

## **Abstract**

STARR, HOLLI MICHELLE. Crossing Boundaries and Finding “Real Life” Teaching English in South Korea. (Under the direction of Nora Haenn).

An increasing number of college graduates, in the United States, are choosing to teach English overseas, in response to economic pressures and globalization. American teachers living in South Korea must learn how to navigate cultural boundaries, and in the process, they reaffirm and/or refashion their own identities. English teachers’ time overseas is a coming-of-age experience and changes their perceptions of what “real life” means for them. Through this process of navigating boundaries, they are seeking to take control over their lives.

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Crossing Boundaries and Finding “Real Life”  
Teaching English in South Korea

by  
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## **Biography**

Holli Starr is from Mount Airy, North Carolina. She has a Bachelor's degree in Social Science Education from Western Carolina University, and is graduating in 2013 with a Master of Arts in Anthropology from North Carolina State University. She has worked for North Carolina public schools and as an English teacher in South Korea. Her main interests include tourism, education and community development. She currently resides in Raleigh, North Carolina with her dog Ella.

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“Sometimes I wonder if I could survive back home. If I could ever walk back into Hy-Vee and not act like a little school girl when I see cheese for less than \$10 a pound. If I could deal with having to drive everywhere, and be co connected with my car again. Life abroad isn’t perfect, but it has helped me understand that I can handle almost anything, except maybe home” (Facebook message 3/18/ 2013).

## **Introduction**

In 2008 economies worldwide took a downturn and many college graduates in the United States found securing a job difficult. This was the case for Melissa Karpinski who explains how when she failed to get a job in the United States with a master’s degree she saw work overseas as profitable both economically and culturally (2010: 1-2). Samantha Amara found herself “fresh out of school and nowhere near a job that would pay enough to live on and deal with a student loan” (2002: 1).

Teaching overseas can be very profitable and requires no teacher training. The only requirements to teach English in South Korea are to be a native English speaker and to hold a bachelor’s degree in any field from an accredited university. Most foreign teachers of English in South Korea hold degrees in the humanities or social sciences. Additional points facilitate overseas teaching. Teachers are provided airfare and housing or a housing stipend. First-year teachers can expect to earn about \$2,000 USD a month and living expenses are cheaper in South Korea than in the United States. Other benefits of teaching English in Korea include learning another culture and opportunities for travel and adventure. Teaching overseas is a break from the norm, a gap year after college, and as I will show, a hiatus from “real life”. Some teachers even view their work as a paid vacation.

What new teachers soon learn is that their international sojourns demand the ongoing negotiation of cultural boundaries. The following pages describe some of these boundaries

that manifest themselves not only in tangible things like clothing and food but social relations such as dating and the establishment of new social networks (throughout the text, I use “teachers” to refer to native speakers of English who leave their homeland to work in Korean schools). These teachers quickly create boundaries within their own group that position them in relation to their new experiences and in relation to one another. In this paper, I draw on my research to identify three groups of teachers distinguished by how long they have been overseas and the boundaries that they cross. ‘First-year’ teachers represent those living overseas for one to two years. ‘Third-year’ teachers have lived overseas for three-four years, while ‘long-term’ teachers, as their name implies, have ongoing commitments to Korea with no identifiable end date. Teachers themselves use the term “first-years” but they do not have a term for those who stay three-four years. The category of “third-year” derives from my own analysis, as I explain in the thesis. Long-terms are referred to as “lifers” in Korea. While there are many teachers from various English speaking countries in Korea, I focus primarily on teachers from the United States of America.

In the following pages I examine these temporal and cultural boundaries as teachers themselves describe them and negotiate them in their daily lives. After providing a detailed background to teaching in South Korea and an explanation of my research methods, I elaborate on concrete boundaries such as clothing, food, and housing. I then turn to more social boundaries including friends, dating, and alcohol consumption. Financial concerns and social support structures are also relevant to the topic, and I dedicate a separate section to these topics.

In the paper's discussion section, I return to one boundary in particular that I argue connects the phenomenon of international teaching to globalization. My discussion focuses on the distinction between what teachers call "real life" and its unnamed opposite. I argue that by using international teaching to navigate "real life" teachers are responding to today's global economic structures, the kind of structures that led to the 2008 recession that opens this thesis. Although much about today's economies is beyond the control of a single individual, I assert that teachers seek in their international journeys a measure of control over or at least a reprieve from economic strictures.

### **Overview of Teaching English**

Globalization and technology demand individuals learn second and third languages, so they can communicate within a more connected world. In Korea, this demand translates into the primacy of English as a second language. Many Koreans see English language skills as a way to make them more competitive in this globalized world. For U.S. English-speaking college graduates facing a difficult job market, the demand for teachers in Korea offers an opportunity that could potentially be more profitable than employment in their home countries. In Korea, college graduates from America are practically guaranteed a job. The trend has not gone unnoticed in the popular press. Teaching English as a Foreign Language has been named by Forbes Magazine Online as one of the 14 hottest jobs for college graduates "College grads find lucrative teaching positions in Europe, Asia, Africa and Central and South America and teaching abroad is a great opportunity for students hoping to



work and travel” ( 2012). Many countries compete for English teachers, however, as Kate<sup>1</sup> a 26-year-old from Washington says “if you want to make money you need to go to Asia” (interview 6/22/12).

Googling “teach English in South Korea” produces 2,400,000 websites including recruitment sites, blogs, videos and news articles. Recruitment websites like “Say Kimchi Recruiting” advertise: “what bad economy: there are plenty of jobs to be had as long as you know where to look, South Korea” (saykimchirecruiting.com). Recruiters tap into youthful interests in travel and excitement. Tom said before leaving that he was ready to “do something different with his life” (interview 8/8/2012). Sarah said that she wanted “to explore the world” and pay back student loans (interview 7/2/ 2012). Teaching overseas offers a tidy package of money, adventure, and a change in life (Karpinski: 2010).

There are thousands of teachers living in South Korea. Teaching however is rarely a focal point of conversation for English teachers living overseas. A more common topic of conversation is teacher’s’ treatment by their employers. There are three main teaching establishments in South Korea; hogwans, public schools and universities.

Hogwans are private schools that offer after-school English lessons for elementary through middle school students, day-time English immersion and instruction for kindergarten-aged students well as adult English classes. Hogwans are privately owned but can be part of a franchise. Teachers working in hogwans with elementary or middle-school students are typically on the job from 1pm-9pm. Hogwan owners vary in that some owners or managers pay their employees regularly and some do not. Some are unconcerned with how

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<sup>1</sup> All Informant names are pseudonyms

their teachers carry out their duties and others are strict task masters. Some teachers posted in hogwans work with only Korean coworkers and others work with multiple foreign teachers in large schools. The situation in hogwans is so variable and often the working conditions so difficult that after their first-year, foreigners who stay in Korea typically search for a better position.

Public schools are an alternative to hogwans where teachers give lessons to elementary, middle or high school students. While the pay is sometimes lower than at hogwans, public schools offer several more weeks of paid vacation time and some schools offer overtime. Some teachers also work at private boarding schools that are structured similarly to public schools and offer higher pay. University jobs are the most desirable of the lot, but the most difficult to access. Applicants either “need to know someone or have a master’s degree and then you still kind of need to know someone” (interview 8/8/2012).

In light of this social structure, it may be unsurprising that after one to two years most teachers return home to “grow up” and resume their “real lives”, as they say, and to reestablish their previous social networks. A smaller group decides to stay and teach English in Korea for three to four years. With their greater experience of Korean culture they often feel superior to the first-year “babies” or “newbies”. By the time this 3-4 year group returns home, they feel they have learned how to live in Korea. They no longer spend time making cultural blunders, figuring out where to see a movie, or get lost in the twisting roads of downtown areas.

However, most of these third-year teachers also leave Korea to return to their old lives, which leaves the final group of “long-term” teachers. For this group, Korea is “real

life.” At some point they either found that they enjoy living in the constant liminal state or living in-between the familiar American society and new Korean society represented by their early years overseas, or they found this liminal state transformed into something else.

All these groups raise the question, in light of the opportunities posed by international teaching, what does “real life” mean? What does “growing up” and “getting back to “real life” signify? How do young people use their travels to build a life? To what extent do they feel that international work is building it for them? Or, is something else in the connection between global economies and identity construction at play?

## **Methods**

In order to answer these questions and explore the cultural boundaries and their relation to ideas of “real life” and the global economy that arise in the process of international teaching, I traveled to South Korea for eight weeks during the summer of 2012. The methods I utilized over the course of my research included digital ethnography, participant observation, and formal and informal interviews.

Prior to leaving for South Korea, I used digital ethnography or internet research to examine how teachers represent their lives online (Murthy 2008). The internet has completely changed how people communicate with one another, both with people next door and those who live far away (Wilson 2002). According to Murthy “a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography not only gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods, but also enables them to demarginalize the voice of respondents” (2008: 837). Wilson explains that using online information is similar to using information gathered

offline and as long as permission has been granted ethnographers may use the information in their research (2002). Social media sites such as Facebook allow people to upload photos, chat with friends, post information, and comments on friends' pages (Murthy 2008).

Facebook also has what it calls the "timeline application" where all the information a person has posted or had posted by others is catalogued by year. By accessing the Facebook timeline information for 15 individuals, I was able to see who their contacts were before leaving for Korea, while they are/were in Korea, and after they return home. I used this information to observe teachers' social networks, with whom informants are chatting with online, news they post, and pictures they have uploaded or been 'tagged in' or added by others. These data helped to reveal a person's identity, how living abroad has changed this identity, and the boundaries they may have crossed.

I chose Facebook informants to represent varying aspects of the expatriate experience including people of different ages, state of origin, sex, marital status, and ethnicity. This information was then helpful in the face-to-face research I undertook in South Korea. Based on the Facebook information, I developed interview questions and occasionally focused my participant observation on certain topical areas including shopping, visiting foreigner or expat bars and support networks. Since returning from South Korea, I have kept up with these informants on Facebook and have updated this research as informants' opinions and ideas change.

My 2012 research drew on my previous experience in South Korea. Between 2009 and 2010, I worked as an English teacher there and most of my informants and hosts came from contacts I made while living there. Thus, during the summer of 2012, I visited the cities

of Seoul (4 weeks), Daegu (2 weeks), Jeonju (one week) and Gwangju (two weeks) to collect data. For the first two weeks I concentrated on conducting participant-observation in Seoul. I did this by living in a studio apartment with a third-year female foreign teacher, going to bars, festivals, and dinners with foreign teachers. The third week I spent conducting participant-observation in Daegu living in a studio apartment with a first-year male teacher. The fourth week I spent in Jeonju where I conducted participant observation living with another third- year female teacher and her Korean male roommate. After this I traveled to Gwangju where I lived with a long-term teacher and his Korean wife (in a four room apartment, housing definitely improves the longer one stays in-country). Returning to Seoul I started interviewing and conducted short trips to interact with and meet up with informants. I ended my time in Korea back in Gwangju pet-sitting for a couple while they were visiting in England.

**Principal Informants –Chart 1**

Sex	Age	Country of Origin	Length of Stay
Female	31	USA	5 years
Female	27	USA	3 Years
Female**	27	England	3 ½ years
Female	28	USA	3 Years
Female	35	Korea	----
Male	32	USA	First-year
Male	23	USA	First-year
Male	32	USA	5 Years
Male*	34	USA	4 Years
Male*	28	USA	4 ½ Years

\*These informants are considered long-term because they have signed contracts for their fifth year.

\*\* This informant was used to compare experiences of Americans to other foreigners.

In addition to the people noted in chart 1, I was also able to conduct informal interviews with approximately twenty people. I refer to these informants throughout the text. Upon completion of my fieldwork I transcribed all interviews and coded them, along with my field notes indicating which boundaries people spoke of or encountered in practice. I contrasted this information with teachers' length of time in country. I analyzed this information to determine overarching themes which, in turn, underpin this thesis. Some of the boundaries were obvious, some not, but all, at their root, were related to globalization and teachers defining what "real life" signifies to them.

### **Literature Review**

Globalization has created the need for Americans to move abroad (Kearney 1995). While globalization has always occurred in one form or another, advances in technology during the twentieth century allowed for the mass transmission of goods, people, and information. Kearney defines globalization as the "social, economic, cultural and demographic processes that take place within nations but also transcends them" (1995: 548). In other words, Kearney emphasizes the way that global events shape the local and the global itself.

One aspect of globalization is the way "advances in communication, information technology and travel that enable migrants to socially embed themselves simultaneously in host and receiving countries" (Lynn-ee Ho 2011: 644). Technology, especially the internet, has enabled people to keep in contact with geographically distant groups in ways that were impossible a few decades ago. As a consequence, Kearney sees increasing need for research

on the “growing virtual communities, identities, and information” associated with globalization (Kearney 1995: 554). Kearney’s assertion is clearly important to teachers in South Korea, from their recruitment via the internet to their use of the internet to create new forms of communities and communication, foreign teachers in Korea keep in contact with people of shared interests or identities and even create multiple identities online (Wilson 2002: 449). Their on-line work in crafting new cultures contrasts with the cultural boundaries they encounter in their everyday lives.

One other connection to the question of globalization is teachers’ status as expatriates. Teachers find themselves automatically entrenched in the expatriate community because their transnational ties to their host country weaken their integration in the receiving country (Vertovec 2001; Holland and Leander 2004). This automatic positioning into the expatriate community unites teachers living there. Studying the identity consequences of this positioning is important because identity and “self/group identification have had significant bearing on a full spectrum of human interests, activities, norms, and social structures” (Scholte 1996: 567). Expatriate experiences overseas affect not only their own personal identities but those in multiple countries as well because they communicate and maintain connections that transcend borders and continents.

Teachers overseas quickly find that they live in two worlds, their American world and the new, expatriate world. This is especially true for American teachers moving to South Korea because of what Kapinski refers to as Korea’s collectivist society, where teachers stand out because few minority groups live there (2010: 10). As a consequence, they must navigate anew both their internal and external identities. Verotvec defines “identity” as

“ways in which people conceive of themselves and are characterized by others” (Verotvec 2001: 571). Holland and Leander explain that a person’s *social positioning*, chosen through his/her own agency or given by others, affects these conceptions (2004). Positioning itself is sometimes given and sometimes created based on differences, both perceived and real, posed by cultural and physical boundaries. Boundaries posit differences which in turn become material for identity construction (Scholte 1996).

Returning to the question of expatriate identities, this confrontation with cultural and physical boundaries affects a person’s national identity. If “who we are is where we are from” then American expatriates cannot escape maintaining an American identity even though their experiences of difference may cause them to question its content (Scholte 1996: 571). Scholte explains that national identity is a recent phenomenon resulting from globalization because until around a hundred years ago, people identified themselves primarily with their local communities and then the nation. Globalization can serve to reaffirm identities, as travel abroad can induce some people to cling to their national identities while suppressing other forms of identity by affirming the superiority of one culture and country over another (Scholte 1996: 567-568). However, many individuals “experiencing this world-scale convergence of symbols, actions, norms, and social changes....have found territorially constructed distinctions of self and other to be increasingly artificial and unsatisfactory” causing them to question the concept and validity of national identity (Scholte 1996: 573). This concept of identity and national identity are important to look at because it helps to explain how teachers view themselves and those



around them and it also affects how they navigate the boundaries surrounding them in South Korea.

Another possible framework for understanding these teachers is that of migrant workers. Are these teachers impoverished migrants or “victims of a harsh and unforgiving global capitalist system” (Waters 2009: 637)? While they do maintain contact with people from their homelands, teachers do not resemble traditional migrant workers as discussed by Waters. They are not victims but, rather, active and willing participants in the capitalist system. Could they also be considered what Aiwaha Ong coined transnationals or “the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space?” (1999: 4). Ong focused her research on wealthy Chinese transnationals and their ability to navigate two social worlds at once (1999). However transnationals are often bilingual and can move easily between one culture and another and, while many teachers can move easily between cultures, few are bilingual (Vertovec 2001: 573). They also cannot hold dual passports in South Korea which is another characteristic given to transnationals by researchers (Ong 1999; Dahlin and Hironaka 2008). Because expatriate teachers in particular do not seem to belong to any established groups such as migrants, transnationals, or cosmopolitans it can be argued that Scholte is correct and “what is needed is a third alternative that transcends the stale communitarian-cosmopolitan debate” (1996: 596). I turn to ideas of liminality to construct this 3<sup>rd</sup> alternative.

Turner states that people in liminal states are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” (1969: 95). Teachers in Korea are immediately labeled wayguks or foreigners. They can

never be a part of Korean society; they are distanced from American society and entrenched in an expatriate community that is continually in flux with the comings and goings of teachers. Teachers, in particular first-years, can be viewed as being on an extended paid vacation and do not have to follow the social norms of their home country or Korea. Teachers living in Korea are constantly negotiating between their old lives back home and their new ones in Korea. By navigating boundaries in this in-between state teachers are forced to examine their old lives in comparison to their new one and this causes them to question what “real life” signifies and what it means to live in a globalized world.

### **Blatant Boundaries**

When Tony got off the plane in Seoul, South Korea he realized for the first time that he “really was white” (interview 8/8/2012). When teachers first arrive in Korea, sometimes alone and for some their first trip overseas, differences are immediately apparent. Teachers not only look different but sound different, too. For some teachers like Rachel--who had travelled for over 30 hours and was immediately taken, jetlagged, from the bus station to the school where she would be teaching-- the experience can be completely bewildering. Sounds come from everywhere that American teachers cannot understand. Students yell in the hallways, Korean coworkers chat in the office, people talking sitting or standing beside them in the restaurant, bus or subway and television commercials between English shows on Korean cable, all create an unintelligible hum in the background. New sights include high rise buildings with an abundance of neon lights, temples with statues of Buddha, and palaces. Some parts of Korea are glitzy and glamorous, like the shopping districts filled with designer

stores and grand theaters. Some sights are not so pleasant like garbage in the streets and old broken-down buildings. Artwork including statues, graffiti, and paintings abound. Different smells like fish, sewage, bread, garbage, kimchi, incense, and even bugs swarm the senses. For example beondegi or silk worm larvae have a very distinctive smell that is possible to detect a block away. Walking around anywhere in Korea people are likely to smell grilling meat from galbi restaurants and fried foods from street vendors. The olfactory impact especially struck Pam, a third-year teacher, who refers to all of these as “the smells of Korea.”

Pam, immediately dove in and tried the new foods, learned a few Korean words, and enjoyed the attention foreigners can receive, what they call “rock star” status. “Rock star” status refers to teachers being given special treatment by Koreans including being stared at and spoken to by strangers wanting to practice their English. It also refers to teachers having disposable incomes, something both teachers and Koreans are aware of.

Other teachers need time to adjust to their new surroundings. Foreigners react differently and experience culture shock differently. Tony, a long-term teacher, says he did not suffer from culture shock at all. In fact he says that he suffered more culture shock returning to the United States.

Still as this overview suggests regardless of whether or not foreigners are affected by culture shock, they must all navigate the cultural boundaries around them. Navigating these boundaries causes teachers to compare their present surroundings to their memories of life back home, their conceptions of what life is supposed to look like with how it actually is. Life in Korea extends this examination to teachers’ own personal identity. They have to

establish new practices for living including daily activities but also new conceptual frameworks that help them navigate the new cultural boundaries and make sense of their lives. Teaching in a foreign country is a paid adventure. But adventures are not necessarily smooth journeys and teachers have to learn how to exist in a world where they have to figure out even mundane things such as where to eat.

### **Food Clothes and Housing**

While the types of cultural boundaries teachers may face change over time, interviews suggest teachers never see themselves as completely fitting in. Even those married to a Korean will never look the same, talk the same or act Korean, and in a collectivist society this means that they will always face cultural boundaries. This section focuses on the logistical boundaries teachers encounter in providing for their basic needs in the areas of food, clothing, and housing.

“Everything in Korea tastes different, and I just want a big piece of meat” complained Hugh a first-year teacher in Daegu (field notes 7/1/2012). One of the things that teachers face in Korea includes adjusting to the Korean cuisine. Squid is everywhere. It is possible to eat squid raw, fried, boiled, broiled, grilled, or dried like beef jerky. Dried squid is actually a favorite snack and bar food. Snack foods, in general, often have a seafood flavor added to them like shrimp or octopus flavored chips. Other snacks include kim (dried seaweed slices) and Korean Ramen. Snacks served in schools could be just a broiled potato or eggs. But, it is also possible to eat octopus at every meal. The fermented vegetable dish, kimchi, can sit outside restaurants and homes in trashcans for weeks before people eat it.

Unusual to U.S. ideas of food preparation, outside storage is also used for fish paste which can sit in containers for years.

Many teachers never get used to Korean food, and for vegetarian teachers, the meat and fish based diet is daunting. Luckily for them, there are alternatives. Grocery stores typically sell products like Prego pasta sauce, noodles, salsa, chips, and a variety of cheeses, wines and other products. There is also an abundance of American restaurants including McDonalds. Other American chains in Korea include Outback, Burger King, KFC, and even a Taco Bell in Seoul. Pizza is very popular among both Koreans and foreign teachers. However, some of the pizzas may be a little different than those in the U.S. At Dominos customers can order their pizza with shrimp, sweet potato, or corn. Salads are typically cabbage with corn, ketchup and mayonnaise. At McDonalds, diners can order shrimp burgers or a big mac or a bulgogi burger or a burger marinated in Korean spices served with a sauce on it and shrimp burgers.

Food comprises a central, and much remarked upon, boundary. Chris, a long-term teacher who recently adopted veganism, finds the dietary change ruined his social life. He cannot go out to dinner with his coworkers because it is almost impossible to find vegan dishes at most restaurants in Korea. Chris mainly eats at home or joins occasionally with friends at one of the few vegetarian restaurants in town. If too much meat is an issue for Chris, Hugh complains Korean dishes do not contain enough meat. He cannot get used to eating only small amounts of meat at a time, especially given that small-portioned Western style meals cost more in Korea than back in the U.S. Few dishes, however, inspire the strong feelings associated with kimchi. Sally a first-year and Tony a long-term both detest kimchi.

Tony tried to eat kimchi for the first two years he lived in Korea but now refuses to eat any Korean food from the time he gets off work on Fridays until he goes back on Monday. He forces himself to eat Korean lunches at school (presumably because they are free) but will not touch kimchi. Sally reports disliking Korean food in general, and Hugh has resorted to eating hotdogs on loaf bread to get his meat fix.

Housing is another boundary that all teachers face. In the United States, people are used to having a bathtub or shower separate from the toilet, but not so in Asia. The shower head is typically located above the toilet and a drain is located somewhere in the middle of the floor. While it makes it easy to clean the bathroom, sitting down on the toilet while it is still wet or getting their socks wet because they forgot to put on their shower shoes makes for an unpleasant surprise.

Teachers typically live in studio apartments that include no closets. The studio may contain a desk, TV, a couple of chairs, and a dresser or two. When I worked as a teacher I had the smallest apartment I have ever seen in Korea. There was no room for a chair and could barely contain a bed, one dresser, mini-fridge and clothes washer. Rooms usually have a washing machine but there are no dryers in Korea. People dry their clothes on racks. There are no ovens and the stove typically consists of two stove top burners or hot plates.

Teachers quickly learn that the longer a person lives in Korea, the larger and nicer their house gets. In comparison to the modest studio of my first-year lifestyle, third-year Pam has room enough for a pull-out sofa, bed, and a kitchen with several cabinets, full-sized refrigerator, and even a tiny pull out kitchen table. Third-year Rachel has a one bedroom apartment with a small kitchen but a real double bed and a bedroom door. Long-term Chris

and his wife Lucy on the other hand, have a four bedroom apartment with a large kitchen, living room, office and bedroom. They even have a kitchen table and pets. Another long-term couple, through their various contacts, were able to house sit for over a year in a gigantic western sized apartment because the owner was a professor taking a sabbatical in the United States.

Clothing is another boundary that teachers can either embrace or find difficulties with. One day while waiting for the bus, Hugh and I made a bet about which visible label on shirts we would see the most, Abercrombie or Ralph Lauren. We were having fun with how brand conscious Korean society is. I won with Ralph Lauren. In Korea, it is possible to shop at stores built around globally recognized brands, including Major League Baseball or MLB store, Calvin Klein, Levi, Burberry, and Merrell. But as a third-year foreigner put it, Korean girls all look alike. Korean fashion, like fashion in many places, is about conformity. Most young Koreans dress in what some teachers call a “preppy” style. Older Korean women dress in Ajumma or grandma style. For hiking, a very popular activity in Korea, Koreans all dressed in different versions of the very same hiking outfit. While many cultures dress similarly there may be subsets of the population that dress differently like the gothic or hippie look in America, which is rarely seen in Korea. While this may be changing slightly in Korea with the popularity of pop stars and their varying fashions, Koreans of the same age dress very similar to one another and the clothes in stores vary little from one another.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the popularity of international brands, many average-sized or larger Americans find it difficult to shop in Korea. The labels may be familiar to teachers, but the

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that Koreans and teachers can easily spot Japanese tourists because of how differently and varied they dress.

sizes carried in stores are not. Women larger than size eight may have difficulties finding things to wear. When two teachers who wear American sizes 12 and 16 respectively were shopping at a department store in Seoul, they saw a sign in English claiming bigger sizes were located somewhere in the store. “The fat girl section was located by itself, away from everything else, through a tunnel with fat people pictures on the walls. All of the sales girls were fat, and all the clothes were ugly, frumpy, and what in America people might call dike clothes” (interview 7/15/12). Clothing is such a difficult boundary to manage, the Say Kimchi recruiting web page warns that “sales people may not let you try clothes on” in the stores because they are afraid large-sized westerners will stretch the garments (saykimchirecruiting.com). Female teachers often have certain items, like bras, jeans and tights shipped to Korea from the United States. If clothing is difficult for medium-sized teachers, larger-framed individuals find it impossible to shop in Korea. At 6’ 7” and a hundred pounds more than most Koreans, Tony cannot shop anywhere in Korea (although he guesses that if he really needed something he could get a soldier to purchase clothing for him at a military base). He recalls the most amazing thing about visiting the States after living for three years in Korea was going shopping.

Once teachers have clothes, they must decide what to wear. Women wearing low cut tops are disrespectful in Korean society. Lucy, a Korean woman, back from a year-long trip to North America, gave away clothes she had purchased to friends in Seoul because she considered them too revealing to wear in more conservative Gwangju. In America these same clothes would be considered modest. Women teachers do not always abide by these modesty boundaries. First-year teacher Daisy wears what she wants because it does not



matter to her how low cut they are (interview 6/20/2012). Other teachers like third-year Pam take care not to show off too much skin. She looks forward to returning to America so she can wear her tops that show off her ample bosom. Cultural sensitivity is not her only motivation in Korea; she also does not want to receive unwanted attention from men. A voluptuous woman she does not wear clothing that accentuates her body because she does not want to be called a Russian or prostitute.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding differences in culture is one of the main differences between the three different groups of teachers. While experience certainly makes it easier for third-years and long-terms to navigate everyday boundaries like food, housing, and clothes, the experience can also change teachers' perceptions about how they view themselves and others.

### **Three Groups of teachers:**

Sitting in a dimly lit and smoky bar four of us discussed how long we thought four other female teachers had been living in Korea. Third-year Kate said, "I bet you a drink that those girls are first-years" (field notes 7/2/2012). Intrigued I took the bet and asked Kate how she knew the four girls sitting in the corner of the bar were first-years. "Look at how they are dressed and how young they look" (field notes 7/2/2012). The girls were all dressed very stylishly in high heels while the third-years were wearing more casual attire. Kate explained that after a while foreign women realize they can never compete with the stylish Korean women so they stop bothering to dress fashionably. After introducing ourselves to

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<sup>3</sup> Third-year Rachel and long-term Ray say that Russian is another word for prostitute presumably because of the Russian community which works in the shipyards in Busan, one of the largest in Asia. The "Russian" area in Busan is known for their Russian prostitutes.

the women, all four were indeed first-years and were out for a night on the town and to meet Korean men. They informed us that they were eying two Korean guys nearby. One of the first-years thought they were cute and invited them over to sit with us. Third-year teacher Rachel who teaches English at a high school snickered because she knew the guys were probably around 18 or 19 years old. Rachel was right, the two Korean men were both 19 years old and had just finished high school. Everyone decided that we should all go to a popular restaurant/bar where we uncharacteristically got carded.<sup>4</sup> The legal age to drink in Korea is 19.

Since all the teachers and I had identification we came in and sat down at a table. One of the first-years, asked me to walk around with her to meet Korean men. Intrigued about her methods I accepted her invitation. She headed straight for a table where two Korean men in suits were sitting and surprised them by sitting down without asking permission. This is extremely rude anywhere but in particular Korea where it is more common to be introduced before making such familiar overtures. When the first-year teacher started to ask the men their names when one of the employees working at the door came up to us and in English exclaimed “No! Come here!” Confused we stood up and were literally marched back to where the rest of the equally confused group was sitting. After a jumbled conversation in pieces of English and Korean the few third-years knew, it was determined that one of the Korean men did not have his ID. One of the first-years told the employee that “we are old enough; just kick them out” (field notes 7/2/2012). This did not appease the workers and the Americans and Koreans were all escorted out. The first-year

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<sup>4</sup> This was the only time in fifteen months I was asked for I.D to purchase alcohol or enter an establishment.

teachers were especially upset and caused a bit of a scene yelling and complaining saying “why do we have to leave” and “this is ridiculous” (field notes 7/2/2012). The third-year teachers stayed behind to apologize to the manager for anything the rest of the group including the Korean guys had done.

Officially kicked out and in a less enthused mood we headed to another bar. The first-years wanted to get rid of the Koreans they blamed for their troubles, and the third-years wanted to get rid of the first-years because of their attitude and how they treated the employees at the restaurant. We all however went to a new bar where we easily found a table and ordered beer and munched on the free service of nachos and fries. The third-years had one table and the first-years had the other and the Koreans were in the middle. They were both friendly and eager to speak to all of us in English but as third-year Rachel put it “they were babies!” and subsequently treated them as if they were students asking them questions about their studies and entrance tests to college.

After being at the bar for about an hour in which little communication occurred between the first-years and third-years the two Korean men disappeared. The third-years just thought they had gone to the bathroom but they never came back. When third-year Kate asked the first-years they explained that they had made fun of them by telling them they were too young and ugly to hang out with everyone. The third-years were shocked and refused to talk to the first-years anymore and we all left and went our separate ways. The third-years determined that the first-years were “silly, stupid, a clique, and that they did not know anything about Korea” (field notes 7/2/2012).

As recruiters promise, it is not necessary to learn more than a few words in Korean and only two teachers I have met claim to be fluent. However, as this story illustrates, the third-years do know quite a bit more than the first-years. All three third-years mentioned could read Hangul, the Korean alphabet, and conduct very basic conversations in Korean which helped when dealing with the employees at the restaurant.

More important to this thesis however are the subtle differences between teachers this example highlights. While this incident is in no way a signifier of the majority of first-years' treatment of Koreans it does exemplify a prevailing view. Some Koreans, third-year and long-term teachers believe that some first-years and in particular American teachers simply do not understand Korean culture. As a result the first-years also do not adhere to what many would consider normal American social etiquette including telling invited guests they are ugly and making scenes with restaurant workers. While several factors could play into this, including personality and alcohol intake, in this case when the teachers confronted "the Other" they seemed to believe too much in their "rock star" status and acted superior to Koreans. "I'm American not Korean." While this comment was made by a member of the United States Army stationed in Seoul, it does sum up why many teachers think that they do not have to follow local social conventions and why many informants say first-years in particular do not feel it necessary to follow Korean customs (interview 8/14/2012).

5<sup>th</sup> year college students, is how long-term teacher Tony describes these first-years who feel they are superior to those around them. This has nothing to do with age but with how much life experience a teacher has prior to moving to Korea (interview 8/8/2012). He also explains that it is typical to see them being disrespectful including throwing trash around

and making derogatory comments about Korea or Koreans. While first-year Hugh does not “act like a 5<sup>th</sup> year college student,” he often gives the impression that he is above his surroundings. For instance he is very upset that his Korean coworkers speak in Korean at his school. He thinks they should speak in English, and practice their English by speaking to him. When I asked if he ever tried to speak to them in Korean, he responded “No! It is an English school” (interview 8/10/2012).

First-years also make blunders that a third-year or long-term would not. For instance Hugh made what is called a midnight run, or quitting without his job, telling the school. Hugh mistakenly made his midnight run to a new school in the same city. When his old hogwan found out he had to pay them back for his plane ticket and was docked pay from his new school, which covered the cost. He ended up in Korea living on four hundred dollars a month unable to purchase comfort items like western food or extra blankets. After living there for six months he was very depressed about his situation. Because of his inexperience Hugh did not know how he should best handle being unhappy with his first employment at a hogwan. When Hugh asked others what he could have done he received varying comments. Some said that he should have stuck it out or waited a little longer to see if the problems his co-worker complained about actually happened to him. Everyone said that he should never have accepted another job in the same city!

Frustration over navigating boundaries is not limited to first-years. Third-year Pam was also thinking about making a midnight run but back home. On the morning after I arrived Pam, a third-year, was woken by her landlord, who thought that Pam had already moved out. After an argument in a mix of broken English and Korean, he left and we were

back asleep when the future tenant of the small studio showed up to yell at Pam saying that she would call the police if Pam was not out of her apartment. Pam tried to explain to the woman that she should speak to the landlord because it was difficult for them to communicate because of the language barrier. The woman replied “you should learn” Korean (field notes 6/21/2012). Pam also eventually changed jobs because her boss continually lied to her employees and was constantly late in paying Pam and her other coworkers.

To navigate these problems a long-term foreigner suggests realizing that “Korean logic is sometimes backwards to western logic” something important for a first-year to understand (interview 7/30/12). On the Say Kimchi website it advises teachers wanting to move to Korea to have patience when solving conflicts with Koreans (2012). This is in part because Koreans operate by chains of command. This means that sometimes employees do not do things until their boss tells them to. This can mean, like in Pam’s case, information is not quickly relayed. Another example is hogwan owners suddenly changing a teacher’s schedule and informing him/her only minutes before having to teach a new class. According to Hugh, foreigners who are successful in Korea need to be adaptable, something he thought he was and realized he was not (personal communication 11/10/2012). Teachers are forced to learn how to navigate certain boundaries just to live. Especially in the first-year, teachers cannot help but to compare life in Korea to life back home.

## **Friends Drinking and Dating**

A travel CNN article lists “learn how to drink like a fish” as one of the requirements for living in Korea (Burton 2011). Every weekend Koreans and teachers alike flock to bars and restaurants in cities across Korea. These establishments are where teachers meet friends, lovers, and accrue hangovers that can last for days.

Being successful in Korea means navigating social networks that span continents. One of the anxieties many teachers have in traveling to Korea is how they are going to maintain friends they already have and make new ones. With advances in technology including Skype, Apple phone’s face-time, and social media sites like Facebook, teachers can communicate and even see friends and family back home. But putting thousands of miles between people changes the dynamics of these relationships. For some teachers, absence helps determine who their real friends are based on who keeps in contact with them.

Members of the expat group are generally friendly and helpful to other expats, perhaps because everyone knows what it is like to be a first timer. Making friends is important because friends provide teachers with a support system. This support system of friends helped Tony navigate some of the initial barriers he faced when he first came to Korea, like finding western food and learning how to get around the city. With the constant coming and going of teachers people are continually meeting one another, especially through westerner or foreigner bars. These bars, eateries, and dance clubs are known to cater to English speakers, but even these change periodically. When I asked a long-term foreigner, where to go out he said, “Bubble Bar and Dream used to be the spots, but now there are too many Koreans who do not speak English that go there, so now people go to Dennys”

(interview 8/5/2012). When Hugh came to visit me we went to Bubble Bar and were the only teachers in the place. Since it was during the 2012 Olympics, Hugh had a great time yelling “Korea Gold” and having all the Korean patrons yelling and cheering.

Westerner-owned bars always stay a popular place for teachers and a few English speaking Koreans. These bar owners are typically former English teachers who in Alex’s case, “wanted to do something different, but stay in Korea” (field notes 8/12/2012). Bar workers and restaurant owners can still get work visas. Most of these bar owners are foreign men who have married Korean women. Having a Korean partner makes it easier for them to obtain and fill out the necessary paperwork and make connections for running a business.

Bars are important to social relations in Korea as the alcohol consumption of all foreigners tends to go up upon moving to Korea. As long-term Chris put it “I had to cut back by my third year, my liver just could not take it” (interview 7/14/2012). Chris also said that drinking is how he met people when he first moved to Korea. I was put through my paces several times in the name of participant observation as I tried to keep up with teachers living in Korea. Drinking connects teachers to each other and to their Korean counterparts. Third-year Rachel explained the importance of alcohol this way.

“I am the only foreigner at my school. Many of the teachers there cannot speak English and I cannot speak very good Korean. When we go on retreats or for employee dinners one way we can communicate with one another is to drink alcohol. Alcohol lowers our resistance to trying to speak English or Korean. They think that I am a cool foreigner because I can drink as much as they can. Beer and Soju (Korean alcohol) makes us equals in a way. I am not seen as so different from them. So now, even though we have a language barrier, they will invite me after work to go have dinner and drinks. Without drinking and being part of that social experience in Korea I would have not met the friends both Korean and foreign that I have” (interview 7/12/2012).



On one occasion two first-years and I ended up meeting a university teacher from the United States at a small bar in Daegu. Because we immediately had something in common, being foreigners, we struck up a conversation and ended up singing karaoke at a noreabong (private singing room) until 4:00am. Many restaurants and bars in Korea do not close until 8:00am and it is possible to come out of a bar and be surprised to see daylight. Soju, the traditional cheap liquor in Korea, is sold at convenience stores for about \$1.00 US. Convenience store drinking is a popular pastime for teachers and since there are no open container laws in Korea, people can be found walking around with beer and soju.

Becoming intoxicated can lead to unpredictable behavior including random hook ups between teachers themselves and teachers and Koreans.<sup>5</sup> While many may not find their life partners in Korea, as the Say Kimchi recruiting website mentions, it is possible, and this is especially true between male teachers and Korean women. One third-year said that American men date Korean women much more than American women date Korean men (interview 6/22/2012). While it is not uncommon for couples to choose to come to Korea together to work, most people come alone. According to third-year Rachel, Korean women take all the good foreign men because they are “cute, hairless, tiny, and beautiful. How do most American girls compete with that?”(interview 6/22/2012). All that is left in the foreigner dating pool are the LBHers, or “losers-back-home” and even they eventually find girlfriends (interview 7/12/2012). Losers-back-home is a term for foreigners who are “obviously” socially inept, but find inclusion into social groups in Korea (interview 8/10/2012). They are

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<sup>5</sup> Love motels are a common place for these hook-ups to occur. They are a little cheaper than other places and come stocked with toiletry kits containing toothbrushes, condoms, mouthwash, combs, and other beautifying products. Often they are easy to spot because of their neon signs with the word love or hearts.

accepted because they are foreigners and “rock stars” and share that experience with other foreigners.

However, some women teachers like third-year Kate, love dating Korean men because she finds them attractive. Kate thinks that they are more romantic and attentive than American men. Kate has even purchased a few couple outfits that she proudly has pictures of. Couple outfits are matching unisex clothes, shoes, and accessories that romantic partners wear to express their commitment to one another.<sup>6</sup> Others find dating Korean men unsatisfying. “Metrosexual” is the word that Rachel uses to describe Korean men. Korean men may want to carry their girlfriend’s purse or wear matching outfits which is different for many western women and according to Rachel, “that’s okay, but I like big strong men” (interview 6/20/2012).

Tony with his 6’7” frame is a big strong man, but he wants to date Korean women. However he finds dating Korean women difficult because they are scared of him (interview 8/8/2012). Lucy, a Korean teacher married to a long-term teacher, often gives dating advice to her teacher friends dating Koreans. She advises women to date the youngest son because it is the eldest son who must be a “slave to her mother-in-law” (interview 7/15/2012). She pities her own sister-in-law and rejoices that she married a foreign man.

Koreans who enter relationships with teachers also have difficulties navigating dating boundaries. Lucy also gives dating advice to her Korean women friends who want to date foreigners. One time one of her friends was upset because an American she had recently started seeing did not call her every day. Lucy told her this was common dating etiquette for

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<sup>6</sup> Not all Koreans find this attractive. According to Lucy couple outfits are “stupid.”

western men. Lucy also says that she used to watch American porn to understand western sexual behavior. According to Hugh American porn is different than Korean porn explaining that in Korea “there is a lot of rape porn always on” (interview 8/10/2012). Korean porn tends to show women in submissive positions and appearing to be in pain.

Marriage to Koreans further changes the boundaries teachers must navigate. A cross-cultural marriage can make everyday living easier for westerners. Lucy orders takeout for her household, which is something most westerners are envious of because few can speak enough Korean to order the food and give directions to their home. When I lived in Korea I did not even know my own address. Being able to order takeout is something long-term Robert, who is fluent in Korean, said distinguished him from short-term foreigners. Lucy also takes care of the paperwork and bills, deals with the landlord, and knows where to purchase and haggle for the cheapest and freshest vegetables at the local market. Chris happily states that dating and marrying Lucy has completely changed how he lives in Korea including the size of his house.

Being married also changes how teachers in Korea are treated as well. Long-term teacher Anna received more respect from Koreans when she got married to a fellow teacher and gained even more when she had a child. Anna came back to Korea with the intentions of having her first child there because the cost of health care is cheaper than in America. Teacher couples with children often find themselves interacting more with Koreans. Parents commonly interact while taking their child to daycare or having Korean Ajummas (older married Korean women) stop to admire and talk to their children.

Long-term university teacher Bob and his Korean wife resemble some typical Korean relationships. In one week I saw Bob at the bar every time I went out to conduct interviews. When I asked him about his wife he explained that “she did not care” and would spend time with her mother and friends (interview 8/8/2012). This is similar to the dynamics between many Korean couples where husbands may go out for multiple business dinners a week.<sup>7</sup>

Because of Korean culture women teachers often find they are crossing gender boundaries when interacting with Koreans. Before I came to Korea, my father was warned by his friend from Taiwan that I should go somewhere else because women were not treated as equals in Korea. While this statement was not correct there is a gender bias that exists in Korea. Korean women are expected to fulfill the domestic duties of the household and men are considered the dominant partner in the relationship. Rachel complains that while many Korean men are hot and sweet, many also want women to call them Opah or “big brother,” a term of respect which does not mesh well with her ideas of gender equality (interview 6/22/2012).

This view of women could be a reason why there are few single women who stay in South Korea for more than four years. I met only one in the almost 15 months I lived in Korea. She lived in Seoul and taught art at an international school. Even if women are married, they typically want to return to the United States to raise a family. Long-term Anna and her American husband had their first-child in Korea, but she wanted her son to know his extended family so they moved back to Tennessee. This long-term couple, however,

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<sup>7</sup> This observation comes from participant-observation experience living with a Korean couple in 2009 and from speaking with married Korean coworkers in 2010 and conversations with Lucy and other foreigners in 2012.

remained connected to Korea and continued to operate their English teacher recruitment website and started a Mexican-Korean food truck business in the United States. They stayed in the states for a couple of years but have since returned to Korea with their son. Shena a long-term teacher and her husband Jimmy are anxious to return to the United States. Though she hates Korea, she stays because her Nigerian husband owns and operates an import export business in Korea. They are leaving when he obtains the difficult-to-get American visa. She is determined to move back to the States to be closer to her family. This gender division is the main reason long-term Tony claims he will never date an American woman, because “they want to go home to their mothers” (interview 8/8/2012). Having friends and romantic partners can affect how well teachers navigate both Korean and expatriate culture. These relationships form the support networks teachers have in Korea.

### **Financial and Support Networks**

Having friends or romantic partners and being financially stable form the support networks teachers need to be successful in Korea. While first-year Ashley had several teacher friends it was just not the same as her family. When analyzing Facebook content from various informants I saw that first-years talk most often with friends and family back home. Their Facebook posts might include things such as “I miss my family” or “the game is on tonight! I hate I am missing it.” Their friends and family post messages such as “I miss you son” and “come home soon, be safe.” But as time passes more comments from friends in Korea start appearing. At first the comments are typically from other teachers and Koreans start leaving messages on their walls. By the third year the posts are mainly from family and

friends in South Korea with occasional messages from friends back home. They comment on pictures or funny posts but most of the information being shared is between people in Korea. Some teachers have posts and friends from people from all over the world. These are typically friends whom they have met while in Korea and with whom they still keep in touch. One long-term teacher lived in South Korea for seven years and is currently living in Ecuador still teaching English. He never wants to return to live in America because it is “just not for him” (Facebook message 1/12/2013). He has an extensive friend list and communicates frequently with people from all over the world, but very few from where he is actually from. Other foreigners who have been living in South Korea for years may not have as many international friends, the main people they speak to being close friends who still live in Korea.

Support from family and friends varies and makes a difference in how long someone stays in Korea. One third-year never felt pressure from her parents to move home. They were proud of her and wanted her to be happy and see the world. Rachel’s parents at one point told her that there were no jobs back home and to stay put in Korea for a while. Hugh’s parents, however, send him complaining messages about how much they miss him. He once got a phone call from his father’s girlfriend who was freaking out because his dad was having chest pains, Hugh was exasperated “what am I supposed to do? I am in Korea! Why did you call me?” Tony’s dad still cannot believe his son has not come home yet and at one point was refusing to send him packages that Tony had already paid for. However, his father’s unhappiness has no effect on him as he vehemently proclaims he is never returning home.

Personal relationships are not the only support networks for teachers. Others include clubs for both Koreans and teachers, like the Gwangju running club or a group of teachers in Gwangju who play fantasy football. Many churches also offer English services. In Seoul, due to the large expatriate population, there are many activities and organizations teachers can join including quiz night at the local English pub. These events or clubs are typically started and maintained by third-years or long-terms. These support networks can serve as long-term's and some third-year's primary support group while others still keep their friends and family back home as their primary support networks.

Receiving enough financial support is another concern teachers have. Some teachers do not feel that they have enough financial security to be able to stay in Korea. Employment there does not meet their definition of success because they lack the ability to move upwards. While advancement is possible for foreign English teachers in South Korea, they will always be considered outsiders and not as respected as other teachers. Language barriers also keep teachers from holding important positions within their respective schools. While they may receive decent compensation they can never make career advancements in Korea that could be possible in teaching or in their field of study elsewhere. The very high paying jobs in education are hard to get and offer little job security. Many teachers also realize after teaching that they prefer other employment; alternative jobs are not in abundance in Korea. But almost all informants interviewed listed making money as one of the main incentives for teaching English in South Korea. As listed previously monetary incentives is one of the main draws to recruiting teachers.

These support systems create either positive or negative experiences for teachers in Korea. For some teachers constantly living in two worlds is too difficult and may be one of the reasons they choose to leave. Others leave because they want more financial options. For other teachers they find balance navigating between two social worlds and economic hindrances. This balance helps to entrench teachers further into the expatriate lifestyle.

### **Real Life**

On a hot humid day in Seoul three teachers were listening to a mixture of music blaring from stores and Korean women with microphones were enticing people to come into their stores. Third-year Rachel was shopping for face cream. After shopping the three went to a Korean friend's restaurant to have lunch and a few drinks. At the restaurant the teachers were greeted by the owner and given free service consisting of nuts and cheese<sup>8</sup> (with more cheese than crackers) artfully arranged on a plate. After ordering burgers, fries, and two pitchers of sangria their discussion veered towards what they were going to do that night. The conversation that ensued is typical for this group of women. "What are we eating, drinking, and perhaps eating again?" Friends since 2009, they all originally lived in Gwangju, a less populated city four hours south of Seoul. Pam and Kate lived there for two years before coming to Seoul for their last year. They moved because they wanted to experience Seoul before they left. Seoul is more diverse, larger and "more everything." Rachel had opted to move to an area considered "the country" by Koreans, with a population near 700,000. Now a high school teacher, at a top rated private high school, she makes more

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<sup>8</sup> Almost every informant (besides vegans) said that eating a variety of cheese was one of the main things they missed about America.



than most teachers. These three friends spend almost every weekend together in Jeonju, Seoul, or traveling together to other areas in Korea. Their focus for these weekends is to eat, drink, be merry, and see as much of Korea as possible before they leave.

Rachel is leaving because she feels that it is time to do something else and she wants to get her ESL teaching certificate. Already fluent in Spanish and conversant in Korean, she hopes to continue teaching ESL after realizing how much she enjoys teaching in Korea. Pam is leaving because she is a little bored with Korea, wants to eat cheese,<sup>9</sup> and because her parents want her to “grow up.” Kate is really leaving because the other girls are leaving and because it is time to start “real life” she jokes. These women are single in their late twenties and have decided that they need to start fresh either back home or somewhere new.

This concept of what is real comes up so often in discussions with teachers living in Korea it merits particular attention. After living in Korea for a year, Rachel feels that Korea does become “real life”, or just life. When she went home for the first time after living in Korea for a year, she brought many gifts and pictures for her family. She wanted to share her adventures with everyone. “There is a sense of surrealism about it especially when talking with people back home because they just do not understand” (interview 7/25/2012). Her friends and family just do not understand why she would want to leave everything familiar to live in another country with strangers, especially Asia which is somewhere she could never really fit in. Life in Korea is very different than teachers’ lives back home. But after this first trip home, Rachel no longer brought as many gifts, and she had fewer stories of things that were exciting and different. Her family no longer questioned what she was doing

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<sup>9</sup> Almost every informant (besides vegans) said that eating a variety of cheese was one of the main things they missed about America.

because living abroad wasn't that "big of a deal anymore" to her or her family, they had accepted it as her life (interview 7/25/2012).

On another Saturday a similar conversation occurred while sitting at a mini-stop convenience store drinking Budweiser's with Bruce and Melinda, first-years, who came to Korea as a couple for the adventure. They explained that living in Korea was not "real life" and this was the reason they were leaving. Melinda wants to start "real life" by having careers they both enjoy, buying a house, and eventually starting a family. She feels that she cannot do this in Korea devoid of all that is familiar including friends, family, and American culture. While Bruce did not seem to care where he lived, he wanted to make her happy and was comfortable with the idea of settling down. They had both come to Korea directly from university and neither had ever had a real job or a career that offered advancement, security and retirement benefits. For Bruce coming to Korea was delaying having a real career and a "real life" and he enjoyed having a break before starting that next chapter in life.

For first-year Heather living in Korea is not "real life" because it is not where she plans on leaving her money. It is also not "real life" because it is not where her main support networks are and because teachers will never truly fit in or in her estimation succeed. When broached with the question is living in Korea "real life," another first-year teacher who recently moved back home, said that to her "living in Korea was not "real life." Yes, I worked and lived there, but that life was only temporary...we got to do whatever we wanted on the weekends with no responsibilities" (Facebook message 2/20/2013). When presented with the topic of living in Korea being real or not, long-term teacher Chris laughed and wondered what isn't real about it? Chris has been living in Korea for over six years and is

married to a Korean woman. Both of them are English teachers, although Chris makes twice as much as Lucy at the same company because he is a native English speaker.<sup>10</sup> Chris has no intentions of ever returning home and has plans of obtaining a master's degree in ESL online to further his career.

Each of these examples represents how being taken out of familiar circumstances can change a person's outlook on what "real life" is supposed to look like. While first-years planning on returning home see Korea as a learning experience, an adventure, and time well spent, they do not see themselves living there in the future. They do not think they can make plans there or go to the next step in life. For the third-years they see Korea as life for right now but are ready for something else but again that next step cannot happen in Korea. It is possible that if any of the three female third-years had a significant other, either Korean or foreigner, this could change how they envisioned their futures. As Rachel put it, "we are not getting any younger but the foreigners coming here are" (interview 6/22/2012).

Chris represents how living in Korea can be "real life" with real plans for the future. Many long-term teachers go back in school or consider obtaining a master's degree in order to make more money. Chris is planning on purchasing an apartment in Seoul when they have enough money. Long-term Ryan is taking Korean lessons which will help him be a better teacher because he can explain things in Korean. Learning Korean has also increased his students' respect for him since many teachers never bother to learn the language.

By constantly comparing Korea to what they feel is better back home, first-years can affirm their national identities but also maintain the idea that Korea is not "real life". Third-

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<sup>10</sup> This is a bone of contention for Chris's wife, Lucy, who speaks excellent English.

year teachers do not overlook the differences between their culture and Korean culture, but they are more successful navigating these boundaries and decide they want to stay longer whether to “delay real life” or to gain more experience living in a foreign country. They enjoy the friends they have met, enjoy exploring, enjoy being “rock stars” and enjoy the feeling of liminality that comes from living between worlds. They create support networks and friendships that span continents. However many of these teachers feel that they cannot go on to the next step in life in Korea. They do not see getting married, having children, or advancing their careers in an Asian country. These points prevent them from seeing their time in Korea as “real life.”

However some teachers make Korea both their “real life” and their home. Their primary support group becomes other people in Korea, either through marriage or friendships. They form tight knit expat communities and, although the people in these communities may change, the importance of it does not. Some of these teachers just enjoy the feeling of living between worlds and distancing themselves from the rat race. In a way, having few employment opportunities in South Korea is a liberating experience. There are fewer choices to make and less room for disappointment and failure. Long-term teachers are removed from the politics of their home countries, and they do not pay taxes to their home countries. While it is impossible to remove one’s nationality in Korea, and most teachers still identify themselves with things from their home countries, they are in effect removing themselves from it indefinitely.

## **Discussion**

In the introduction I suggested that these teachers are responding to the American economy and to an increasingly globalized world. The evidence for this is not always apparent in the interview data because teachers self-consciously position themselves as global workers. However, given the limitations of this interpretation as more suggestive than conclusive, it makes sense to place these teachers in the global structure. I argue that, by leaving “real life” in the United States, these teachers are responding to the difficult and monotonous economic conditions there, especially since the economic downturn in 2008. Long-terms themselves mention the rapid increase of foreign teachers over the past decade and feel that this trend will continue.

Teachers come to Korea because they want something different, an adventure that employment in America does not offer. By taking this hiatus from the expected route of college, career, retirement, teachers are taking control over how they fit into the capitalist system. Since they are not contributing to the financial well-being of the American government, companies or stores they are removing themselves from it completely at least for the time that they are in Korea. With the continued economic crisis and demand in Asia and other parts of the world for native-speaking English teachers these new groups of expatriates deserve to be studied to understand better the future of our globalized and increasingly interconnected world.

Stories about negotiating cultural boundaries and what “real life” is suggests that U.S. teachers in Korea situate their time there as almost a coming-of-age. Many decide to go to Korea because they feel that they have to prove to themselves that they can live abroad on

their own, and they must live in a global setting to do that. This seeking of a personal experience entails identity transformations including becoming more patriotic or abandoning or shifting allegiances from their home countries to the global world or expat communities. Some teachers decide that they want “real life” which for them is defined by houses, marriages and climbing the economic or social ladder. For third-years this coming-of-age is a little different because they have not pinned down what “real life” means for them yet they just realize that, for them, it is just not in Korea. Others decide that their identity as an adult represents something else that is not constrained by following the ideal, middle class life of college followed by marriage, house, babies, and retirement.

Long-term teachers do not want to be involved in climbing the social or career ladder. They want to be removed from the capitalist system back home where, in light of the current recession, they may have to struggle to find employment. They do not see themselves as just another grunt working at an office making little and having their money taken away by taxes in the United States, rent, car payments, insurance, and everything else they do not have to pay in Korea. These teachers may also feel that they fit better in this world of “others.” Long-term Robert, who had never felt like he fit in anywhere until he came to live in Korea, has made Korea his home and his “real life” (interview 7/2/2012).

While it cannot be addressed in depth in this thesis it is important to note that crossing boundaries is not only difficult for teachers but Koreans as well. Teachers navigating the cultural and social boundaries in Korea can also influence Korean society. In 2009 it was very rare to see Korean women smoking in public. They smoked in bathrooms, alleyways and dimly lit bars; however, this trend is now changing. In 2012 it is possible to see Korean

women smoking in public, although most still hide the fact that they smoke. Third-year Rachel, who smokes in public, claims that this is because of foreigner women's influence. She smokes in public because it is something Koreans expect of foreigners and are not shocked by. While teacher influence alone is not the sole cause of this changing trend, it does speak to the idea that teachers think they have some amount of influence on the local population. Another contributing factor to this trend would be globalization itself.

Koreans also think that teachers are affecting Korean culture. In July 2012 a video was released that caused controversy between Koreans and teachers. Produced in English by Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation, the video bashed male foreigners who prey on helpless Korean women and leave them with AIDS, and possibly pregnant.<sup>11</sup> This video was warning Koreans about the detrimental effects of becoming seduced by and too entrenched in expatriate lifestyles. Other anti-foreigner groups believe that enough Koreans now speak English to make continuing to hire native English speakers pointless. Many Koreans point out that most foreign teachers are not trained in pedagogy, party all the time, and care little about actually teaching their pupils (Na 2012). Lucy agrees with this statement saying that only trained teachers or those who are knowledgeable about Korean culture and history should be allowed to teach English in Korea (interview 7/15/2012).

While many foreigners were angry about the video that was shared via Facebook, long-term teacher Robert who is fluent in Korean, complained that no one should be making a big deal about the video because these come out all the time. The controversy was caused

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<sup>11</sup> This video was criticized by both foreigners and Koreans because of its questionable facts. Another Korean video in English, made by CBS, went viral parodying the MBC video by using made up statistics to talk about Korean men's penis size.

because it was broadcast in English. While the video was definitely over the top, it does bring up the tensions that exist between Koreans and the foreigner population. Some restaurants, particularly those around military bases, will not accept foreign credit cards, and some bars ban foreigners from entering. Third-year Kate and her Korean friends were not allowed to enter a bar in an area outside Seoul because she was a foreigner. Some of these tensions have arisen because of rape allegations against military men and overall changes western influence is having on Korean culture.

English teachers living overseas are a group of people which has received little attention from anthropologists. They are a fascinating group that represents the world-wide changes being caused by globalization and the economic downturn. Even if these teachers move home after one or two years they are still bringing experiences that affect their identities and how they view the world around them, which in turn affect those back home. These teachers are also impacting Korean culture and this is just another way that globalization is affecting local cultures.

This study also has implications for employers looking to hire native English speakers who will be successful in Korea and as teachers at their schools. While a more in-depth study is required, it seems that teachers in their mid-twenties or older navigate boundaries more successfully than teachers who come to Korea directly after having obtained their bachelor's degree. This is because, as previously mentioned, teachers who have more life experiences are more mature, and therefore navigate boundaries more successfully than those who have maybe never held a real job before. It is not possible to accurately place these teachers into any established category. While most literature suggests that migrants are



impoverished and disenfranchised and cosmopolitans are privileged globe trotters, teachers do not seem to fit in either category.

### **Limitations**

Finally, it is worth mentioning, some limitations of this research including its focus primarily on bar going teachers. While this is the predominant teacher group in Korea, there are other avenues for meeting people including clubs such as running clubs, book clubs and English language churches all of which are attended by Koreans fluent in English. However, as Chris put it, drinking is “how you meet people” (interview7/14/2012).

Another limitation is the small number of primary informants. While I garnered a lot of information by talking with strangers on the streets and bars, I only conducted ten formal interviews. For a more complete picture of teacher life in Korea, additional informants should be interviewed. Also it would be helpful to have a greater understanding of why people come to Korea to begin with. What separates the people who come to Korea because they are bored, need employment and want adventure from people who have those feelings back in the United States and choose to change cities or jobs but not move abroad? What is it about the personalities of teachers that motivate them to move across the world? There are similarities because, as various informants have pointed out, teachers in Korea all have something in common because they all made the choice to live overseas as teachers in Asia.

Another topic to be considered is the role that race plays in the hiring and overall experience of teachers living in Korea. Tony explained that one school he worked for previously was getting ready to hire another teacher and asked for his input. He really liked

one candidate, who was 26 and African American, because she had a very impressive resume and was religious, something he thought his boss would like. Instead, his boss hired another woman, a 22 year old who was blond with blue eyes who had never held a real job before.

Another teacher, who is African American, explained that the only reason she got the job she had in Korea was because she did not send a picture of herself during the hiring process, and her employers were very surprised by her appearance when she arrived in Korea.

Since this thesis is written based on only ten weeks of field research much could come to light from additional study. My emic and etic perspective for this study was helpful, for understanding the process first-year teachers undergo and in my data analysis. This would not have been possible without the help of and support from all the previous and new contacts I made while in Korea and their ability to continuously answer my questions and share their tiny apartments with me.

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