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BAKALÁRSKA DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCA

**Western foreigners experiencing South Korean company culture: An evaluation of
non-fictional expatriate literature**

Západní cudzinci zažívajúci juhokórejskú firemnú kultúru: Hodnotenie cudzineckej
literatúry faktu

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Prehlásenie

Prehlasujem, že som bakalársku diplomovú prácu vypracovala samostatne a uviedla všetky použité pramene a literatúru.

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Annotation

This thesis investigates accounts of the experience of working in a company environment as a Western foreigner in South Korea. It provides a short overview of the history of Westerners living and working in Korea until the present and then focuses on the situation after the millennium when more and more foreigners have started coming to Korea for work reasons. The main part of the thesis explores and reviews observations presented in non-fictional expatriate literature. Guidebooks on Korean working culture and etiquette serve as points of reference.

Keywords

Westerners, foreign population, expatriation, South Korea, company culture, Korean culture

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Anotácia

Táto práca sa zaoberá skúmaním popisov skúseností s prácou vo firemnom prostredí v Južnej Kórei z pohľadu Západných cudzincov. Poskytuje krátky prehľad histórie Západných cudzincov žijúcich a pracujúcich v Kórei až po súčasnosť, a následne sa zameriava na situáciu po miléniu, kedy do Kórey začalo prichádzať čoraz viac cudzincov z pracovných dôvodov. Hlavná časť práce skúma a zhodnocuje pozorovania prezentované v cudzineckej literatúre faktu. V práci je odkazované aj na príručky o kórejskej pracovnej kultúre a etikete.

Kľúčové slová

Západní cudzinci, populácia cudzincov, expatriácia, Južná Kórea, firemná kultúra, Kórejská kultúra

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor, Dr. Andreas Schirmer, for his help, valuable advice and patience throughout my writing of this thesis. My appreciation also goes out to my family and close friends for their encouragement and support all through my studies.

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Transcription

When romanizing Korean, I follow the rules of the McCune-Reischauer romanization system. In case of names that are universally used or personal names, commonly used form of transcription is used instead of McCune-Reischauer romanization. (For example – Seoul instead of Sŏul.)

1. Introduction

In the era of economic globalization, migration of skilled labor across countries and continents is a natural phenomenon with South Korea¹ being no exception. Many Korean companies have been hiring Western foreign employees in recent years with the intention to globalize the company, bring in divergent thinking or use the employees' knowledge to complete specific assignments. Western foreigners who come to Korea due to work are, however, facing various challenges when adjusting to the new environment at work and beyond. Cultural differences are challenging them in simple day-to-day activities, such as eating out or socializing, and are also reflected in the workplace, work ethics and values.

Many Westerners coming to Korea to work in the office environment feel the need to share their experience, especially with the other foreigners who may follow in their footsteps. Due to this, numerous interviews, articles and novels talking about their experience are coming out – something I refer to as non-fictional expatriate literature in this thesis. I observed that there are, indeed, many common themes emerging in the mentioned accounts. Being a student of Korean for Business and Commerce who would like to experience working in a Korean company one day, I find its contents very interesting and worth looking into more closely.

In this thesis, I aim to investigate and review observations on working in the Korean office environment written from a Westerner's point of view. For a clearer understanding of the situation, it is important to know how the relationship between Korea and the West has evolved in the past. Therefore, I will, first of all, present a brief outline of the history of Westerners in Korea until the present times. I will then progress with a closer look at what I call the genre of expatriate literature. Finally, I will get into the main objective of exploring the contents of my selection of accounts that represent samples of the experience of Western ex-pats working in a Korean company environment. My focus is on the repeatedly surfacing matters and motifs in these accounts. As for a practical side-effect of my investigations, readers of this thesis can hence acquaint themselves with some of the challenges and downsides Westerners might face while working in a Korean office environment but also with the possible positive experiences.

¹ Henceforth Korea.

1.1. Methodology

In this thesis, I work with different accounts, such as novels, articles, interviews, and guidebooks centered especially on the working but also general living experience in Korea from a perspective of a Western foreigner.

While searching for a sample of literature, I made sure to check that evaluated accounts meet the following conditions:

1. Accounts are **non-fictional**. Although there are many fictional stories written based on real experience, for the purpose of this thesis I work with non-fictional literature only.
2. Accounts are **published over the last two decades**. I take the millennium as the outset of this study.
3. The author/interviewee is:
 - a. Someone whom I define as a **long-term resident**. I exclude literature written by sojourners (so-called travelogues).
 - b. Someone who works in an **office company environment**. This results in the exclusion of numerous accounts written about the teaching experience of Westerners in Korea.
 - c. Someone who is considered a **Westerner**² in a general sense.

I would like to mention that my requirements have been slightly modified before they reached the above-presented structure. At first, I aimed at evaluating officially published literature only, but because I did not find the sample sufficient, I decided to prioritize provided information over the form. Therefore, blog articles and interviews have been included in my evaluation as well.

² In this work, I use the term ‘Westerner’ and ‘Western Foreigner’ in a general sense, therefore, to refer to nationals of Northern America – USA and Canada, European, and Australasian countries – Australia and New Zealand. I have not followed the division by geographic relevance but a historical one, where Australasian countries are considered to be Western nations because of their European colonial origin, and Latin America is often considered to have its own civilizational world different from the Western one.

Eventually, the following accounts were chosen:

Year of publication	Collector / Interviewer	Author / Interviewee	Type	Title
2004	Richard Harris	Brian*, David* ³	Interview	Faces of Korea: The Foreign Experience in the Land of the Morning Calm
2010–11	Steven Bammel, Tom Tucker	Linda Myers, Didier Chenneveau, Tom Brown, David Dollinger	Interview	The Korea Business Interviews Series
2011	Sarah Green Carmichael	Linda Myers	Article	Crucible: The Would-Be Pioneer
2013–16	-	Michael Kocken	Blog	The Sawon (selected articles)
2014–15	The Wall Street Journal	Anonymous Female Employee	Newspaper column	Office Outsider (a series of 7 articles)
2016	-	Frank Ahrens	Novel	Seoul Man: A Memoir of Cars, Culture, Crisis, and Unexpected Hilarity Inside a Korean Corporate Titan ⁴
2017	-	Brian M. Williams	Novel	Stranger in a Stranger Land: My Six Years in Korea ⁵

Table 1 – List of evaluated literature

After carefully going through the selection, I chose eight common topics that were discussed by most of the ex-pats in the sample. Each topic represents one chapter in the second part of my thesis.

Some important questions for the second part are the following: What are the common problems Westerners face while working in Korea? What Korean practices do they find unusual or surprising? Are the descriptions of their experience very similar? Or, otherwise, to which degree can we find a plurality of descriptions and assessments? Is there a cultural background to these issues that the authors may have failed to understand? Could their opinions be biased in any way? I do not intend to exhaustingly answer all these questions, rather let them become a supporting structure when unfolding my findings in the second part of the thesis.

Despite narrowing the sample of accounts that form the basis of this thesis, several limitations need to be taken into consideration. I work with different types of accounts, which means the ideas are presented differently. Some authors explain their background and journey leading them to Korea, while others mention almost no information about themselves and go straight into talking about their experience. Besides that, not all ex-

³ The full name of the two interviewees was not revealed.

⁴ Henceforth Seoul Man.

⁵ Henceforth Stranger in a Stranger Land.

pats express their opinions on all the selected topics, which creates less room for comparison of their observations.

2. History of Westerners in Korea

2.1. Korea as the “Hermit Kingdom”

The term “Hermit Kingdom” is often used when talking about Korea during Chosŏn Dynasty. It started to appear in Western literature roughly around the 19th century and became more widely used after the release of the book *Corea: The Hermit Kingdom* by William Elliot Griffis in 1882.

Chosŏn’s policy of isolationism was especially significant during the unofficial rule of king Kojong’s father – Hŭngsŏn Taewŏn’gun⁶ (usually referred to as “the” Taewŏn’gun). He ruled the country for the first ten years after his son’s enthronement, since at that time, Kojong was too young to take on full royal responsibility. Witnessing China’s loss in the Opium Wars, Taewŏn’gun became warier of Westerners and wanted to isolate the country from all foreign forces except for China.⁷ This policy helped to protect Korean culture from unwanted foreign influence, but at the same time, might have delayed the development and modernization of the country.

Some voices are opposing this out-of-the-ordinary title. At the World Congress of Korean studies in 2006, Professor Jeong Su-il argues that “Korea was called the hermit kingdom out of ignorance.”⁸ Harsh isolationist policies in late Chosŏn took only a short period of time in comparison to the whole Korean history. He tries to shed light on the mixed origin of Korean names and Chosŏn scholars’ admiration and acceptance of Western teachings.⁹ There are also many pieces of evidence proving that Arab-Muslims were living on the Korean peninsula way back during the Silla, Koryŏ, and early Chosŏn periods.¹⁰

But whatever Chosŏn’s long-term policy was, the geographical position might have played its role in making the country a little more isolated than the others. Also, most of its contact with other nations was of negative nature, whether it was with Mongolians, Japanese, or Manchurians. Even their allies often ended up victimizing and using Korea

⁶ A title granted to the father of a sitting king, who himself was not a king before.

⁷ David W. Kim, *Daesoon Jinrihoe in Modern Korea: The Emergence, Transformation and Transmission of a New Religion* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), 16.

⁸ Jeong Su-il, “[Keynote Speech] The World Inside Korea. How Have We Communicated with the World?” *The Review of Korean Studies* 10, no. 2 (2007): 191.

⁹ Jeong, “The World Inside Korea,” 193, 197–199.

¹⁰ Lee Hee Soo, “1,500 Years of Contact between Korea and the Middle East,” *Middle East Institute*, June 7, 2014.

and its people for their own benefit.¹¹ Taking this into consideration, the term hermit kingdom is easily accepted by many.

In recent years, however, this name is quite often used as a synonym for North Korea. North Korea is diplomatically and culturally isolated, and after imposed US sanctions and drastic measures due to the coronavirus pandemic has a more closed economy than ever before.¹²

2.2. First Westerners in Korea

Although the states of East Asia generally maintained a policy of limited contact with outsiders, compared to China and Japan, Korea has only a small number of recorded contacts with Westerners prior to the 19th century.

Naming a few of them, the earliest is from the 1580s when an unknown Western sailor was found on the Korean coast. Because no one could communicate with him, he was quickly dispatched to China.¹³

A few years later, during the Japanese invasion in 1593, Spanish Jesuit priest Gregorio Céspedes came to Chosŏn to do missionary work. There is no evidence that he directly interacted with Koreans, but we can say he was the first recorded Western missionary coming to Korea.¹⁴

Around the year 1627, a crew of several Dutch people arrived on the Korean Peninsula. One of them, Jan J. Weltevree, later took the Korean name Pak Yŏn and became an important government official. He even married a Korean woman who gave him two children.¹⁵

But the most famous Westerner who arrived in Korea before the 19th century was Hendrick Hamel. In 1653, the ship “De Sperwer” arrived on Cheju Island with him and his crewmates. They were forbidden to leave the country but got the freedom to live normal lives in Korean society.¹⁶ After 13 years, Hamel escaped to Japan where he wrote about his experience. His records were published in 1668 as *Hamel’s Journal and a Description of the Kingdom of Korea, 1653–1666*, which made him the first Westerner to provide a voluminous account of Chosŏn Korea.

¹¹ Thomas L. Coyner and Jang Song-hyon, *Doing Business in Korea: An Expanded Guide* (Seoul: Seoul Selection Press, 2010), Location No. 672, Kindle.

¹² “North Korea is lonelier than ever,” *The Economist*, October 22, 2020.

¹³ Andrei Lankov, “(572) First Westerners in Korea,” *The Korea Times*, February 9, 2012.

¹⁴ Yu Chai-shin ed., *The Founding of Catholic Tradition in Korea* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 141.

¹⁵ Henny Savenije, “Jan Janse Weltevree,” *Hendrick Hamel*, Accessed January 21, 2021.

¹⁶ Brother Anthony Taizé and Robert Neff, comps. eds., *Brief Encounters: Early Reports of Korea by Westerners* (Seoul: Seoul Selection, 2016), 33.

Whenever foreigners tried to get into contact with Chosŏn during this period, they were met with mistrust and, in most cases, dispatched away as quickly as possible.¹⁷

2.3. Western Missionaries

Besides curious explorers, many missionaries started entering Chosŏn in the middle of the 19th century. They became an important part of the Western community. Before the gates of Chosŏn officially opened, twelve French Catholic missionaries arrived in the 1840s, but nine of them were captured and executed together with about 10,000 converted Korean Catholics. The crackdown on Catholics happened all under the orders of the Taewŏn'gun.¹⁸

A few years after the Kanghwa treaty (1876) was signed, the ban on Christianity was lifted. In 1884, the first official missionary – Horace Newton Allen entered Korea, later followed by many others. Most of the incoming missionaries were Protestants and came from the United States, inspired by America's Revival Movement.¹⁹ They built many facilities such as schools and hospitals. For example, one of the most prestigious Korean universities today – Ewha Womans University, evolved from Ewha school founded in 1886 by an American Mary F.B. Scranton. She was a widow who came to Korea with her missionary son.²⁰

Nevertheless, especially in the beginning, upper-class Koreans viewed missionaries and Westerners in general as troublemakers and even accused them of having a colonial mindset.²¹ Younghill Kang described two types of Western missionaries – one that was educated and sincere and one that came to Korea only to live cheaply and enjoy superiority over poor Korean people.²²

2.4. Westerners in Korea between 1910–2000

After Japan annexed Korea in 1910, the Japanese did not intend to make it any easier for Korea's Westerners. The regime slowly increased pressure on their businesses in an attempt to eliminate foreign competition and force them out of the colony. As Clark

¹⁷ Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 87.

¹⁸ "French campaign against Korea 병인양요 [pyŏngin yang'yo]," *Stories Preschool*, Accessed April 12, 2022.

¹⁹ Kim Sang-Hwan, "The impact of early Presbyterian missionary preaching (1884–1920) on the preaching of the Korean church," *Theses and Dissertations (Comprehensive)*, 1996, 27, 31.

²⁰ Donald N. Clark, *Living Dangerously in Korea: The Western Experience 1900–1950* (Manchester: EastBridge Books, 2017), 181.

²¹ Clark, *Living Dangerously*, 15, 97.

²² Younghill Kang, *The Grass Roof* (New York, London: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 323, 311.

describes, they were prohibited from buying land near certain places, some of their property was confiscated and the surveillance was strengthened to catch anything that could be a reason for their deportation.²³

Through missionaries' efforts, the number of Christians in Korea started to grow rapidly. One of the factors that made Christian beliefs easier to follow for Koreans was Christians' support of Korean nationalism and their stance toward the Japanese. Missionaries played an important role in the March 1st Movement. It is not proven whether they participated in the organization process, but they were quick to help and support Koreans in their fight after it began.²⁴

Missions in Korea flourished until the end of the 1930s, around the time when the Shinto shrines issue surfaced. The Japanese were forcing Koreans to perform, or at least pretend to perform, worship in the shrines they were building around the country.²⁵ Missionaries found themselves in a very difficult position. Their reaction to the situation affected not only them but many of their students as well. If they resisted, they led their students into violating the law and put their future at risk. Most of the missionaries started resigning and closing schools they have founded, shutting out more than 2,500 of their students.²⁶

With the situation escalating and signs of approaching conflict between Japan and the United States in the World War II, three-fourths of Americans evacuated Korea by the end of 1940, leaving years of their work behind.²⁷ Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the remaining Americans were deported in 1942.²⁸

After the war, prewar missionaries' presence was replaced by the presence of the American military. Missionaries who wanted to come back to Korea needed approval from the U.S. Military Government authorities. If they got a chance to return, they had no choice but to do things the Army way: "living where the Army put them, eating what the Army fed them, and buying what the Army sold them."²⁹

Korea has not opened its borders to the public until 1988 – the year in which it hosted the Summer Olympics. Since then, the number of foreigners had been consistently increasing. Today, Korea maintains diplomatic relations with 191 countries in the world and is a member of many international organizations, such as the United Nations, WTO,

²³ Clark, *Living Dangerously*, 201.

²⁴ Donald N. Clark, "'Surely God Will Work Out Their Salvation': Protestant Missionaries in the March First Movement," *Korean Studies* 13 (1989): 42–43.

²⁵ Clark, *Living Dangerously*, 209.

²⁶ Clark, *Living Dangerously*, 211, 215.

²⁷ Robert Kim, "The American Missions in Korea: Complete Success, Completely Forgotten," *Providence*, October 21, 2019.

²⁸ Clark, *Living Dangerously*, 258.

²⁹ Clark, *Living Dangerously*, 297.

and G-20. Thirty years after the Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea also hosted the 2018 Winter Olympics in P’yŏngch’ang.

3. Westerners in Korea today

3.1. Statistics of foreign residents

According to data from the Korean Immigration Service (refer to Figure 1), the number of foreigners in Korea had continuously risen from the 1980s until 2019 when it reached its all-time high – 2,52 million in total. Due to regulations related to the coronavirus pandemic, it decreased by approximately 500 thousand by December 2020 and it continued decreasing to less than 2 million by December 2021. The pandemic affected especially the number of short-term visitors which decreased from 2019 to 2021 by 57%, while the number of long-term visitors decreased in the same period by “only” 10%.

Besides recorded statistics, there was an estimated number of about 390,000 illegal foreign immigrants living and working in Korea in 2020.³⁰ Under a special amnesty program, tens of thousands of them have left the country or agreed to leave in the near future. The government came up with a promise of multiple-entry visas immigrants may receive for their next visit if they leave the country within the authorized period. It is expected that Korea might allow migration to fill labor shortages in the future, as its workforce continues to age every year.³¹

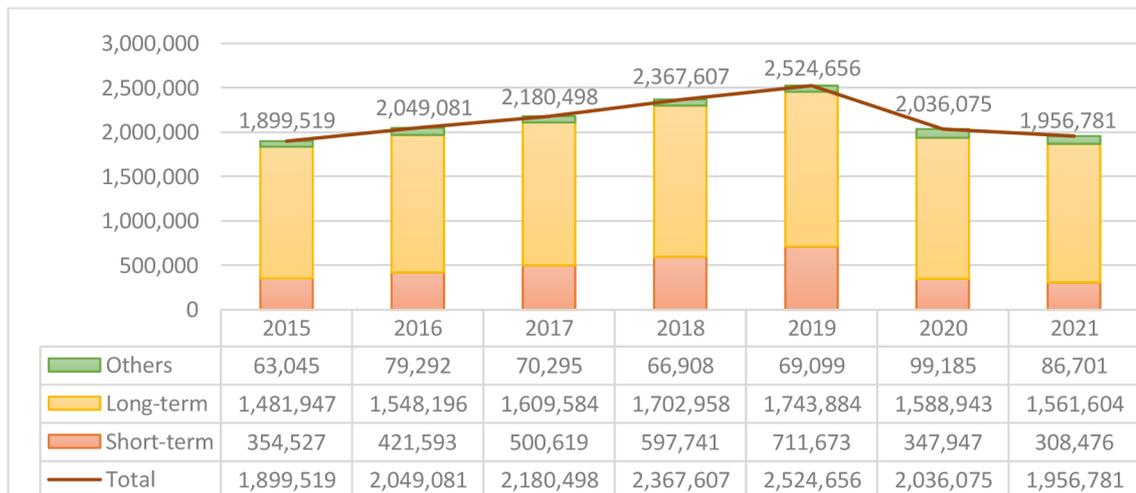


Figure 1 – Foreign residents in Korea (2015–2021) – Comparison of long-term (91 days or longer) and short-term share of residents (Korean Immigration Service – HiKorea Monthly Statistics)

³⁰ Jung Min-ho, “Over 41,000 undocumented immigrants leaving Korea under amnesty program,” *The Korea Times*, July 1, 2020.

³¹ Anthony Kuhn, “As Workforce Ages, South Korea Increasingly Depends on Migrant Labor,” *NPR*, June 2, 2021.

Figure 2 displays the share of Western and Asian foreigners in the total of Korea’s foreign population. Asian foreign nationals make up 86% of all Korea’s foreign population. The largest group consists of Chinese nationals with about 840 thousand residents, making up 43% of all Korea’s foreigners (approximately 610 thousand are Chinese nationals of Korean ethnicity).

Western nationals on the other hand take up a much smaller part of Korea’s foreigners, which is only 13%. As shown in Figure 3, the largest group of Western foreigners – about 140,000, came from the USA, followed by Russian and Canadian nationals respectively. In 2021, foreigners from about 50 Western countries were residing in Korea. Only 11 of these countries surpassed the number of 1,000 residents.

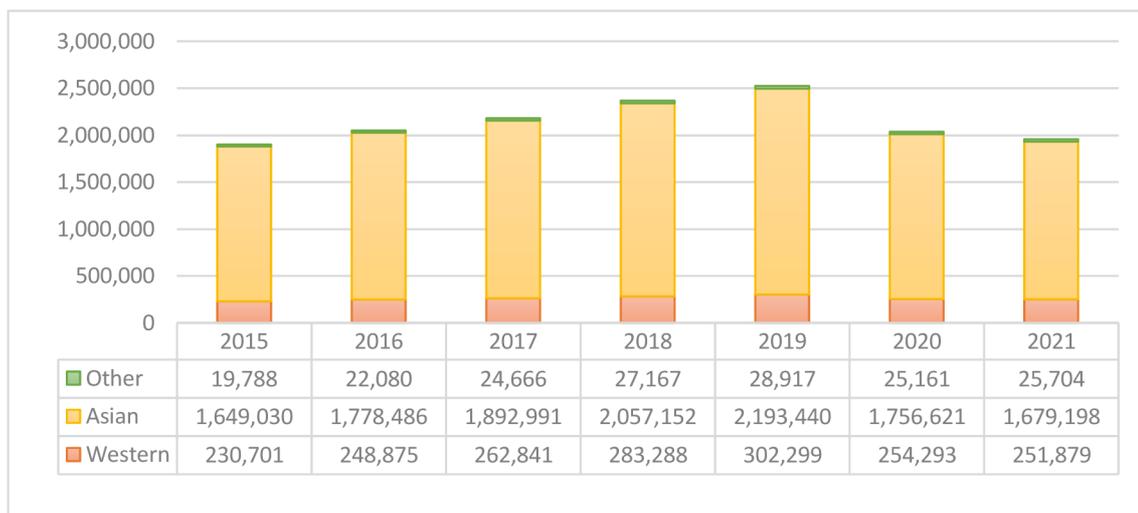


Figure 2 – Foreign Residents in Korea (2015–2021) – Division by a Group of Origin – Nationality) (Source: Korean Immigration Service – HiKorea Monthly Statistics)

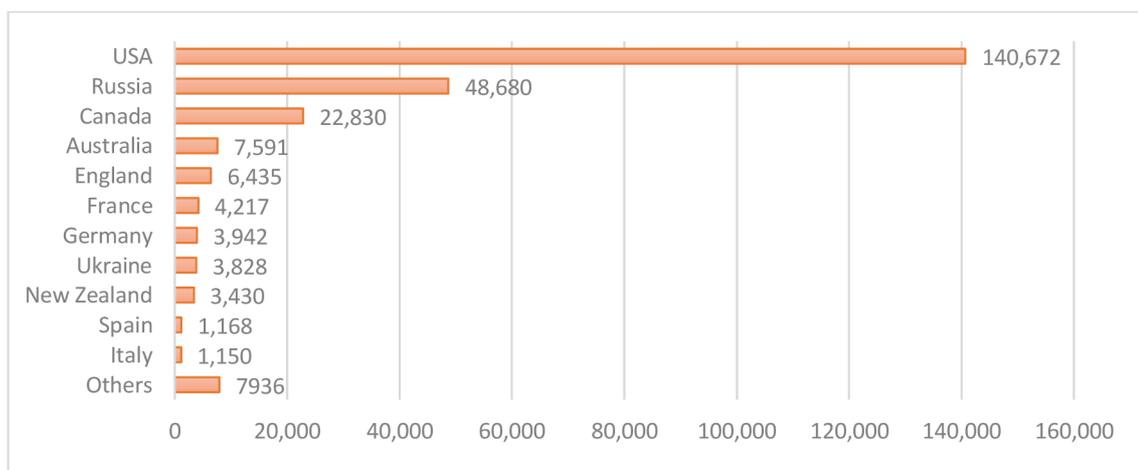


Figure 3 – Nationality of Western Foreigners staying in Korea in 2021 (only countries with more than 1,000 nationals residing in Korea are shown, the rest is included in the “others” category. (Source: Korean Immigration Service – HiKorea Monthly Statistics)

3.2. Professional foreign employees

As of May 2021, there were 1.33 million foreigners aged 15 or more staying in Korea long-term. Around 811 thousand were employed, making the foreign employment rate stand at 64.2%.³² Talking about professional employees in Korea, they comprise mainly of E1 to E-7 and D-7 to D-9 visa holders. There are professional employees in other categories as well, for example, F-2 and F-5³³, these are, however, more difficult to quantify. Despite the increase in migration to Korea in the past decade, the number of professional workers remains fairly low.

Long-term professional employment visa	Visa holders as of December 2020	Visa holders as of December 2021
D-7 (Intra-company Transfer)	1 057	1 028
D-8 (Corporate / Foreign Investor)	5 587	5 955
D-9 (International Trade)	2 136	2 053
E-1 (Professor)	2 053	2 017
E-2 (Foreign Language Instructor)	12 621	13 403
E-3 (Researcher)	2 637	3 638
E-4 (Technical Instructor / Technician)	199	177
E-5 (Professional Employment)	374	257
E-6 (Artistic Performer)	3 011	3 285
E-7 (Designated Activities)	19 534	20 675

Table 2 – Overview of professional visa holders in 2020–2021 in Korea; includes all foreign nationalities (Source: Korean Immigration Service – HiKorea Monthly Statistics)

The Korean government has previously made a notable effort to attract more foreign talent which continues to this day. Rather than focusing on the working population only, Korea also focuses on students – potential future employees, by offering them government scholarships and participation in various programs. In addition to this, the Korean Ministry of Justice has decided to introduce a system to support foreign talent entering the country in 2022. Those in the field of science and technology who complete their master’s and doctorate courses in Korea will be able to acquire a permanent visa.

³² “Number of foreign workers rebounds this year amid economic recovery,” *Yonhap*, December 21, 2021.

³³ F-2 and F-5 visas have quite many subcategories, some even including the spouses and children of another visa holders. Therefore, we cannot simply say all F-2 and F-5 visa holders are professional employees, although they definitely include some of them.

This move is aimed at supporting the inflow of foreign workers and bolstering the national growth amid a rising problem with the aging society.³⁴

On the other hand, Korea also makes decisions to prevent overreliance on foreign employees in Korea. For example, there is a company-level restriction on E-7 workers – only 20% of all firm employees can be foreign nationals with the only exception in the high-tech field.³⁵

Few company employees hold a position of so-called FELO (Foreign Executive in Local Organizations) in Korea. In 2018 Yonhap News Agency reported that there are only 94 foreigners out of the 6,843 executives in 100 listed companies.³⁶ Frithjof Arp talks about the crucial role of FELOs, explaining that they form an important bridge between the East and the West in their companies.³⁷

4. Expatriate literature

To define the genre of Expatriate Literature it is necessary to first understand the expression ‘expatriate’ or ‘ex-pat’ in its shortened form. Expatriates are people who reside outside their native country for a longer period of time either temporarily or permanently.³⁸ The main motive for them to move is usually work, but there might be other motives too, such as better living conditions or dissatisfaction with the situation in their own country.

Nagendra Kumar in her book *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee* describes the difference between expatriate and immigrant as follows: “The expatriate dwells on his ‘ex’ status of the past while the immigrant celebrates his present in the new country.”³⁹ Lecturer Sophie Cranston from Loughborough University sees the difference in the intention of returning home, where immigrants move to another country intending to stay permanently, while ex-pats always intend to return home, whether they live abroad 10 months or 10 years.⁴⁰ However, because the difference in their meanings is very subtle, in some sources they are often used interchangeably.

Expatriate literature is describing, explaining, or teaching about the experience of a person living in a foreign country. Particularly non-fictional expatriate literature that I am

³⁴ Park Jae-hyun, “Kisul·munhwa oeguk injae chabara··· p’act’üsüt’üraek·hallyu pija toip,” *Yonhap*, January 2, 2022.

³⁵ “Guidelines on Employment for International Students in Korea,” *StudyinKorea*, Accessed April 1, 2022.

³⁶ “(LEAD) Number of foreign executives in S. Korean companies declining,” *Yonhap*, October 29, 2018.

³⁷ Steven S. Bammel, “Korea Business Advisor (Seoul Magazine) – Supplement to the Article “Question: What is a Korean FELO?”” *Nojeok Hill*, March 4, 2012.

³⁸ Mohammed Ilyas, “Expatriate Experience and the Fictional World of Diaspora,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 9, no. 1 (2018): 109.

³⁹ Nagendra Kumar, *The Fiction of Bharati Mukherjee: A Cultural Perspective* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2001), 17.

⁴⁰ Yasmeen Serhan, “‘Expat’ and the Fraught Language of Migration,” *The Atlantic*, October 9, 2018.

going to focus on in this thesis deals with real events either based on the author's own experience or experiences of other people he/she has collected by conducting interviews.

Although in this thesis I talk about Expatriate literature as a 'genre', literature written by ex-pats is generally put under the category of Diaspora literature and is not considered to be an independent genre itself. It is, however, important to note that these two terms – 'diaspora' and 'expatriation' also do not carry the same meaning. While diaspora is connected to socio-political issues and generally involves involuntary mass migration, expatriation often concerns only individuals or communities who settle down in a country different from the country of their nationality.⁴¹

5. Matters and motifs

5.1. Getting hired: Foreigner's advantages and handicaps

Job competition in Korea is extremely fierce with many Korean job seekers, especially young graduates, struggling to enter the workforce. In the recent past, many Korean companies placed a lot of importance on globalization, therefore it might seem that finding employment in Korea is easier for foreigners. In the accounts which form the material basis of this thesis, there are cases of ex-pats getting hired in different ways, whether it was through a recruiter – Williams (2017), after reaching out directly to the company – Ahrens (2016) or after receiving the offer by email – Myers (2011). There are also cases of ex-pats who started to look for a job while being already in the country – Kocken (2013–16) and an anonymous worker for the *Office Outsider* (2014–15).

Kocken, an Australian ex-pat in Korea, starts his article about the Korean hiring process saying he was luckily exempted from the competitive recruitment that almost every Korean goes through. He supposedly had no competition and, as a foreigner, was allowed to skip answering personal questions about his family which is a mandatory part of Korean's resumé.⁴² However, later on in his blog, he contemplates whether it was rather the case of him being what Koreans call *nakhasan* (literally: "parachuting") – getting a job using personal connections, rather than him being a foreigner, since he personally knew someone from the company.⁴³

Williams is one of the ex-pats who got the job before coming to Korea through a recruiter. Being a black American, he surmises his chances of getting hired might have been affected by racial prejudice. There is a standard practice in Korea to include not only

⁴¹ Ilyas, "Expatriate Experience," 109.

⁴² Michael Kocken, "Getting Hired in Korea – A foreigners-perspective," *The Sawon* (blog), Blogspot, December 14, 2014.

⁴³ Michael Kocken, ""Na nūn nakhasan ipsa hage toeyōtta" – Han'guk kiōp e ch'wiōphan oegugin ūi ipsa iyagi," *The Sawon* (blog), Blogspot, December 14, 2014.

personal information about family members in the resumé but also a photo of the applicant. Williams describes being ignored by some recruiters after sending them his photo and explains that one recruiter admitted it is more difficult to find him a job because of the color of his skin.⁴⁴

After President Moon Jae-in took the office in 2017, he expressed his intention to stop the practice of including a photo in the job application in order to make hiring more fair.⁴⁵ He even released a video about so-called ‘blind hiring’ which gained a lot of attention from the Korean public. Making ‘blind hiring’ mandatory would prevent employers from asking applicants to list their physical characteristics and answer personal questions about their families in their resúmes, however, even today this change is yet to be implemented.

Ahrens in his book *Seoul Man* claims that with his previous experiences, he could have never entered a company like Hyundai at a director level in the US. In Korea however, being a native English speaker was a big advantage for the position and thus he was chosen as a suitable candidate.⁴⁶

Although being hired for a completely different position, Williams also talks about how the hiring process was easier for him in Korea in this respect. He says that simply speaking English tends to be a qualification enough for most companies because they often assume all native English speakers are equally competent when it comes to speaking, writing, and even teaching the language.⁴⁷

Myers has an interesting experience receiving a direct email from an executive recruiter who tried to scout her for a specific position in a Korean company. From another interview for Harvard Business Review, we find out that the recruiter first assumed she is a man, addressing her as Mr. Myers.⁴⁸ Myers went through a six-month-long interview process without knowing much about the job and in the end was formally offered the position.⁴⁹

An anonymous Western female employee describes receiving “strange” questions during her interview in Korea that was held directly with the company president. She was asked about her alcohol tolerance, religion, and even blood type, topics that would be hardly ever opened during a traditional interview for a company job in a Western

⁴⁴ Brian M. Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land: My Six Years in Korea* (Raleigh: Lulu Press, 2015), Location No. 1628, Kindle.

⁴⁵ Isabella Steger and Soo Kyung Jung, “Korea’s president wants to ban photos, and questions about your parents, in job applications,” *Quartz*, Last modified July 3, 2017.

⁴⁶ Frank Ahrens, *Seoul Man: A Memoir of Cars, Culture, Crisis, and Unexpected Hilarity Inside a Corporate Titan* (New York: Harper Business, 2016), 43.

⁴⁷ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 244.

⁴⁸ Sarah Green Carmichael, “Crucible: The Would-Be Pioneer,” *Harvard Business Review*, April, 2011.

⁴⁹ Linda Myers, “Working at the Top in SK Group: An Insiders’ Story,” Interview by Tom Tucker, *Korea Business Central*, Accessed November 12, 2021.

country.⁵⁰ Even Ahrens mentions being asked about his attitude towards drinking alcohol during his interview with Hyundai, being told his team will want to show him respect by pouring him drinks.⁵¹

Based on the accounts evaluated in this thesis, getting hired as a foreigner in Korea is not an impossible thing to do, there are, however, two big concerns. The first one is that the job offer is very narrow – English teaching jobs and other jobs connected to language in general predominate. Second is that there are still some prejudices against people of a certain nationality or race, and it has to be considered that not every foreigner can speak English on a native-like level which is sometimes one of the requirements.

5.2. Trying to “fit in”

Although the number of foreigners living in Korea has been growing for the past decades, Western-origin foreigners in Korea are still in a very small proportion. Especially in areas outside of the capital city Seoul, it seems to be quite easy to stand out in the crowd.

Ahrens describes it as follows: “Everyone in Korea of course does not look alike, and you learn to see that the longer you live there, but they look alike enough to a newcomer that it creates an overwhelming feeling of being the only Other in a sea of sameness.”⁵²

Physical appearance can play its role in “fitting in,” but simply feeling like one is a part of a team, being equal to other employees of the same rank, and receiving the same treatment from both colleagues and customers as Korean employees do is important as well.

The anonymous female employee says she was receiving an excessive amount of special treatment because of her foreign nationality right from the start while she only dreamed of being a “normal employee.” She describes her frustration about being showered with praise long before she got a chance to gain respect and people in the company having unrealistic expectations of her. “I know that as a foreigner, I will likely never truly fit in, even if I spend the rest of my life trying.”⁵³

It looks like to some extent the system adds to the feeling of social exclusion for foreigners. Myers talks about a six-digit ID number that is needed when shopping online in Korea. She says that the difference in coding between foreigners and Koreans identifies

⁵⁰ “Office Outsider: Dispatches From a Foreign Worker in a Korean Company,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 3, 2014.

⁵¹ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 11.

⁵² Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 20.

⁵³ “Office Outsider: Trying to Fit In and Moving On,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 15, 2015.

foreigners as outsiders who don't have the same privileges as Koreans, making it more difficult for them to feel like equal citizens while doing simple daily actions.⁵⁴

Brian* says he observed that Koreans hang out mostly with other Koreans and Korean-Americans with other Korean-Americans which leaves foreigners in the office straddling somewhere in between.⁵⁵ While Chenneveau mentions feeling left out whenever his colleagues started talking in Korean. He says that they got along well but once Koreans started speaking Korean, there were only very few interactions.⁵⁶

How ex-pats discuss the language barrier is explored more closely in the next chapter.

5.3. Language barrier

Despite not always being required for the position, the Korean language is a major obstacle for Westerners in Korea, both in and outside the workplace.

David*, in an interview for *Faces of Korea*, described feeling like a child when he first arrived in Korea. Difficulties carrying out simple daily actions such as finding places or giving directions to taxi drivers made his overall stay especially challenging.⁵⁷ Ahrens says his biggest worry while living in Korea was a medical emergency because of the language barrier. He feared the situation of when emergency line operators are not being able to speak English since he himself couldn't speak Korean.⁵⁸

Most of the expatriates in the evaluated accounts had no knowledge of the Korean language before their arrival and for some of them, it stayed like that even when they returned back home a few years later. Williams says in his book that even after 6 years, he was only able to read the Korean alphabetic system and knew a few phrases.⁵⁹ Ahrens has a similar experience. He wrote that his new job, career, and culture were so overwhelming that he had no time to learn a new language on top of that, although later on, he made some effort by hiring a Korean tutor.⁶⁰

Dolinger shared his interesting working experience where Koreans spoke Korean and he as an American, spoke English during company business meetings. This was possible only because both sides could understand and speak the language of their

⁵⁴ Myers, "Working at the Top."

⁵⁵ Richard Harris, *Faces of Korea: The Foreign Experience in the Land of the Morning Calm* (New Jersey: Hollym International Corporation, 2004), 31.

⁵⁶ Didier Chenneveau, "Global Expertise Within the Korean Business Framework at LG Electronics," Interview by Tom Tucker, *Korea Business Central*, Accessed November 13, 2021.

⁵⁷ Harris, *Faces of Korea*, 94–95.

⁵⁸ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 238–239.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 3473–3483.

⁶⁰ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 62–63, 215.

counterpart quite well.⁶¹ Cheneveau, on the other hand, had to use translations during meetings which were not only difficult to follow but also ineffective, because as he says, in such a setting, nuances can get lost in translation.⁶² This is especially the case for the Korean language, in which important things are often not directly said but expected to be understood by using ones *nunch'i*⁶³ (literally: “eye measure”).

The anonymous female worker who already had a certain level of Korean says she was told she is not required to speak high-level Korean at an interview because she will primarily work with fluent English speakers only. However, once she got on the job, 12-week training was conducted in Korean and there certainly was a need of using Korean when communicating with the other departments in the company. She also describes the bipolar nature of Koreans’ evaluations of her speaking ability and being met with both praise and frustration by others. She says she could feel the frustration, especially at work where her language ability was closely tied to her work performance.⁶⁴

What makes the language barrier more challenging is not only the insufficient level of foreigners’ Korean but also the level of Koreans’ English. David* said that despite them being an American company, the standard level of English of his coworkers was not good.⁶⁵ Brian’s* experience is a little different, but the work of his colleagues required using English every day. He says that because of that, even juniors who came in with elementary English skills improved significantly in a span of a few years.⁶⁶ That is however not the case for many other companies whose employees use English only occasionally.

5.4. Working hours, taking a leave/vacation

In 2016, employees in Korea worked an average of 2,069 hours a year compared to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development’s (OECD) average of 1,764 hours. Based on these statistics, Koreans worked the second-longest hours out of OECD

⁶¹ David Dolinger, “A Participant in Korean History and in Korean-Led Innovation of the Global Medical Industry,” Interview by Tom Tucker, *Korea Business Central*, November 16, 2011.

⁶² Cheneveau, “Global Expertise.”

⁶³ *Nunch'i* is considered to be the ability to “read the air” It is similar to the concept of emotional intelligence. Thomas L. Coyner in his guidebook *Doing Business in Korea: An Expanded Guide* (2010), devotes one chapter to *nunch'i*. He says that from a Westerner’s point of view, it may seem there is a difference between what Asians express and what they mean, and one should keep looking for subtle clues of the other party’s intentions by using their *nunch'i* skills.

⁶⁴ “Office Outsider: Speaking Korean and Learning English,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 1, 2015.

⁶⁵ Harris, *Faces of Korea*, 95.

⁶⁶ Harris, *Faces of Korea*, 32.

countries, right behind Mexico, with an average of 2,255 hours a year.⁶⁷ Addressing the situation, the South Korean Labor Standards Act was amended to restrict maximum working hours and came up with the 2018–2021 working time reform plan which was supposed to restrict an employee’s maximum working time from 68 hours to 52 hours a week.⁶⁸

The unspoken rule of newcomers being the first one to enter the office in the morning and the last one to leave in the late evening hours is mentioned several times in the evaluated accounts. This seems to stem from Confucianism deeply rooted in Korean society. Kocken talks about a so-called *munch'i* pyramid: “The junior members are watching the mid-managers, the mid-managers are watching the managers, the managers are watching the department heads and the department heads are watching the directors and finally, the directors are watching the family owners.”⁶⁹ Simply said, they are all adjusting their working hours to those of their direct superiors at the expense of productivity and their own free time.

However, many described feeling like the rules are somehow more benevolent to them as foreigners. Kocken says he knows he isn’t required to meet all the norms of corporate etiquette and therefore, is leaving work every day at 6:30 PM. That is thirty minutes after his paid working hours but still earlier than other people in the office. Ahrens holding an executive position says he usually arrives in the office at 7:20 AM when half of his colleagues are already at work.⁷⁰

Williams talks about the topic of sick leave, saying that Koreans, in general, do not take much time off, and even if they sleep at their desk being sick, they are praised for their dedication instead of being sent home not to spread the disease to their colleagues.⁷¹ Korea is one of very few countries in the world that has no sickness benefits. This started to attract more attention in the light of the coronavirus pandemic. In 2020 “Stay home when sick” campaign by Korean Health and Welfare Ministry was initiated. Many experts and workers however called it only an “empty mantra,” as the actual situation in the companies rarely allowed employees to stay home.⁷² The Vice Minister of Food and Drug Safety Kim Gang-lip commented on this as follows. “Personally, I found it hard getting

⁶⁷ Bak Se-hwan, “South Koreans work second-longest hours in OECD for below average pay,” *The Korea Herald*, Last modified August 17, 2017.

⁶⁸ Alexander Hijzen and Stefan Thewissen, “The 2018–2021 working time reform in Korea: A preliminary assessment,” OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Papers, no. 248 (2020).

⁶⁹ Michael Kocken “Why do Koreans work so late? – An in-depth look at Korean Overtime Culture,” *The Sawon* (blog), Blogspot, November 7, 2014.

⁷⁰ Michael Kocken, “My Experience with Korean Overtime,” *The Sawon* (blog), Blogspot, November 7, 2014.

⁷¹ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 1393.

⁷² Kim Arin, “Too many in Korea can’t afford to get sick,” *The Korea Herald*, Last modified February 12, 2021.

used to the concept because all my life I was trained to believe not calling in sick was a sign of a strong work ethic.”⁷³

The topic of vacation is discussed by Ahrens. He says that Korean workers usually take their vacation during summer and the higher their position is, the less vacation they are expected to take. Oblivious about how things work in Korea, as one of the executives in the company, he took a two-week-long vacation in spring, and although he hasn't received any objections, he says that after his return he quickly figured out that something was off. He finds out that it is very inconsiderate to ask your team members to do your work instead of you for so long. To not make a similar mistake when asking your supervisor for vacation, he explains it is important to use the best of your, earlier mentioned, *nunch'i*, to figure out whether it is acceptable.⁷⁴

5.5. Hierarchy and communication in the workplace

Confucianism played an important role in shaping the Korean workplace environment as very formal and hierarchical. Hierarchy in Korea is so fundamental that it affects all the evaluated topics to some extent, nonetheless, I dedicate one separate chapter to it in connection with communication in the workplace.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* brought up the topic of Korean hierarchy in relation to air accidents. He says that communication between the aircrew in the cockpit can be affected by the Koreans' high regard of authority and it might have been one of the key factors resulting in the Korean Air Flight 801 plane crash in 1997 and several more cases before the new millennium.⁷⁵ During the mentioned flight, the second pilot (first officer), having a lower rank and therefore less authority, was supposedly not assertive enough when communicating the situation to the captain who was tired and did not notice the problem. Gladwell's analysis received mixed reactions and provoked an even bigger discussion. Some agree with his theory, while others criticize him for omitting some potentially relevant facts.⁷⁶ The risks of ineffective communication in the office environment and in the cockpit of an aircraft are far from comparable but we can say it may still significantly affect the workflow.

Ahrens talks about emails with regard to authority. He says that while in the West emails are used for all types of communication, no matter how (in)formal, in Korea, they are used for high-rank, official communication only. He goes on to say it is very important

⁷³ Kim, "Too many in Korea."

⁷⁴ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 114.

⁷⁵ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2008), 212–217.

⁷⁶ Max Nisen, "Blogger Completely Dismantles Malcolm Gladwell Theory Connecting Korean Culture To Plane Crashes," *Insider*, July 16, 2013.

to send emails to the right person. This does not necessarily mean the person that is able to answer your question.⁷⁷ “If I e-mailed a coworker of lesser rank on another team, there’s a good chance they would not e-mail me back, but not out of rudeness. First of all, it was highly uncommon for an executive to e-mail anyone below him but his Team Leader; further, e-mailing from higher rank to lower rank or from team to team can almost be seen as subversive.”⁷⁸

Authority plays a big role in direct spoken communication too. The frustration coming from this is both on the side of the subordinate and the superior. Williams, from the position of a subordinate, says he was given deadlines that were impossible to meet, but he could not express his honest opinion, because it would make him look “uncooperative, disrespectful, lazy and difficult to work with.”⁷⁹ He later finds out that what he was supposed to do was do his best and wait until the deadline is moved. He explains: “In Korea, it seemed a boss would rather have a deadline not be met than have an employee tell them in advance it couldn’t be done.”⁸⁰ Brian*, in his interview for *Faces of Korea*, compares his experience of working in both Korea and the United States. Being a lawyer in the US, he says he never had to worry about correcting someone who is his senior if he could prove his convictions, while that was not the case in Korea.⁸¹

Chenneveau on the other hand, holding an executive position, talks about an opposite struggle. Despite trying to encourage more effective communication and feedback by establishing an open-door policy⁸², he could not really see it having any effect, because the employees had too much respect for their superior and were not making any use of it.⁸³ Ahrens also failed in his attempt to bring Western ways into the office. After telling his subordinates to call him by his first name – which is, as he later found out, unspeakable in Korea, he not only made the employees feel very uncomfortable, but it also made him look like he is of lesser status. From then on, he could feel he did not receive as much respect from his subordinates as other fellow executives.⁸⁴

Several ex-pats mention being met with very strict treatment from their superiors. Ahrens warns that Korean bosses are not gentle with their words.⁸⁵ The anonymous female worker has a similar experience and shares she has often seen abrasiveness

⁷⁷ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 60.

⁷⁸ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 60.

⁷⁹ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 1306.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 1321.

⁸¹ Harris, *Faces of Korea*, 31.

⁸² An open-door policy means that every employee is free to approach the senior leadership of the company. It is supposed to encourage an open communication and discussion of any matter that the employees find important.

⁸³ Chenneveau, “Global Expertise.”

⁸⁴ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 48.

⁸⁵ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 147.

towards subordinates. Apparently, the only time she, herself, received some positive feedback was during company dinners in a more relaxed atmosphere after her boss had a few drinks.⁸⁶

When it comes to casual communication between the employees, Ahrens describes the office environment as very quiet, with employees mostly staying at their desks and sharing very few desk-side conversations with their coworkers.⁸⁷ The anonymous female worker shared that she was warned by her colleague not to laugh out loud at work when the sales are down. She talks about being shocked and embarrassed when learning that her mood at work is supposed to reflect the current business conditions.⁸⁸ Ahrens and an anonymous worker however go on to say that the behavior outside of work, such as during the company dinners, is shockingly different. When it comes to dealing with problems, Brian* says people in Korean corporate culture are less confrontational than in the US, however just as competitive. The difference is that if there is a problem, they supposedly do not confront each other verbally.⁸⁹

5.6. Promotions and staff shake-ups

While in the West promotion usually goes hand in hand with receiving a higher salary, in Korea it is more about gaining authority and respect – something that is very important and valued in Confucian society. Yet some Korean companies that have experience with employing foreigners can and do adjust their “way of promotion,” like in Williams’ case. According to him, all Westerners in his office (including him) were only given pay raises without being officially promoted, and therefore without having to take on more responsibility. Koreans, on the other hand, would get promoted, while their salaries stayed the same. Because Westerners generally preferred the higher pay while Koreans pursued more respectable titles, he says that both parties were generally fine with the used way of promotion.

As mentioned above, Ahrens discusses that the higher the position, the less vacation is an employee supposed to take. Therefore, promotion can also mean being required to make more sacrifices for the sake of the company.

Brown points out that an employee usually needs to work a certain number of years before getting a chance to be promoted.⁹⁰ His claim is supported by a survey from 2017. 1,057 employees were surveyed in regard of promotion criteria in their company. 35,5%

⁸⁶ “Office Outsider: Angry Bosses and the Role of Drinking Parties,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 1, 2014.

⁸⁷ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 15.

⁸⁸ “The Role of Drinking Parties,” *Wall Street Journal*.

⁸⁹ Harris, *Faces of Korea*, 30.

⁹⁰ Tom Brown, “Homeplus: Tesco’s Success Story on Entering the Korean Market,” Interview by Tom Tucker, *Korea Business Central*, August 9, 2011.

of respondents answered that the system favors seniority over ability.⁹¹ Brown mentions that there is also a more Western-style way of getting a promotion which is through the interview process.⁹²

In Ahren's case, he explains he did not feel like he is the boss of his team, which was one of the reasons why he asked to get promoted to vice president. He prepared his own presentation that was supposed to convince the company and his request was successfully approved.⁹³

Another interesting practice discussed in the accounts is an annual staff shake-up that usually happens in all companies around the end of the year. Ahrens explains that companies rotate especially young promising hires. The intention is to form a well-rounded executive with sufficient knowledge about departments.⁹⁴ The anonymous female employee for *Office Outsider* traces the practice of staff shake-ups to the Korean military where frequent rotations help in creating better leaders. She thinks it is a method to "inject a sense of excitement into the organization."⁹⁵ Employees get to work in a slightly different environment, have different tasks, and also new coworkers. Both Chenneveau and Myers – foreign executives in their companies – are, however, not too positive about it. Chenneveau says he does not quite understand why any organization would do this.⁹⁶ Myers goes into more detail. She says it can take even half a year for everyone to reposition and it significantly changes the dynamics in the division.⁹⁷

5.7. Company dinners, team building activities and special events

Hoesik or company dinners are after-work get-togethers that are supposed to strengthen relations between coworkers outside of the office environment. In Korea, they are not just an occasional tradition but a regular part of work life. These monthly or in many companies, weekly, gatherings are however not very popular with neither ex-pats nor locals as they often involve lots of drinking and are an addition to already exhausting prolonged working hours.

Ahrens talks about company dinners as an obstacle in his family life. He explains that in his case, attending company dinners created tension at home while not attending

⁹¹ Julie Kim Jackson, "Corporate promotion system favors seniority over ability: survey," *The Korea Herald*, September 6, 2017.

⁹² Brown, "Homeplus."

⁹³ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 245–246.

⁹⁴ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 49.

⁹⁵ "Office Outsider: Another Year, Another Staff Shake Up," *Wall Street Journal*, January 5, 2015.

⁹⁶ Chenneveau, "Global Expertise."

⁹⁷ Myers, "Working at the Top."

them created tension within the team.⁹⁸ Another problematic part of these outings is the alcohol. He explains: “If you didn’t get drunk, or refused to drink, you made everyone else uncomfortable, disrupted the harmony, and puffed yourself up in their eyes.”⁹⁹ He lists several ways how to avoid this “obligation to drink,” such as dumping the shots or taking the role of the one who pours the drinks for others.¹⁰⁰

Kocken says the company dinners are more stressful for him than actual work in the office. Because he is at the bottom of the “ladder,” he is required to do all the work – pour drinks, grill the meat and stay until the very end.¹⁰¹ According to Kocken, this can get really exhausting as these outings often have several rounds and continue until late at night, almost dawn. The anonymous female employee for *Office Outsider* on the other hand, talks about a positive aspect of these outings. Because team managers are usually communicating rudely while in the office, she appreciates how informal company dinners give them a chance to show their kind selves: “The post-work parties let employees connect on a personal level, allowing them to overlook the offenses that occur during work hours.” She also mentions how it is the only time she gets to hear some positive feedback from her boss.¹⁰²

Williams talks about a perception of drinking itself. He was surprised that even if employees “ruin their image” after drinking too much at the company dinner, they are not looked at any differently by their colleagues the next day. He says that even being hungover at work is tolerated and it does not make the person look any less professional.¹⁰³

Ahrens talks about his experience of holding a home party for both his co-workers – including another executive person from his company – and co-workers of his wife. He claims that the intention was to create a relaxed atmosphere where everyone is equal, so that their acquaintances can get to know each other, but it did not go as he imagined. Whether it is in formal or casual settings, Koreans still need to show their boss some respect. “Confucianism doesn’t take days off.” He describes that his guests looked uncomfortable and did not bring their spouses or dates to the party with them as Ahrens encouraged. The thing that was most concerning was, however, that they did not try to get to know any new people there. The explanation of one of his guests was simple: “Sir, we don’t go to parties where we don’t know everyone.”¹⁰⁴ It looks like Koreans, indeed,

⁹⁸ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 58.

⁹⁹ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 107.

¹⁰⁰ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 109.

¹⁰¹ Michael Kocken, “Na hant’ e hoesik iran ömmu poda tö sütüresü rül bannün irida,” *The Sawon* (blog), Blogspot, April 14, 2015.

¹⁰² “The Role of Drinking Parties,” *Wall Street Journal*.

¹⁰³ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 3189.

¹⁰⁴ Ahrens, *Seoul Man*, 76.

prefer spending time with their friends¹⁰⁵ over getting to know new people. And that is especially the case for people of different age categories.

Another part of Korean corporate life is visiting personal events in the lives of their colleagues, such as weddings and funerals. The number of guests at a wedding can be often seen as a merit of the family's social status. This is to a point where it is not uncommon for people to rent strangers to attend their wedding. And it is also one of the main reasons why not only close colleagues, but a wider range of company's staff is invited to these events. Kocken talks about their company having a "freeboard" where they announce these important personal events from throughout the whole company. Close colleagues are expected to not only attend but also contribute a financial gift. He says that only in his first year in the company, he attended six events while he had a direct link to only two of the employees concerned.¹⁰⁶

Williams says that besides attending special events, it was also common for Koreans to bring snacks to work when something important was happening in their lives and he personally enjoyed this and even picked up a habit of bringing gifts after he traveled overseas. He says: "In my mind, these things perfectly embodied what communalism is all about: sharing what you have with others and keeping other people in mind when taking [something], the way you must do when sharing a meal Korean-style."¹⁰⁷

5.8. Women in the workplace

Based on the article published by The Economist in 2021, South Korea ranked last in the Glass-ceiling index which ranks working conditions for women in 29 countries. In particular, the index combines data for higher education, labor-force participation rate, gender wage gap, statistics of women in managerial positions, child-care costs, maternity and paternity paid leave, and more. Korea scored only 25 out of 100 points on the index, which is less than half the average for the OECD countries.¹⁰⁸

The anonymous female employee for *Office Outsider* talks about their company having very few female employees and lack of them, especially in the management. On the other hand, she observed that men tend to spend more time at work. She says: "In the morning, it is the men who are usually at their desks long before starting time, while the women usually arrive just before the bell. Furthermore, the women seem more likely to

¹⁰⁵ When Koreans talk about friends, it often does not mean the closeness of their relationship. Being friends can be a synonymous expression with being the same age.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Kocken, "Four Weddings, a Funeral and a Baby Shower – A look at coworker events in the Korean workplace," *The Sawon* (blog), Blogspot, November 24, 2014.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 1022.

¹⁰⁸ "Is the lot of female executives improving?" *The Economist*, March 4, 2021.

linger over lunch, and leave work right at quitting time, while the men more frequently work through lunch and stay late into the evening.” Nevertheless, she points out that her workplace is very small in size and different factors besides gender might be in play here.¹⁰⁹

She also talks about “odd gender-related policies,” which were of surprise for her when she first arrived in Korea. There are supposedly women-only parking spaces outside their company, women can apply for a “menstrual leave,” and back in the day, female employees used to have their own big lounge with couches to rest on. Women-only parking spaces and menstrual leave both received mixed reactions from the public as it is disputable whether they actually help women or are just supporting preconceptions that women are weaker and less convenient to employ. Anonymous female employee calls these policies “misguided attempts to remedy the persistent gender gap in this country.”¹¹⁰

Williams says his co-workers were mostly women and after their team got a new female boss she came up with some new changes. One of them was giving subordinates more freedom in making decisions: “I would rather you make some decisions on your own, even if they are a mistake than take every little decision to me.” Williams guesses she was trying to be a boss like this for the benefit of the female Korean staff in the office.¹¹¹

Amidst the 2022 Presidential Elections, feminism was once again brought to attention in Korea, as one of the candidates and later elected President Yoon Suk-yeol was accused of using anti-feminism in his campaign. This is after a 5-year long term of former President Moon Jae-in, who used to campaign with a promise to become “feminist president,” and a so-called #MeToo movement¹¹² that brought attention to workplace sexual harassment in Korea in 2018. While feminism was gaining more supporters, a counter-movement gained strength that criticized the direction and ways of feminist activism in Korea. Many are speculating that Yoon Suk-yeol used this anti-feminist sentiment to gain more voters in the elections.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ “Office Outsider: Being Female in a Korean Company,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 18, 2015.

¹¹⁰ “Being Female,” *Wall Street Journal*.

¹¹¹ Williams, *Stranger in a Stranger Land*, Location No. 3085.

¹¹² The social movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment started to spread on social media in 2017 starting in the US.

¹¹³ Amy Gunia, “How South Korea’s Yoon Suk-yeol Capitalized on Anti-Feminist Backlash to Win the Presidency,” *Time*, March 10, 2022.

6. Conclusion

South Korea, a country that was once referred to as the “Hermit Kingdom” is now a place of residence for approximately 2 million foreigners – about 250,000 of them being Western nationals. Many of these foreigners are coming to Korea due to work, Westerners in the Korean workplace are therefore becoming a more and more common occurrence.

The main objective of this thesis was to investigate the experience of Western foreigners working in the office environment in Korea as described in the non-fictional expatriate literature. I created my own definition of the otherwise relatively broad genre and selected seven accounts to look into more closely in the main part of the thesis.

Although it is difficult to arrive at any big conclusions considering a rather small-sized sample of evaluated literature, we come across some common repeating concepts and observations introduced by the authors and interviewees. To name a few of them, there is the struggle to fit in with a Korean group of people, overtime working culture, annual staff shake-ups, regular company dinners, or the need to attend personal events of employees from all over the company.

We learn that besides many obstacles that come with working in the Korean office environment as a Western expatriate, there are some benefits as well. For instance, getting hired for a good position may be easier considering the foreigner’s proficiency in English. Furthermore, Westerners are often more easily forgiven if not complying with all the norms of Korean corporate etiquette.

The still somewhat reserved approach of the Korean public towards foreigners today is often associated with Korea’s history of limited contact with foreign countries. However, when it comes to the whole expatriate experience, how the ex-pats themselves approach their stay in Korea is as much important. Their experience can be very much affected by their level of cultural awareness, their willingness to adapt to Korean practices, and their readiness to learn at least basics of the language. For people who intend to work in Korean companies in the future, accounts such as the ones examined in this study, although offering mostly authors’ subjective perceptions, can be very helpful in giving the readers an idea of what to expect and how to prepare for their venture into the Korean working environment.

“I know that as I foreigner I will likely never truly fit in, even if I spend the rest of my life trying. But I also know that it’s not just about fitting in – it’s about adapting where you can and making the most of your unique qualities, of maximizing your advantage as an outsider.”¹¹⁴- Anonymous (Office Outsider)

¹¹⁴ “Dispatches From a Foreign Worker,” *Wall Street Journal*.

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