandwiches) are not commonly available, so a simple sandwich can be hard to come by. Even franchises like Subway can have ingredients that look right, like pickles, but are actually sweet pickles, not the dill pickle flavor you might be expecting. I went there with a friend who was in search of her childhood comfort food – a bologna sandwich on white bread with yellow mustard – and fortunately they made it the way she wanted it. Despite being something that she had not had in years, and did not habitually consume, the experience of living in Korea evinced a need to connect with the comfort of childhood memories through a fondly remembered food.

Margaret brushed off the unavailability of particular familiar foods, despite her previous mention of the sandwich, saying, “I mean, I don't need it. I don't care. I don't need Western food all the time. Don't care that much,” but she then admitted, “But I need the coffee” (I\*Scates 2007). In research on comfort food, Michael Owen Jones reveals, “The emphasis has been on food; beverages are rarely considered” (2017, 34), but Margaret's attitude toward coffee, and the number of informants who made a point of bringing tea, argues for further investigation. Her focus on coffee becomes clear in this excerpt from one of our interviews:

**Kelly:** So, in terms of food here. Like, you were talking about when you went home, you just wanted a sandwich. (Margaret: Yah.) What are the, [*laughs at Margaret's*

*expression*] what are the things that have an impact in terms of your daily food consumption? Like?

**Margaret:** Um. [*pause*] These days, not much. I like Korean food. I don't like spicy food, but there's fortunately plenty of food that isn't spicy. I usually have a, a, a good lunch, Korean, *bibimbap* [*rice and vegetables topped with an egg and hot sauce*], *boggeumbap* [*fried rice*], something. (Kelly: Right.) Um, I, in the morning, generally a bowl of cereal. That's not gonna change. I mean, I ...

**Kelly:** Decades of habit? [*laughs*]

**Margaret:** Yeah, um, and in the evening, you know, if I have something here, I'll cook it up, but it's small, it's light. I don't like going out? at night. I know a lot of people always eat their dinner out? (Kelly: Mm.) I don't. Um, and it's usually kind of Western because that's just me cooking. If I cook, I cook what I know and ...

**Kelly:** That's what you know.

**Margaret:** Yeah, so I don't mind it all. I quite like the food.

**Kelly:** Right. When you came back this last trip, what food items did you bring with you?

**Margaret:** I brought coffee, uh, red licorice, which I would offer you some, but it's gone. [*laughter*] Ah, this time the food, that was it. I brought vitamins back. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) Um, at Christmas, I brought back a ton of, um, like macaroni and cheese (Kelly: Ah.) and stuff like that, which I still have and I just keep here for, you know, gotta have it.

**Kelly:** Nostalgia moments or...

**Margaret:** Yeah. Um, but I don't eat that that much. [*long pause*] I think that's what I, all I brought back in terms of food

**Kelly:** How about when you were first living in ...

**Margaret:** Tea. (Kelly: Tea?) Herbal tea. (Kelly: Herbal tea.) I buy tons of herbal tea. (I\*Scates 2007)

To this point in the conversation, we are talking about the things she misses, and how little impact not having her favorite foods has on her. As she says, she enjoys Korean food and, while she does bring back a few things, and really enjoys a sandwich filled with cold cuts and cheese when she goes home, the lack of them has minimal effect on her daily life. As the conversation continues, however, it becomes clear that there is an ongoing internal negotiation when it comes

to her ultimate favorite: coffee. Margaret weighs the value of having high quality coffee on a daily basis against the cost of procuring it, which varies according to how she gets it: bringing it, having it shipped to her, traveling to Seoul, or having it purchased for her, but with a markup for the service. In the end, though, it is evident that while cost is a consideration, it is only because she has multiple avenues available to her for acquiring it, and she would pay a premium in order to have Starbucks French Roast coffee.

**Kelly:** Do you ever make a run up to Seoul or any of the other places where...

**Margaret:** Uh, well, before Rob's Costco runs<sup>18</sup>, yeah, I would, but ...

**Kelly:** Not much need now?

**Margaret:** Yeah. Not.

**Kelly:** What kind of coffee did you bring back?

**Margaret:** I bring back, actually, Costco French, Starbucks French roast? (Kelly: Right, right.) Um. (Kelly: Which you can get here! [*laughing*])

**Margaret:** Which you can get here, except for that when Rob, Rob, doesn't know coffee? (Kelly: Mm-hm.) And so he, he said, "yeah, they have coffee," and so I bought it and it's this Colombian (Kelly: Mmm.) garbage. Pardon me, it's just disgusting, drip, gross, and, and I kinda went, "That is so gross." He's like, [*anxious tone*] "What's wrong with it?" and I said, "No, I need real coffee." So he finally located it in Costco, the same thing, French roast, Starbucks French Roast? (Kelly: Right.) And he just gave me this price, he said, it's like 30,000 [*won*]<sup>19</sup> and I went, "Ah!" [*sound of disbelief/shock*] That's, yeah! So I bring it back [from home], right after I got back, I went to Costco with him. (Kelly: It's not.) It's only twenty-two or twenty-three thousand. I pay eighteen [*dollars*] for the same thing (Kelly: Right.) back home and then I ship it to myself, so ...

**Kelly:** It's costing more.

**Margaret:** It costs more, so it's like, well, if I knew it was twenty-three, I would have you buy it. He's like, "Well, you know I have to have a mark-up." I'm like, (Kelly: Well,

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<sup>18</sup> Rob was an enterprising foreigner who owned a car and earned additional money by supplying other Suncheon *waegooks* with Western goods from Costco, which only had locations in the largest Korean cities at the time. The nearest was in Dajeon, a drive of two and a half hours. Suncheon *waegooks* would place their orders and he would make the drive to stock up once or twice a month.

<sup>19</sup> The exchange rate for Korean *won* at that time was 932₩ to one U.S. dollar (making the price for the coffee \$32.19), or 868₩ to one Canadian dollar (or \$34.56).

that's a significant mark-up.) "That's too much mark-up!" I can have someone mail it to me for cheaper. Like, you gotta understand that I'm, like, 30,000 for a bag of coffee? No, no, no.

**Kelly:** I mean, that pays for your ticket to go up and get it yourself. You know? (Margaret: Yeah.) Like you, if you go ...

**Margaret:** Or my, my sister can just go to Cost-, whenever she goes to Costco, and then post it (Kelly: Right.) and by the time, you know, it is, it does cost money to post, but not eight, eight dollars a, not twelve dollars a bag.

**Kelly:** So it seems like in this business model he has, he might have missed his moment. Like, maybe there was a time when there was one Costco and it was in Seoul. And then might've, you know, the sort of (**Margaret:** Mm!) sub-distributor thing might've made more sense.

**Margaret:** He does really well here, because there is no Costco here [in Suncheon]? (Kelly: Mm.) And he, while he does have the market, he just didn't realize how much he was marking it up. 'Cause he doesn't understand, he thinks that the Colombian stuff is just great. (Kelly: Mm-hm.) [*laughter*] So he just, he just says, yeah, they have it, it's like 30,000 and I just, I went "Whoa." Um. He does well here because there's no Costco here and, like, you can get cheese at Homever [department store], um, but it's really expensive. So he cut, he, even though he marks up, he, he, on the big items, the cheese, (Kelly: He can edge them.) the tortillas um, his big ticket items, the stuff that really goes, he doesn't have that much of a mark-up. So, he does well. But it's stuff that he doesn't really know the comparative cost that, like the, he just overshot it on the coffee and I just went, "Well, I'm not buying that." And then when I saw the price, I went, "How the hell do you charge me thirty dollars or saying, when it's twenty-two or twenty-three?"

**Kelly:** Right.

**Margaret:** That's too much. I can have it mailed over for cheaper and, and I think he went, "Oh, I guess I was not really thinking." It's like, yeah! [*chuckles, then laughs*] (I\*Scates 2007)

This transcript reveals the value Margaret places not only on coffee, but on particular flavors and characteristics of coffee, on which she is unwilling to compromise. Although there are many coffee shops in Korea, including Western franchises like Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks, the former does not have the type of coffee she wants and there was no Starbucks in Suncheon. A search of the transcribed interview excerpt above shows the word "coffee" appears over sixty times in our discussion, a reflection of the intensity of our focus on the subject. She esteems this

Starbucks coffee variety, in particular, more highly than other food or drink items. She said, “I know that they don’t have what I want, so, I either put up with what they have, mentally, you know, prepare myself, or I find a way to get what I want” (I\*Scates 2007). Margaret considers such planning ahead one of the tools of an experienced expatriate, a preventive measure against the lacks that have such an impact during the first few months in Korea, yet it also speaks to the value that coffee holds for her.

Melanie told me she goes “home every eighteen months and the most essential treats” she brings back with her (I\*M. Steyn 2007). These include her favorite artificial sweetener and a powder for making custard, plus she confessed to a food craving that had surprised her: beet salad. She said, “I miss that. It’s strange, I never thought I would. And so, then, a little jar of that I might stow away [to bring back] and things like that, yeah?” (I\*M. Steyn 2007). Oftentimes, it seemed that what they wanted most were the very items they largely took for granted while living at home and, only in their absence, recognized how they were integral to their alimentary life. These particular foods incorporate an emotional significance, even if Melanie is unsure how or why, that makes it worth the effort to maintain their presence in her life abroad. Like the others, Greta felt that she was thoroughly comfortable with Korean food and, when asked what she brought from home, asserted she “didn’t bring anything” (I\*G. Wilson 2007). As it turned out, however, she meant she brought back nothing...other than Tetley tea and Tim Horton’s French vanilla- and English toffee-flavored hot chocolates. Again we see the importance of warm beverages as comfort food, aided in part, perhaps, by their portability. Greta was also excited when I gave her my slow cooker and various Western foods from my cupboard when I left Korea<sup>20</sup> and, the one time we had dinner at her apartment after an interview, the meal was

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<sup>20</sup> Some of the items I gave her had previously been handed on to me when a friend left, including various spices and mixes for Western foods. It is common practice when leaving for foreigners to give such goods to other foreigners

spaghetti. While all of these individuals had adapted to the culinary landscape of their expatriate home, and its food was central to their eating habits in Korea, they still cherished foods from home, longed for some things more than they realized, and made efforts to obtain those they preferred not to do without. Each one started by saying they had adapted to Korean food and did not need foods from home, which was probably true, but when pressed they all listed items that they did go to the trouble of bringing back with them.

The situation with Kim was less clear, though she also had acquired some Western spices and cooking supplies. In general, however, I do not think she liked to cook and she often had me call to order a pizza when I visited. One of her colleagues had given her a sheet of paper with instructions on how to order, how to describe where to deliver the pizza, and the names of various ingredients, all written out in phonetic Korean. Apparently, a foreign teacher at that university at some point in the past had written this out for someone and, as all foreign teachers were housed in the same building and had been for years, the paper and photocopies of it were handed on to new teachers as they arrived. Still, Kim was not entirely comfortable with the process and became annoyed when those on the other end of the phone line deviated from the script, so she preferred to have me call when I was there. The sheet of paper and the information it contained comprise an artifact that exemplifies the kind of folklore transmission that is so vital within the network, probably gleaned from personal experience or laborious translation and transliteration in phonetics. That it was committed to paper, copied repeatedly, and handed on from one group to the next – a form of Xeroxlore – can be attributed to the permanence of the on-campus housing the university provided for its teachers. More commonly, teachers are housed in scattered apartments with different addresses and surroundings, so each must get information

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as it is assumed not only that they are likely to be more familiar with and appreciate having them, but also that few Koreans will want, enjoy or, know how to prepare them. Occasionally appliances will be sold to others, but this is rarely the case with food. It is usually given away.

– from other foreigners or Koreans – specific to that area in order to have food delivered to their home. I had my own notes to have on hand while ordering over the phone, and more than once I trained other foreign teachers in the daunting process of getting pizza delivered to their home.

In circumstances where other foreigners are present, information is exchanged on the whereabouts of highly prized Western foodstuffs, if they are available at all. During my fieldwork visits, my informants apprized me of the best places to find Western foods, where restaurant franchises such as Dunkin’ Donuts and McDonalds were, and which Korean restaurants had the best foods, standards of cleanliness, and pleasant atmosphere. As Jill Terry Rudy points out, “[in] contrast to the short encounters with the food items of the touristic other, where novelty and the exotic are highly valued, the extended stay usually requires an ongoing negotiation between the exotic and the familiar” (Rudy 2004, 132). When you have been living abroad for any period of time, you are able to consume delicious indigenous cuisine on a regular basis, but the desire for home foods persists. There remains a need to connect with the previous existence and familiar patterns outside of the foreign country of residence, especially through food, and thus restaurants offering familiar fare are of great interest.

The role of foodways is amplified when individuals are removed from the places and the foodways that inform their lives. We may not even consider what we eat or why we eat it, health and dietary concerns aside, until we are in a place where the foods we love and which have been such an integral part of our lives are suddenly no longer available to us. Even today, with swift international shipping and widespread availability of diverse foods, eating is always grounded in local availability, which, if you move to a new region, presupposes that some items will become accessible while others disappear. Douglas asserts that “If food is treated as a code, the messages it encodes will be found in the pattern of social relations being expressed. The message is about

different degrees of hierarchy, inclusion and exclusion, boundaries and transactions across boundaries” (1997, 36). For expatriates, recreating the foods of home provides comfort while at the same time providing a marker of identity that delineates the border between themselves and their new environment. What they make, with whom they share it, what local foods they adopt, and what missing foods they make efforts to obtain all speak volumes about the negotiation of identity under these conditions. For consumers of this food, whether hailing from other regions or native to the new one, it signals how the creators of the food see themselves and their relationships with those who share their food.

Like immigrants, expatriates are often confronted with an environment that cannot provide some of the foods and ingredients that are familiar to them. While their situation differs from that of immigrants in some regards – particularly in that residence abroad is usually temporary – they are faced with finding ingredients that work for them and replicating, to some degree, foods reminiscent of home cooking. In circumstances where shared identity is fragile, given the diverse origins of group members, food and celebration can go some way towards reinforcing bonds within the group. I have to wonder whether the constant dining out I did with members of my informant group was an unconscious attempt to reinforce the connections we had made. Goode asserts, “Community food events have the potential to display relations of cooperation, exchange, solidarity, and sometimes conflict within friendship and extended-kinship networks” (1992, 244) and because other mechanisms for bolstering a sense of belonging may be absent, food becomes all the more important as a means of forming connections within this community.

When traveling through a country, it is a simple thing to get by with what comes to hand in the markets or by eating in restaurants, even fast food chains when you just do not want to



tackle another challenge. A traveler always knows that the situation is short-term and whatever discomfort or difficulties that arise can soon be left behind and that “[t]here is no need to adapt to the ways of a place we do not belong, no need to try to live there, however briefly” (Campbell 1994, 11). But for those who reside abroad, regardless of whether you have any command of the native language, it is imperative to find a way to provision yourself and put together meals that provide proper sustenance. In such circumstances, it may be difficult if not impossible to express what it is one is looking for in the market, or to be certain of the identification of those things one does find. Nikki Berrington said of her early days in Korea, “I nearly starved to death the first few days because it’s terrifying trying to buy something when you’ve got no concept of the currency or the product you’re buying; trying to ask for something was really intimidating!” (Quoted in R. Harris 2004, 294). Determining the contents of a package is no easy matter where there is a language barrier. Muller describes her consternation during one of her early shopping expeditions in Japan, saying, “It’s ten thirty in the morning and I’m standing in the local supermarket, trying to figure out if the bag I’m holding is filled with salt or sugar. I’ve smelled it, I’ve surreptitiously licked the plastic, I’ve examined the grains from every angle, and I’m stumped. The problem is, I can’t read Japanese” (2005, 13). The unavoidable fact is that sugar does look like salt, baking soda looks like corn starch (or rice flour, or cream of tartar, or alum), and cans of tuna have eerily similar pictures to those on cans of cat food. Without language skills or guidance from someone who has them, purchasing and consuming food abroad is full of surprises, some less pleasant than others.

Melanie laughed at her early experiences with food in Korea, saying, “I had funny little bits of food. I didn’t know how to feed myself. I did not. Because I do not like spicy food and there was very much of it and I didn’t see familiar ingredients calling up at the little, uh,

supermarkets, and it was wonderful! I lost eighteen kilograms!” (I\*M. Steyn 2007). While she puts a positive spin on her experience, celebrating a desirable outcome of her difficulties, eighteen kilograms represents a substantial and potentially hazardous weight loss. She is also describing an often overwhelming circumstance that all newcomers must face. The “little bits of food” that are recognizable to newcomers are often junk food like fast food or chips, crackers, and cookies, full of calories but with little nutritive value, a diet that is unwholesome in the long term. Melanie knew this, and she made an effort to learn to identify Korean foods that suited her tastes and to shop more effectively, as do most foreign teachers. Unfortunately, this adjustment is not inevitable; another acquaintance divulged her aversion to Korean foods and her inability to adapt to them, which resulted in significant weight *gain* for her. During her time there, she ate Western fast foods rather than more healthy Korean foods and, several years after her return to Canada, she still had not succeeded in losing that weight. Her method of coping with her aversion to Korean foods left her with few healthy options as most fast foods are not very nutritious, focused as they are on meats, cheeses, fatty sauces, and frying. For both of these women, the alterations to their native foodways had a profound impact on their health and fitness, an issue neither had considered prior to leaving home.

Another example of negative consequences is that of a man I knew during my first years in Korea who ate out as little as possible, but did not really like cooking, either. Christopher developed a serious case of constipation from consuming almost nothing but eggs for days at a time. His diet was a response to his aversion to Koreans and Korean culture, in conjunction with a distrust of Korean food-handling methods. Such considerations are not exclusive to travelers, as Susan Eleuterio documents in her essay, “Even Presidents Need Comfort Food: Tradition, Food, and Politics at the Valois Cafeteria,” (2017), where the cafeteria’s motto is “See Your



**Figure 10:** Like the market, the grocery store is mystifying when you can't read Korean. This photo is of jars of simmering sauces and canned luncheon meats. (Photo by K. Roubo 2006)



**Figure 11:** These products have even less identifying marking than the mass-produced foods above. These are various forms of dried seafood, mostly for snacking. (Photo by K. Roubo 2006)

Food” (69). In discussing the clear view of the food being prepared at the cafeteria, Eleuterio’s informants reflect on how the openness of the kitchen affects their feelings about the place. Eleuterio says, “I asked Phillis, Barbara, and Charlene what [the motto] might mean. Phillis: ‘Seeing is believing ... that no one picked their nose or forgot to wash their hands.’ Charlene: ‘You see them cooking and making the food. A lot of African Americans don’t like eating out; you don’t know who cooked the food and there’s a history of mistrust’” (2017, 69). Eleuterio’s informants’ approach to strangers cooking their food is grounded in American history, racism, and discrimination, where harsh experience within their community has taught them to be cautious of consuming food prepared by strangers.

Christopher exhibited a xenophobic distrust of Korean food preparation habits, probably influenced by Orientalist tropes of the sort presented in Screaming Monkeys: Critiques of Asian American Images (Galang, 2003), including those referencing viruses, dirt, or unacceptable ingredients (dog, cat, etc.). This resulted in him avoiding eating out and restricting his diet in unhealthy ways, though he would sometimes purchase snacks from fried-food vendors on the streets. He seemed to believe that deep-frying would kill any harmful bacteria or contaminants and he could clearly see the cooking as it was performed. This was the same individual who had gotten the botched haircut and was intensely critical of Korean women’s submissive behavior, discussed previously, and he never did really become accustomed to life in Korea. Christopher simply tolerated what he had to, spent much of his time there miserable, and avoided what culture contact he could until his contract was up. Individuals who live abroad must come to terms with the environment in which they find themselves and the foods it can provide, or leave for another locale that has foods they find more agreeable. His inability to trust that Koreans *also* want food that is safely prepared and expect to receive it in restaurants negatively impacted both

his experience of life in Korea and his ability to obtain nourishment. As far as he was concerned, Koreans did not make safe, edible food and, though he did not make a midnight run, his entire focus was on getting back home.

In writing about wilderness and foodways, Sue Campbell states that “wilderness narratives have settled into a genre of their own, one that takes as its primary subject the experience – almost always from a Euro-American standpoint – of humans who leave ‘civilization’ to immerse themselves in the ‘wilderness’” (1994, 1). In this wilderness, food becomes problematic and individuals struggle to adjust to new eating patterns and experiences. Whether or not expatriates in Korea travel to less explored “wilderness” areas in Korea or Asia, they seem to bring the perspective of wilderness explorers with them and approach native customs and foodways through a similar paradigm. The differences that abound between Korean culture and those of their homelands, in conjunction with prevailing stereotypes, lead to feelings of having left civilization behind. Melanie Steyn shared her feelings of intimidation on confronting the Korean landscape for the first time:

**Kelly:** You were saying yesterday, um, that the space here has always seemed alien to you.

**Melanie:** Mm. Mm. Yes, that was an interesting reaction that I think, I personally had probably projection (Kelly: Mm-hm.) because I know that I looking back, I really know, that I was suffering from culture shock. I was feeling brave and I was in denial at it, I think but I was, and I think I projected it onto the landscape. (Kelly: Ahh!)

To some extent, because, um, I wasn’t used to mountains that were actually hills, that were flint-shaped, triangular, steep but (Kelly: Mm.), not high. And they seemed alien to me and they seemed to kind of, like, be ... I remember writing home and saying it’s as though there’s some ancient Korean giant has ... has ... blocked your way like, um, that scene from the Lord of the Rings where Gandalf says, “You will not pass!” [Kelly: *laughs*] Stay out of my country!” (Kelly: Right.) Really. I, I experienced it as almost hostile. But it was a projection, because I was being friendly to everyone and trying hard, and denying the fact that actually I was in culture shock and this was alien. (Kelly: Mm.) So I think that’s what was going on there. [*laughing*] (I\*M. Steyn 2007)

This sense of being enveloped in an alien landscape contributes to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Campbell asks, “What do we mean, what have we meant, by ‘roughing it’?” (1994, 2) and, given my informant’s description of her feelings, we must wonder to what extent expatriates in Korea have a sense of “roughing it.” They, like all migrants and immigrants, arrive with what they can carry and must learn to get by with what is available, rather than what they are accustomed to having.

Melanie gradually developed her Korean language skills, even as she came to know non-spicy Korean foods that she could enjoy. Within a relatively short time, she was shopping with confidence, cooking in her home, and had a repertoire of commonly available Korean foods that she knew she liked. The other two cases described above were marked by failure to adapt. The woman who subsisted on fast food, although she spent two years in Korea, was never really able to come to terms with living there and was relieved to return home at the end of her tenure. The man managed to complete his one-year contract by limiting his diet to bread, rice, cereal, eggs, and other familiar items he considered safe, and by living as a recluse. While his inability to come to terms with Korean foods or to learn to cook for himself may not have been the only factors in his desire to leave for home as soon as his contract was complete, it must certainly have had an impact on the quality of his experience there.

#### **6.4 Disrupted Foodways, “Roughing It,” and “Survival”**

The frequency with which foreign teachers use the word “survive” or “survival” in talking about their stay in Korea suggests that they sometimes feel a sense of entering a wild or untamed space or having left “civilization” behind. Such comments speak as much about learning to make do or “rough it,” the effects of transience on emplacement, self-perceptions of tenacity, and preconceptions about other cultures as they do any truly hazardous or risky experience. In speaking of staying in Korea, Kim Crosby said, “Now, I can sit here and I, and I



will have anxiety about how to survive again [*in her homeland again*], but at least I know it's the end, the end is in sight, and the, ah, I can stick it out, I can handle that" (I\*Crosby 2007).

Another said, "Having to survive in an alien culture, it just is hard" (I\*M. Steyn 2007) and the friend of another informant, on hearing that I had been in Korea during the mid-1990s, said, "So, you were here back in the old Wild West days." As mentioned at the start of this thesis, in my proposal for this topic, even I referred to "vernacular culture as a mechanism for survival" as one of the primary foci for this research. These statements foreground the adaptation and perseverance necessary to live in another culture long-term and evoke images of the expatriate as a globe-trotting adventurer, with all the Orientalist and colonialist baggage that includes. The emphasis on "surviving" a stay in Korea implies a particular mentality shaped by impinging, uncertain circumstances, especially in the tension between long-term residence (two or more years) and the underlying assumption that these stays are temporary. Unlike tourists, foreign teachers must become comfortable with their residency in Korea and achieve a degree of emplacement, but they can never settle, which imposes limitations on their investment, emotionally and physically. This unresolvable instability of circumstance creates anxiety, which they must learn to live with, and *survive*, in order to remain.

Korea is not the Wild West, nor does it contain many untamed spaces, though its mountainous regions can be treacherous. Most foreign teachers are housed in apartments, provided with sufficient funds to procure food, and the streets are safe for the most part, even for women at night, so references to "survival" in Korea are not literal, because there is little danger to physical existence. It is not Korea, then, but their *experience* of life in Korea, that elicits analogies with survival, camping, and roughing it. It is their altered circumstances, where their status is contingent on satisfying the requirements of predatory employers, where they are

immersed in the unfamiliar and lack support and resources, that they must survive. As the most fundamental of needs, the impact on their foodways can be felt deeply and, as we have seen, can even be perceived as threatening by some. Sidney Mintz writes:

Food preferences that emerge early in life do so within the bounds laid down by those who do the nurturing, and therefore within the rules of their society and culture... What we like, what we eat, how we eat it, and how we feel about it are phenomenologically interrelated matters; together, they speak eloquently to the question of how we perceive ourselves in relation to others. (1985, 4)

Food choices in Korea are unfamiliar and some may even be shocking, such as raw meats and/or offal, live octopus, dog soup, blood cakes, or *kimchi*, which seems rotten to the unaccustomed palate. They break the rules we are accustomed to and, in their difference, create a distance between foreigners and Koreans. Commensality among foreign teachers encourages a sense of belonging within a group that will never belong (in Korea). Jill Terry Rudy, in describing the “extended-stay eating experiences” of Mormon missionaries compares the long-term resident with the culinary tourist, saying:

[The] extended stay most likely creates compelling twin desires for new *and* familiar eating experiences. For, unlike the tourist, participants in a lengthy stay become more exposed to the “culinary system not one’s own” (Long 1998; 181). Without significant effort to avoid unfamiliar culinary systems, the long-term visitor or resident will experience more frequent encounters with new aspects of foodways than the culinary tourist: more new food items, new meal systems and cuisines, and new methods of food procurement, preparation, and presentation. (2004, 131)

The intersection between long-term residence and transitory migration, between belonging and exclusion, and between reproducing and maintaining foodways and adapting to local foods results in an unstructured, ad hoc approach to foreign teachers’ existence in Korea. This becomes especially clear in how foreign residents understand and experience foodways and establish culinary habits in Korea, in the ways they “make do” and “rough it” in order to “survive.”



Foreign teachers are provided with the necessities of furniture and appliances, and even with some items that are considered luxuries. In her memoir, Dana Sachs describes her living space in Vietnam, saying, “Huong had given me an electric hot plate and a refrigerator. Most Vietnamese would have considered these appliances luxuries, but for an American who learned to cook on a four-burner Magic Chef, the hot plate experience felt like camping. I had to figure out a whole new method of cooking” (2000, 112). In this passage, again, we hear the reference to camping and it is easy to get the sense that the supplies at hand are nominal by Western standards. In the long discussion of coffee with Margaret, I described the use of instant coffee and creamer as more of an emergency food or for use in “camping situations,” to which she replied, “Right, which is ..., part of the camping ... experience” (I\*Scates 2007), meaning that deficiencies are an expected part of the experience and come to signify it in a positive way as it reflects one’s flexibility or fortitude in the face of adversity. In going camping, we are deliberately choosing to temporarily leave modern conveniences behind in favor of a more primitive and simple existence, creating circumstances that demand sacrifice, adaptation, and creativity. For Margaret and me, instant coffee was perceived as less than ideal, putting it in the category of food used when you have to “make do” or “rough it,” and rendering memories of bad coffee nostalgic instead of unpalatable. It requires “careful planning, skill in hunting...and gathering, and a willingness to adapt to new tastes” to get by in the new environment, but “[t]hese factors signal the degree to which ‘camping food’ travelers see themselves as passing through, or as *living in*, the wilderness” (Campbell 1994, 9, emphasis mine). The focus, whether camping, passing through, or exploring the wilderness, is on moving through what is seen as a temporary condition, to emerge on the other side surrounded, once again, by conveniences you value the more for having done without them. Foreign teachers who stay in South Korea face the

challenge of transient permanence, where they will stay long enough to require adaptation, both to foods and to systems of food preparation. They must either learn where and how to find familiar foods, or how to prepare acceptable substitutes, or accept native foodways for the duration of their stay.

Most foreign teachers do not intend to take their cookware and utensils when they return to their homeland. How much individuals purchased was therefore usually a reflection of how much they liked to cook or how little they liked Korean food. The standard stove in a Korean apartment had two burners and no oven, reflecting a culinary pattern of one-pot meals served with rice (cooked separately in a rice cooker) and many side dishes of pickled or fermented vegetables. The limitations of this setup were part of what made that Thanksgiving feast a challenge back in the 1990s. In their adaptation and survival, however, foreign teachers learn that there are many things that can be cooked in a single pot and creativity is the key. One roommate of mine found a squirt can of Cheez Whiz and some macaroni at the department store. Two hours later she was squirting the cheese product over the cooked noodles and putting the whole dish in the toaster oven. Just as Cheez Whiz is a distant relation to actual cheese, her rendition of macaroni and cheese bore only passing resemblance to the standard dish, but it provided an approximation of the flavors and textures of the original. Obviously, she had never made macaroni and cheese in this way before, but it satisfied her craving for that dish, just as Margaret's boxes of macaroni and cheese did for her. These may not be Mom's macaroni and cheese, with all the emotional and nostalgic associations that comfort food conveys, but these impromptu stand-ins provide a sense of connection to remembered people, times, and places.

Generally speaking, most foreigners make do with the bare essentials or with whatever has been left behind in their apartments. It is absolutely possible to go for a year with a single

pot, bowl, glass, plate, fork, and spoon, as campers and backpackers often do. The alternative is to invest a lot of money in material goods that will be abandoned after a year or two, an outlay of cash that does not make sense for most people, so long-term transients aim for a middle ground. For those with any interest in cooking home-style foods, it was worth it to invest in a few small appliances like toaster ovens, coffee makers, or crock pots in order to recreate the comfort foods of home. While my apartment in Seoul had a glass-topped two-burner stove, my dorm room at Geumgang University had no kitchen at all. Since it was set up for two people, however, I converted one built-in desk to a sort of kitchenette, with my food stored on the bookshelves and the desk as my cooking area. With the help of a single-burner hot plate, an electric cookpot, a coffee pot, and a toaster oven, I was able to have many familiar meals. I even bought a small refrigerator that fit into a corner of the room and kept the toaster oven on top of that, freeing up some cooking space on the desk. This setup enabled me to have a bagel and coffee for breakfast, and make pasta dishes, soups, and curries for dinner. Even though the university had a cafeteria where I could eat for free, there would be days when the cafeteria was closed, or I would just want to be on my own, and other times when I wasn't in the mood for Korean cafeteria food. These foods, the bagels especially, were touches of home and even though I knew they were luxuries I could survive without – and had done so often – it was a treat to be able to have them when so far away from home. When I left, most of this cooking equipment was given away (or sold, in the case of the fridge) to other foreigners or to my students. There was little point in bringing it home, as the current and electrical plugs were different, and it would cost as much to ship as to replace once home. Like most expatriates, I left behind any superfluous material goods when I left for home, though I did ship more than most. In the end, though, most foreign teachers revive habits from their college years, using cast offs or buying inexpensive items to meet their



**Figure 12: A typical tiny kitchen space in an officetel apartment (similar to an efficiency or bachelor apartment). (Photo by K. Roubo 2006)**



**Figure 13: A jerry-rigged kitchen in my dorm room at Geumgang University, showing the additional shelf space created by tipping over the extra bed. (Photo by K. Roubo 2007)**

needs, then leaving them behind when they go. Rather than a set of dishes, cookware, knives, linens, or substantial furniture, they get by with a cheap pot or two, a couple of dishes, and only the minimum of cooking and eating utensils. In my second year in Korea (1996), I inherited a low, traditional table and an étagère from a departing foreign teacher, a Canadian who had found them on the street behind his apartment building. Such discards can add warmth and personality to foreign teachers' spaces without incurring any expense and are often handed on to others when they leave. The items I received became a valued part of my environment, enough so that I associated them with my life in Korea and, when the time came, I shipped that little table home (the étagère, sadly, was more fragile and was passed on to another teacher instead). Foreign teachers in South Korea, like expatriates in many other situations, learn to use available resources to meet their immediate needs, culinary or otherwise. In the process, they procure what they can to recreate the comforts of home, adapt to new foodways and food experiences in their new environment, and learn to make do with whatever materials are available to them. They also discover creative methods of adapting their home environments to suit their habits. Eventually, they learn what is possible, what they can live with, what they cannot do without, what they are not *willing* to do without, as well as creative ways of procuring material goods, often with the help of their compatriots. All of this hunting and gathering, contriving and working around, comprises part of the dynamic vernacular culture that spreads throughout *waegook* folk groups in South Korea and facilitates their ability and willingness to adapt and survive there. It generates a sense of *surviving*, in that they are “making do” and “roughing it,” overcoming challenges and obstacles their status and environment create, and assuaging the tension brought on by being transients in a settled community.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

My initial research plan focused on foreign teacher networks in South Korea, and examining them revealed that this community displays essential differences from other folk groups. Investigation of these webs of lightly connected individuals revealed a transitory migrant community, one perpetually in process, whose cohesion was sustained in large part through the transmission of folklore. The constant dispersal and introduction of individuals mean that the group is always emergent, its members always in transition along an arc that bends towards an eventual return home. This constant state of change creates tensions, both internally for the individual and in relationships among group members. As new members are pulled in, others depart, and there is a constant need for adjustment – to new situations, new personalities, new jobs, new locations, etc. – which in turn requires constant effort. Like the proverbial river, you can never step into the same community twice. It is this perpetual state of rapid change that is a defining characteristic of the transitory community, one which requires members of such a folk group to bond quickly, if superficially at times, in order to create any sense of belonging among its participants. Narrative is fundamental to the creation and sustaining of *waegook* identity within the foreign teacher community.

The difficulties of adjusting to their new environment in Korea creates tension that manifests within community members' relationships – with coworkers, employers, locals, and other foreign teachers. There is also tension between the individual's comfort level in Korea and their desire to return to the more familiar and predictable environs of "home," wherever that may be for them. This tension between emplacement in Korea and feelings of homesickness is most evident in narratives about "good Korea days" and "bad Korea days." On a "good Korea day," the foreign teacher feels comfortable with their level of emplacement, successfully navigates the

daily challenges of living in another culture, and derives a sense of achievement and satisfaction from that cultural competence. “Bad Korea days” are marked by conflict with Korean culture, whether with coworkers or employers on the job, during interactions with Koreans in public, or through an event that intrudes on their consciousness and disrupts their sense of emplacement – suddenly, once again, they feel out of place. Such an event could be a failure in communication, an inability to complete a necessary errand, or simply having no patience for being stared at on that day, as we saw in Kurt’s story about the t-shirt. Whatever the trigger, it heightens the foreign teacher’s self-consciousness and makes them aware of their surroundings, reasserting their sense of foreignness, which in turn undermines those feelings of emplacement and belonging that are crucial to living comfortably in Korea. On such days, the pull of home is ascendant as feelings of irritation, awkwardness, and alienation contrast with a familiar space where you know you belong. The act of narrating such events to other *waegooks*, however, and being met with understanding and sympathy, can help to reground the individual in their sense of belonging, building a sense of group identity, as it demonstrates that, in this, they are not alone.

Van Maanen suggests that, “To do fieldwork apparently requires some of the instincts of an exile, for the fieldworker typically arrives at the place of study without much of an introduction and knowing few people, if any” (1988, 2). To do fieldwork within the foreign teacher network in South Korea is to be an exile among transitory exiles, a *de facto* member of a dynamic, amorphous folk group. This instant membership in my folk group both complicated things for my fieldwork and made them easier. It may have meant a less stable population to work among, but there was a low threshold to ingress to the community. In conceptualizing the fieldwork and methodology for this thesis, the assumptions I made about the community were based on my own experiences of life in Korea in the 1990s, as well as on discussions with other

former foreign English teachers. As is often the case with fieldwork, neither my project nor my findings were what I anticipated. My research reveals the kind of ad hoc folk group that can form when Western expatriates live as itinerant workers in a foreign land – a type of folk group that is increasingly common in our mobile, contemporary society – and the kinds of vernacular culture that develop within it.

While some of the differences between my first visit to Korea and the start of my fieldwork were obvious and anticipated, despite advances in technology, some aspects of foreign teacher life in South Korea were surprisingly untouched by the passage of time. In particular, a preference for face-to-face communication over online or phone contact was common, as was transmitting information via folklore, especially through personal experience narratives. The network was, if anything, even less substantial than I had remembered, a gossamer thing sustained by a combination of random, near-constant movement and casual socialization. The narratives transmitted the kinds of information I had recalled, but they also did much more than I had understood. Personal experience narratives provide a sense of intimacy among strangers and a sense of collective and personal identity for the narrators who share them, which allows them to feel they belong, despite the group's diversity and transience. In addition, foreign teacher narratives provide a means for newly marginalized white Westerners to reassert their superiority by portraying themselves favorably in comparison to Koreans, a detail that was both unanticipated and, in retrospect, unsurprising.

The considerable time elapsed since I had left Korea and resultant changes in my age and level of education changed the nature of the cohort with whom I connected and the activities in which we participated. Returning as an older, presumably wiser, and Korea-savvy folklorist also necessarily meant that I no longer had the same perspective as I had had in the 1990s. These



differences altered my experience of life in Korea and resulted in my gathering different data than I had expected, some of it surprising and some simply a product of change. Additionally, while this research was intended as a study of a folk group, the nature of networking and inclusion among foreign teachers meant that no sooner had I met my informant group than I was an adjunct to it. The circumstances that prevail among foreign teachers in Korea, juxtaposed with my own preexisting knowledge of life there, contributed to the auto-ethnographic quality of this thesis. I had emphasized objectivity in my previous fieldwork, but my personal connection to the experience and the material I was studying resonates in my results. Without a thorough understanding of the context in which they are framed, however, the layers of meaning carried by foreign teachers' personal experience narratives of their *waegook* life and work in Korea could easily be overlooked. My years of experience in South Korea gave me a multifaceted perception of my informants and their stories that a newcomer would not have and, while I cannot rule out the possibility of bias, my insider knowledge imparts legitimacy to these findings.

For the neophyte foreign teacher, the network in South Korea seems extensive and resilient, with numerous experienced guides who can show them the ropes. Because it represents a source of information, resources, and companionship, new arrivals establish connections swiftly. In these early days, they learn their way around their locale, learn some Korean, and expand their own personal networks through chance encounters and introductions, turning to their fellows as resources to help them cope with their environment. These relationships often develop quickly, as individuals lean on each other and share both informational and tangible resources, and the bonds developed may be long-lasting as well. Through narrative exchange, often as a group, foreign teachers share their personal experiences, their approaches to dealing

with life in Korea, and their expertise in the culture. Because foreign teachers in Korea possess a mutual understanding of the culture and their place in it, the framing and content of their narratives create a sense of intimacy with their listeners. The community's narratives constitute a body of shared insider knowledge that helps to create bonds and construct a sense of collective identity within their folk group. What they are learning is occupational folklore, an accretion of knowledge that will enable them to succeed as a teacher in South Korea. Newbies soon become *waegooks*, or foreigners, outsiders who meet by chance, but recognize the common bond their status represents.

Foreign teachers soon discover, within a few months of their arrival in Korea, that the durability of the network is an illusion as one after another of their veteran guides leaves the area or the country. The newcomer quickly becomes a mentor to others. Since the average stay in Korea is just a few years, it does not take long before nearly the entire membership of the foreign teacher network is replaced. In the early months of that first year, foreign teachers must learn the skills that will allow them to succeed in Korea after their mentors have gone. They also learn that despite the turnover in foreign population, the network is more resilient than it seems, and new arrivals bring more energy and create fresh bonds to reinforce it. It was this fluid and mutable network that first inspired this research, and it is the connective tissue of the network, the occupational and personal experience narratives comprising the folklore that sustains its bonds, that lies at the core of this thesis. Without this transmission of vernacular culture along its conduits, the subculture has little to hold it together. In its narrative exchanges, often in conjunction with commensality, the community sustains a sense – a culture – of belonging and identity.

Foodways-related behaviors follow a similar trajectory to networking in that needs are immediate and pressing upon arrival, but diminish over time, particularly after the first year. Initially, foreign teachers expend time and energy seeking familiar foods, or the ingredients to make them. It is worth it to them to have items shipped from home or to make the effort to bring them back after visits, but having these items eventually becomes a matter of convenience, not need. During the first year, a personal repertoire of familiar and enjoyable Korean foods develops and expands, providing satisfactory new alternatives to missing familiar favorites. Those who cannot develop at least a tolerance for Korean foods are often those who leave, whether they make a midnight run or stick with it only until the end of their contracts. Those who become accustomed to Korean foods tend to increasingly choose them over Western-style foods, which are often poorly rendered in Korea. Better to have an excellent, freshly-made native dish than to suffer through ghastly local versions of Western dishes. My research revealed that most foreign teachers maintain their connection to home through at least one of their familiar comfort foods, often a beverage such as tea or coffee. Conversely, Korean foods remain a part of their foodways repertoire and may become the favorites they miss and seek out once back in their own homeland. Because Korean foods are delicious and affordable, foreign teachers spend little of their time cooking, especially if they live in larger towns or cities. Easy access to restaurants, fast-food franchises, coffee shops, and bakeries makes cooking a choice as opposed to a necessity and most do little of it.

One of the more interesting revelations of this study is that the foreign teacher's job is not just their occupation when it comes to the type of standards denoted in McCarl's canon of work technique. Despite the fact that they are in Korea to teach, it is in the social context of this new milieu where the most vital skills must be mastered, in addition to those in the classroom. The

classroom still matters, but how they perform in the culture more broadly matters more. In a subtle shift of emphasis, success for foreign teachers in this enviro-specific canon of work technique demands the ability to understand Korean social situations and respond appropriately. This means knowing customs, traditions, and etiquette, having a basic grasp of the language, picking up subtle cultural cues, and behaving appropriately in the workplace. While foreign teachers may not be held to the same expectations as Koreans, failure to meet minimum standards conveys disrespect for the host culture or an inability to adapt, however temporarily. Success in the canon can be seen in advancement of status and position, and is reflected in foreign teachers' personal experience narratives, in which the Korean cultural milieu frames the stage and interpretation of the events described is foregrounded. Professional advancement in English-teaching positions as a marker of success may make it seem that Koreans set the canon, but this is not the case. Foreign teachers also see these factors as indicators of achievement and signs that their peers take seriously their obligation to effectively adapt to this framework. It is in sharing their personal experiences through narrative in face-to-face encounters that success in the canon is usually judged, with first-rate positions seen as a reward for cultural competence.

In listening to their comrades' narratives, experienced foreign teachers identify skills and the acceptance of the folk group's norms (including casual international travel, consuming local foods, and adoption of local customs) for expatriate life in Korea. Those whose efforts are unsatisfactory tend to either leave or find themselves unable to advance to more prestigious positions, and this applies even to those most enamored of the culture and positive in their view of it. Additionally, Korean sensitivity to nuance and appearances means there may be personal qualities over which an individual has little control – whether skin tone, accent, vocal qualities, or mannerisms – that are seen as undesirable shortcomings. Overcoming such disadvantages is

possible, but requires greater than average effort and determination, as changing accents and mannerisms is difficult at best, and changing physical characteristics (other than perhaps weight) is usually impossible. Fair or unfair, most foreign teachers would acknowledge that it is part of getting by in the culture and are not surprised when they encounter discrimination.

The canon of work technique for foreign teachers in South Korea also renders them distinct from tourists, ethnographers, or other types of expatriates. Tourists visit briefly, gaining a relatively superficial understanding of the people and culture while interacting with Koreans in passing, literally. Ethnographers come with the intention of learning as deeply and thoroughly as possible and strive to explore and experience the culture to the best of their abilities. Foreign teachers, however, occupy a space in Korean culture proper, functioning within it and learning more than tourists, but integrating less completely than ethnographers would seek to do. They live among Koreans, unsheltered by corporate or government organizations, while mastering the canon that makes survival possible. They are emplaced, but always temporarily. Foreign teachers network as they do in order to find mutual support and a sense of belonging while living temporarily within the constraints that life in Korea imposes, taking comfort from sharing the experience and a sense of *waegook* identity with their fellows. In terms of resources and cultural capital, all they have is each other and whatever the community can acquire and disseminate of knowledge and experience about contemporary life in Korea for foreign nationals.

In addition to inculcating knowledge about Korea and Koreans to help others develop the skill required for the canon of work technique, narratives of foreign teachers' personal experiences function in other ways, as well. The framing and context of these narratives, shared as they are with others who understand their content, allow listeners to follow them, as Braid has described, and draw experiential meaning from them. The sense that there is a shared

understanding of what is happening in these tales – more properly personal experience narratives and legends – also promotes a sense of intimacy between the narrators and the audience. This encourages feelings of collective identity, a sense of folk groupness within the foreign teacher community and engenders a feeling of belonging in a temporary home. There are other, unfortunate, aspects of these shared personal experience narratives. In the framing of them, it is not uncommon for the narrator to create a structure that incorporates Orientalist tropes, racist stereotypes, or white superiority. By depicting the behavior of Koreans as morally lacking, backward, or inferior in some way, the narrator of the experience creates a positional superiority for themselves by describing their own behavior as more appropriate, advanced, or proper. Those who are aware of and uncomfortable with their ethnocentrism, as Melanie was, recognize it in the discourse and scrutinize their own attitudes and remarks for signs of it. Others continue the practice, either unconscious of or unconcerned with the negative attitudes and prejudices they are exposing and disseminating. This can be to their social detriment, despite it being a common subtext, because overstressing the negative reads as bitterness, perceived as tainting attitudes and experiences regarding life in Korea and affecting adaptation and survival. So while these tropes can emphasize difference, thereby reinforcing collective identity and belonging, when taken too far they can contaminate social relations within the community and undermine an individual's successful adaptation.

Language learning, although definitely a part of the canon of work technique of foreign teachers, is not the dominant focus of effort that might be expected. Those who do not learn some Korean unquestionably fail to fulfill the expectations set by the canon, but fluency is neither expected nor common. Expatriates discover that while the alphabet is easy to learn, the language itself is complicated by its intersection with the hierarchical social structure. Once they

realize that Korean requires them to speak up or down to others, which entails being able to discern their status relative to their conversational partner(s) and use specific linguistic forms that reflect that relationship, they often begin to question whether it is worth the effort. Instead, it is expected that they will have a sufficient familiarity with the language to function comfortably in society. Working knowledge of the language is demonstrated through its correct incorporation in a personal experience narrative, where Korean words and phrases enrich detail and add to the contextualization of the story. Language skills are also foregrounded in public commensality, where knowledge of Korean foods, the ability to order and interact appropriately with Koreans in restaurants, and interpreting written materials (signs and menus) are on display for one's fellows.

It would be interesting to see how the canon of work technique learned by foreign teachers in Korea transfers to another culture and place, and to what extent foreign teachers in other locales share the same standards and strategies. Margaret's example of moving from Japan to Korea suggests it is likely because, as she put it, "The culture shock was there? [*voice rising in intonation, as if a question*] But the preparation was in how to deal with it. I had tools. I had been through it before" (I\*Scates 2007). Korea and Japan have a shared history, proximity, and cultural similarities, which may have eased Margaret's transition, as well. However, while teaching in other countries might be different, I have known several teachers who continued in this itinerant lifestyle and went on to teach in places as diverse as China, Mexico, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Indonesia. It seems likely that each successive adaptation, while not necessarily "easy," at least becomes a familiar form of discomfort that is more easily tolerated with each new experience of it. Given the mobile nature of life in the twenty-first century, whether for work or out of necessity or both, additional studies of expatriate groups

promise to further our understanding of how expatriate communities form and develop, function and change in order to survive, and what role folklore plays in such communities.

As my research demonstrates, expatriate communities can be fluid, diverse, ungrounded in any particular physical space, and generate unfixed networks, yet still persist and even thrive. Like any other folk group, English-language teachers in Korea exhibit a naturally broad range of folklore, but I have chosen here to examine in detail a few aspects to reflect on traditionality in a somewhat different light. I might have gone about it in more conservative ways, exploring what is traditional, perhaps through a more focused examination of some of the matters I do touch on and in some cases analyze: terminology, shared spaces, foodways, occupational lore, and meeting skills among them. In this thesis, I have pursued my research along a different track, in a less generic manner, and have explored how tradition is employed and developed within this group. The vernacular culture of foreign teachers that is so critical to their ability to adapt to life in Korea manifests in multiple areas and overlaps, bleeding from one genre to another. Like so much else relating to the foreign teacher experience (and my own in doing this research), *waegook* culture had me wandering into performative spaces I had not anticipated. In pursuing the subject in the way that I have, my work opens the way for additional questions about the nature of traditionality among transient groups, or within stable groups of transient people. Individuals plug in and drop out, but folklore flows through conduits of opportunity, particularly in the form of personal experience narratives, and provides a common thread to the experiences they share. The persistence of typical first-year horror narratives points to the fact that for most newcomers, their initial experiences of the culture resonate in similar ways, and this persistence of similarity underlies the endurance of the *waegook* vernacular culture. From marginalization to foodways adaptation to the necessity of mastering particular aspects of the indigenous culture,



the tests faced by newly arrived foreign teachers remain the same, and thus, so does the body of vernacular lore about responses to these challenges. Many of the matters raised here parallel other such transient or dynamic populations, including ones we see as shaped by their larger contexts, their superordinate institutions in many cases: students in schools and colleges, inductees in armies, religious pilgrims, foreign service officers in governmental institutions, and visitors at tourist sites, for example. Despite the parallels, clearly there are differences, both from folkloristic and non-folkloristic points of view, as the lack of overarching organizational structures creates the need for, and allows the organic development of, internal structures to suit the needs of the group. Global migration grows more common in our contemporary world, not less, and the intersection of transience with the maintenance, deployment, or evolution of traditionality within such groups merits further study.

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**Note:** In the in-text references, “I\*” indicates reference to an interview with an informant or information gathered through personal communication. In the interview transcriptions, words the informants stressed for emphasis are underlined and texts from multiple participants without double-spacing between indicates more than one person speaking at the same time.

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