

# **The Lure of South Korea: Exploring the Contact Zones of Teaching English Abroad**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the experiences of Canadian university graduates who have taught English in South Korea. I focus on how their expectations before leaving were framed, how these preconceived notions were met once arriving in South Korea (in terms of work, culture, and travel), and how they made sense of their experiences once they returned home. Through working and traveling abroad, the subjects of my study are experiencing and creating what James Clifford has termed “contact zones,” areas where already constituted systems enter into new relations through historical processes of displacement. Through such contacts, new arenas of economic and cultural contention and collaboration are formed. While this labor migration not only impacts what happens both in the host country and back home, I argue that through working and living in this ‘other’ place hybrid identities are forged at the contact zones of teaching English in South Korea, which give new shape to these people’s lives and perceptions of the world.

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## Section One: Introduction

*Travel. Adventure. Money. What more could you want?*<sup>1</sup>

In Canada, a widespread notion holds that teaching English in Asia will lead to countless rewards—principally travel, adventure, and money. As it is commonly advertised, to get such a job all you require is a Bachelor of Arts degree (BA), the willingness to teach your native language to children, and a pulse. In return, you will have the opportunity to travel, with your plane ticket and living accommodations provided at no cost, and receive a hefty paycheck. At present, for Canadian youth fresh out of university, often debt-ridden as a result, the lure to undertake such contractual work is quite strong.

The following paper sets out to explore the experiences of such university graduates who have gone to South Korea, where there is a great demand for their services. I focus on how people's expectations before leaving are framed, how these preconceived notions are met once arriving in South Korea (in terms of work, culture, and travel), and how they make sense of their experiences once they have returned home. Through working and traveling abroad, the subjects of my study are experiencing and creating what James Clifford has termed *contact zones*, areas where already constituted systems enter into new relations through historical processes of displacement (1997: 7). Through such contacts, new arenas of economic and cultural contention and collaboration are forming. While this labor migration not only impacts what happens both in the host country and back home, I argue that through working and living in this other place hybrid identities are forged at the contact zones of teaching English in South Korea, which give new shape to these people's lives and perceptions of the world.

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<sup>1</sup> *Teach English in Asia* by m4h.management. Job advertisement. *The Coast: Halifax's Weekly*. October 2- October 9 2003. 11(18): 38.

I begin in chapter two by presenting a brief background of South Korea and its economic status in the world, which has enabled the context under which youth are recruited to teach English. I then move into a presentation of why I chose to focus on this topic, and my research methodology. In chapter three I briefly discuss the literature that I have drawn upon, presenting a theoretical framework for understanding the construction of identities in a context of labor migration and travel. Chapters four through eight thus explore the data that I have collected, looking at the experiences that my informants have had before they went to South Korea, while getting there, during their time there, and after their returns home, looking at the impacts that this experience has had upon their identities in terms of work, cultural transitions, and travel. In the final chapter, I conclude by summarizing my findings, and laying out areas for further research on this topic, raising critical issues for future anthropological enquiry regarding travel, culture, and migration.